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"Meg"

MEG, OF VALENCIA

BY

MYRA WILLIAMS JARRELL

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This little book is lovingly dedicated to my parents.

"'Tis pleasant, sure, to see one's name in print:
A book's a book, although there's nothing in't."

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CHAPTER I.

"What's in a name?"

When Mr. Robert Spencer was annoyed, he made it known by pacing the floor with his hands under his coat-tails. When he was pleased, he quickened the pace, and his hands caused his coat-tails to stand out in a most jaunty and undignified manner. He was pacing up and down a handsomely furnished room, one bright May morning, with annoyance visibly depicted in every line of his coat-tails.

The other occupant of the room, his sister, was watching him with an expression half amused, half sad. They were much alike, both sandy in coloring, and both wearing the same humorous, half-quizzical smile, which in her was saddened by the loss her deep mourning indicated. She had never been a handsome woman, but she possessed an attractiveness far greater than that of mere outward beauty.

Suddenly her brother paused in front of her and began explosively: "I tell you it's tommy-rot. And it's all because you wouldn't call him Bob! How the deuce do you expect a boy you have called 'Robert' for twenty-five years, to have any worldly sense?"

"Wait a minute, Bob," interrupted his sister, quietly; "how could I be expected to call such a splendid boy anything else? 'Bob,' for him, would have been nothing short of sacrilege,—no offense meant, my dear brother."

"Don't mention it," he growled; "but I protest that you can make or mar a boy by a name. You called him 'Robert.' What was the result?"

"Very fine, I call it."

Unheeding the interruption, he continued in a mocking voice: "Lacy dresses which he never tore, wax dolls, kittens, and long curls. Now that just naturally led up to books, study, church!"

"That is a combination few people object to, Bob," his sister gently interpolated.

"If taken in moderation, my dear Stella,—in homeopathic doses. Your boy went on the principle by which some people govern their medicine-taking, that if a little is good, much is

better."

He paused for her reply, but as she was evidently waiting for the close of his harangue, he continued: "Now, look here. Suppose you had called him 'Bob.' There would have been no long curls or doll-rags for him. It would have been baseball, marbles, fresh air, boy friends. And now, hang it all, look at him now!"

Mrs. Malloy sat up with dignity, and asked, "Well, what of him now?"

"That's just it," he sputtered. "If he wasn't so handsome, manly, honest and lovable, I wouldn't care; but to think of all those virtues being shut up in a monastery, makes me wish I were a profane man, so I could ease my mind by swearing."

Mrs. Malloy had become very white, and she made no answer. Her brother glanced at her, and added softly, dropping into a chair by her side: "It's all because he was brought up in that Faith. I don't see how you could do it, Stella."

"You forget," she answered sadly; "it was John's religion, and it was understood that he should do that if he were so inclined."

"But John never meant for you to be left alone in the world. He wouldn't have wanted the boy to leave you, if he had known."

"Perhaps not," she said with white lips, "but I would not lay one straw in the way, or stand between my boy and what he considers his duty."

"Duty be—," vociferated Mr. Spencer. "I beg your pardon, Stella,—it almost slipped out. But can't the young whelp see where his duty is? Now, don't be angry, Stella. Do you think I wouldn't whale any other man within an inch of his life if he called the boy that?"

"Nothing is gained by discussing it," Mrs. Malloy wearily replied, "and I insist that you say nothing to Robert on the subject. His mind is quite made up, quite. He believes it to be his father's wish. He does not know but that it is mine, though it is, as you say, not my faith."

"'He was the only son of his mother, and she was a widow,'" quoted Mr. Spencer, softly.

"To say anything to him would make him very unhappy, but would not alter his decision."

"Perhaps some way may yet be found," he ventured.

"I am sure nothing would change him. You see, he has had this idea ever since he was a mere child. It has grown with him. It is so interwoven with the very fibres of his being that it could not be uprooted. No, no, Bob, it will have to stand. If I can bear it, surely you can."

"If *you* can bear it," he answered. "Oh, yes, you can bear it. You will wave your handkerchief and smile as the gates close upon him, and then you'll come home and die of a broken heart!"

"Don't,—don't," she begged, piteously.

"Forgive me, Stella; I didn't mean to hurt you so. But I've a scheme to stop this foolishness and make you happy, and the boy, too."

She shook her head hopelessly, but her brother patted her on the shoulder and said, "But yes, I say. Will you be a party to it?"

For one moment her eyes flashed up with a look of hope, then it died out as she said slowly, "I cannot conspire against my boy and what I know to be his earnest desire."

"Well, don't," was the brusque reply. "Your co-operation isn't necessary anyway. But you and Robert will come next week to visit me as you promised, won't you?"

After Mrs. Malloy nodded in reply, he walked out of the room with his coat-tails expressing satisfaction.

He had not been gone long when the door was gently opened, and a young man entered. Coming up to Mrs. Malloy, he stooped and kissed her on the forehead. The look of passionate adoration she gave him was not surprising, for he was undeniably good to gaze upon. He was tall, well formed and athletic in build, with the fresh coloring, the warm, honest gray eyes, clear-cut features and rippling dark hair of a long race of Celtic ancestors. His brow was frank and noble, his smile charming. There was nothing about him to suggest the parochial calling he was about to adopt. He looked merely a healthy, wholesome, happy and unusually handsome young fellow.

"Always cheerful, little mother," he said, balancing himself on the arm of her chair, and meeting her smile with tender, earnest eyes. "That thought makes me very happy, for I know you are never lonely, and will not mope after I am gone, as some mothers would."

Her face blanched; with teeth shut hard together, she pressed her face against his sleeve until she could control her voice, and finally answered: "No, I was never given to moping, my son. But to be irrelevant, I promised Uncle Bob that we would go to Valencia next week and stay with him through the summer."

"That will be jolly; I think I would enjoy one good old spree of that sort before—"

"Let's go out and find Uncle Bob," said his mother quickly.

CHAPTER II.

"And both were young and one was beautiful."

Valencia was a western town, with about forty thousand inhabitants who believed in and were immeasurably proud of the place. There were no factories, and there was no great value in real estate, since the wild boom of the early eighties, which made and broke so many western towns; but it was quite a railroad center, one of the principal western roads having headquarters there. Amusement there was none, save band concerts twice a week in summer, and an occasional show in the opera house in winter.

The town had perhaps more than a fair allotment of that class of people who find fault with everything, from the price of ice to the sparsity of amusements. It was said, also, to be no more free from public officials with itching palms, than other cities of its size.

Saloons were supposed to be unknown in Valencia, in accordance with the laws of the State, and it did truly present a clean, moral aspect to the casual observer.

Valencia was essentially a “home” town, with its wide streets, its many trees, comfortable homes and green lawns, and it was much beloved by its inhabitants, who, if they moved away, inevitably moved back again, with untiring loyalty.

Robert Spencer had been borne into the town on the tide of prosperity that had carried so many into it in 1882, and he was one of the barnacles who had remained, firmly fastened, when the tide receded, taking with it a few of the industries that had sprung up like mushrooms during the boom. He had had a competence when he drifted into Valencia, which by judicious investment had increased until he was independently rich.

The first few years of his life there had been uneasy ones, for he had to be constantly on the alert to avoid matrimony, so many were the enticements thrown out to land him. He was unquestionably the biggest fish in the pond, and the hooks had been baited for him repeatedly, but he had not bitten.

The first evening after Mrs. Malloy and Robert reached Valencia, Mr. Spencer entertained two of his nearest neighbors, a widow and her young niece, at dinner.

Mrs. Weston had been a pretty girl in her youth, and it was a hard habit for her to break from. She still affected baby blue, which had set off to advantage her pink-and-whiteness twenty years before, but which now exaggerated the faded lemon color into which that complexion had degenerated. In place of dimples, there were creases in her cheeks, but she clung to her original conception of them, and used them accordingly. Her hair, from being golden, had become dull and lifeless, but she still wore it in the jaunty frizzes which had once set off her doll-like face.

She was an easy victim for complexion agents, and her generous patronage had done much to hasten the decay of her delicate complexion. She was entirely satisfied with herself, but nevertheless she felt a pang of jealousy whenever she looked at her young niece, and was only moved out of her complacency and simplicity, to indulge in caustic remarks to her.

Robert Malloy felt himself shy and awkward in the presence of girls, for his life had been spent close to his mother, with books and study, and he was ignorant of their ways.

Before dinner was announced he found himself seated by the girl, Margaret Anthony, vaguely wondering what to say, and wishing he dared look at her to see what she really was like.

He ventured a remark about the weather, and looked at her as he did so. She answered in a monosyllable, but kept her eyes cast down. Following the direction of her eyes, he saw that she was twirling her thumbs.

In a flash he glanced at his own hands, and then he realized that he was being ridiculed.

He looked hastily at her again, and this time she met his eyes with an unmistakable gleam of laughter in hers. For a moment he was inclined to be angry, but changed his mind and laughed outright, a musical, boyish laugh, with which hers chimed.

The older folks looked over at them, and an expression of satisfaction appeared on Mr. Spencer’s face.

“That little vixen is up to some mischief, I know,” twittered Mrs. Weston.

“Whatever it is, I am grateful to her,” responded Mr. Spencer. “I don’t think I ever heard Robert laugh like that before. Did you, Stella?” he asked, turning to his sister.

“He wasn’t so different from other boys, Bob,” she said smilingly; “he and I have had many a romp together.”

“Maybe so, maybe so,” he muttered.

“If I should say ‘booh!’ you’d run,” said Margaret with conviction, to Robert.

“Try me and see,” was his good-humored response, just as dinner was announced.

Mr. Spencer had seated the two young people together, for he rightly concluded that the ice would be broken sooner, over soup and fish, with the assistance of warm candlelight and flowers, than in a drawing-room with the accompaniment of voices no longer young.

In taste, Robert was no acolyte, and he gave a little sigh of satisfaction as his eyes took in the exquisite details of the table of polished, massive mahogany, with gleaming silver and glass, the bowl of gorgeous, rich red roses, and the candles with their red shades.

Turning, he met the eyes of his companion, and involuntarily thought that she fitted with the environments. Her hair had a decidedly reddish cast, and framed a face which was small and white, with a refractory red mouth and an insignificant nose.

Her eyes were peculiar, but very beautiful, large and full and greenish in color, shaded by lashes so long and dark that they gave a dazzling brilliance to her face.

As she met his eyes she smiled and said, as though he had spoken, “Yes, *isn’t* it pretty?” Then she added, “But I am a gourmand. I like the pretty surroundings *and* a good dinner, but if I had to choose between the two, I would take the latter.”

“That’s because you are such a child,” he said patronizingly.

“Of course, judging from the standpoint of *your* experience, I must appear like one,” was her lofty reply.

Her remark reduced him to an awkward consciousness of his inexperience, and beside this small girl he felt himself suddenly to seem like an uncouth school-boy.

After this little encounter they listened to the conversation of their elders. Mrs. Malloy was expressing her opinion of a new book which she did not like, and said that people were better off with no books at all than with one of that character.

Mrs. Weston, who had never delved very deep into any subject, said with a little giggle: “I would hate to acknowledge, though, that I had not read a book of which every one was talking. But I have often heard Meg express herself the way you have been doing.”

After they were back in the drawing-room Robert said to Margaret, “Did I understand your aunt to call you ‘Meg’?”

“You did,” was the reply; “I have as many names as Eugene Field’s ‘Bill,’ in the little poem ‘Jes

'fore Christmas.' You remember it?"

He nodded.

"Well, it's this way with me: Father called me Margaret, the girls they called me Peg, Mother called me Margie, but Auntie calls me Meg."

"And—?" he queried.

A sudden gravity settled over her face, as she replied, "There is no one now to call me Margaret or Margie. Auntie's name for me sort of sticks. But I suppose it's all right. I'm not big enough to be entitled to the big, dignified name of Margaret."

"When I know you well enough, I shall call you Margie," Robert said confidently.

CHAPTER III.

> "A child of our grandmother Eve, a female;
> or, for thy more sweet understanding, a woman."

The life which opened up for Robert Malloy was so full of surprises, new sensations and experiences, that he was both bewildered and delighted.

His uncle watched him hopefully, his mother anxiously. There could be no doubt that she would have welcomed anything which would turn her son from his desire, but she was paradoxically jealous for the strength of character and singleness of purpose which had determined him for the life which would take him from her. Also, she could not be certain that he would be happy, should he walk into the trap so obviously set for him by his uncle.

A few weeks after they reached Valencia she had a chance to study Meg more closely, and to obtain an insight into the character of the girl who puzzled her, and who very evidently attracted her son. There was something so subtle and elusive about her, that Mrs. Malloy, with her ear attuned to simplicity and directness, had not been able to form an opinion concerning her.

She had taken a favorite book and started for a quiet spot in the woods adjoining her brother's place, when she met Meg. The girl flushed with pleasure when Mrs. Malloy asked her to join her. There was little said by either as they walked along, yet there was no constraint. Finally Mrs. Malloy turned to her companion and said smilingly, "I believe you are one of those rare persons who are good company without saying a word."

Meg laughed as she answered, "I hope I know the value of silence."

Just then Meg's quick eyes detected a little bird which had been wantonly shot, and was lying under the tree where probably it had made its home. Picking it up, she murmured a few broken words of pity, which might have been a requiem over the little dead body.

"Isn't it cruel?" she asked, raising her lovely dark-lashed eyes to Mrs. Malloy's face, "and so useless,—a little bird that never harmed anyone,—and not even good to eat," she added mournfully.

Mrs. Malloy was impelled to laugh, though she, too, felt the pity of it.

They finally sat down under a large tree, whose branches afforded a refreshing shade. Leaning her back against the tree, and sighing restfully, Mrs. Malloy turned to look at her companion. Meg wore the most inexpensive white dress, but she wore it as she did all of her home-made clothes, like a small princess.

As she sat there, with her hands clasped around her knees, and her small head, with its refractory reddish hair, drooping, there was a pathetic look about her that went straight to Mrs. Malloy's warm heart. She put her hand out and slightly touching Meg's shoulder, said softly: "You look unhappy, dear,—sort of lonely. Can I help you?"

The girl's face changed instantly, and looking up at Mrs. Malloy she said gayly, "But I'm not lonely,—not now."

Mrs. Malloy withdrew her hand and said simply, "Pardon me. I no doubt seemed intrusive."

"*You* intrusive! oh, dear Mrs. Malloy, you *couldn't* be intrusive! Why, if you should tell me my hair was red, I would not be offended. And that's what I wouldn't take from anyone else," she added under her breath.

"Well, I won't be so rude, nor so untruthful. It is beautiful auburn, a color I've always liked."

"Of course," Meg admitted reluctantly, "it isn't exactly the color one could wear red with,—not but what I would if I wanted to."

Mrs. Malloy threw her head back and laughed, and her laugh was as pleasant as it was rare.

Meg looked at her in a pleased manner. Then Mrs. Malloy said: "What a spunky little girl you are! It's regular red-headed spunk, though of course your hair is not red. My dear, it's a blessing you are so independent, having no one to do your fighting for you."

The wistful look came back into Meg's eyes as she answered: "It has never seemed just right that I didn't have a father, or mother, or even a big brother to take care of me. Sometimes,—" there was a little catch in her voice,—"oh, dear Mrs. Malloy, sometimes I feel as if there were no fight left in me!"

"You poor little thing!" exclaimed Mrs. Malloy, reaching out for her hand, "this is really yourself that I see now,—a little tame canary made wild because it has no one to shield it, and must look out for itself!"

Meg looked at her adoringly.

"You are the first person I have ever known who has seemed to understand me, and somehow, I feel that my mother was like you. You won't laugh at me or tell any one if I tell you something?" she asked anxiously.

"You may count on my silence and sympathy, dear."

"When I was a little girl, my principal amusement was to 'pretend' things. I would pretend I

was a princess, or something else equally improbable. One day, I wanted some one else to play with me so badly, that I told Aunt Amelia about it."

"Yes?" queried Mrs. Malloy softly, as she paused.

"Oh, she slapped me, told me I was nothing but an ugly, red-headed little object of charity, and not to go imagining any more nonsense."

Mrs. Malloy bit her lip to keep back the disparaging words which longed for utterance. Instead, she stroked the hand she held, and Meg continued:

"Since then I have played my little games by myself. Sometimes I go up to the attic, where I have a trunk containing mother's things. I put on her dress and apron, and take a piece of crochet work in my hands,—the one she was making when she was taken sick,—and then I pretend that I am she, and that I am there, too,—you understand?"

Mrs. Malloy nodded. "And then I talk as I know she would talk to me if she were here. I give myself lectures for my frivolity, and good advice,—and,—and,—oh, I say the tender little things that I know she would say, and that no one ever does——" She stopped, and began to sob quietly.

Mrs. Malloy drew her up beside her, so that the little red head rested on her shoulder. There were unshed tears in her eyes, which had looked out bravely and hopefully upon a world that had little enough to offer her, and she felt, in this moment, that a very strong bond was between this girl, almost a stranger, and herself.

CHAPTER IV.

"Ope the sacred source of sympathetic tears."

Meg was leaning back in delicious idleness on the cool, shaded porch of her aunt's house, with her hands loosely clasped above her head, and her eyes dreamily fixed on the treetops.

Robert Malloy was reading aloud from a book of verse. His voice, rising and falling musically, harmonized with the summer sounds, the hum of the insects, and chirping of the birds that came fearlessly close, to bathe in the whirling spray of the garden hose.

After he had read a while he closed the book, and said, "Tell me a story."

"A really, truly one?" she asked, bringing her eyes on a level with his.

"Yes; tell me about yourself."

"All right. Once upon a time there was a beautiful princess, and she was as good as she was beautiful; never cross, never impatient, always serene, gentle, and loving. She lived with her cruel stepmother—"

"Wasn't there a prince?" he queried anxiously.

"Not any real one," was the severe retort, "just a few little imitation ones. But she had a taste above paste jewels, so she determined—"

At this moment the air was pierced by a shrill cry from the road, followed by lusty weeping.

Meg was half-way to the gate before Robert started, and when he reached there he found her exclaiming pityingly over a small, ragged, and decidedly dirty boy, who was sitting in the dust of the road nursing an injured toe.

"How did it happen?" she was asking as Robert came up and leaned against the fence.

The hurt, slight in itself, assumed new importance in the eyes of the boy, and he answered proudly, between the sniffles into which his sobs had subsided, "I was running fast, an' I never seen that piece of broken bottle, an' I stepped right on it, an' cut my toe, an' it hurts just awful."

"I know it does, you poor, dear thing," was Meg's sympathetic rejoinder; "come right in the yard with me, where it's cool, and I'll fix it all right."

The boy began to strut after her, but meeting Robert's broad smile, bethought himself of his affliction, so changed the strut into a limp, and followed her in.

He looked a trifle dubious over the water when she took the injured member in her soft hands to bathe it, but submitted like a martyr. After Meg had washed the wound free from dirt she looked up at Robert, who was watching the proceedings with amused eyes, and imperiously demanded his handkerchief.

He elevated his brows, as he handed it to her, and, addressing the boy, remarked, "The heroines one reads about always tear their own handkerchiefs into strips."

"Yessir," responded the boy, scarcely knowing what was expected of him.

"Do you remember what Chesterfield says about just such a case as this?" Meg asked the boy, ignoring Robert.

"No'm. Who's he? The doctor?" And alarm became visibly written under the grime of his countenance.

"Never mind," Meg said reassuringly to him, and went on neatly binding the toe. When it was finished, she darted into the house and came out carrying an apple and a huge piece of cake, which she immediately bestowed upon her new protegé.

He accepted them graciously, as he had her ministrations, and was about to edge off when her eye was attracted to a sling-shot protruding from his coat pocket. She pulled it out and threw it as far as she could, then turned to the amazed boy with flashing eyes. "You horrid, bad, ugly boy! You were chasing a poor little bird when you stepped on that bottle! I'm glad you got hurt, and I hope the next time you will cut your toe completely off!"

She emphasized her words with a little shake, which sent him scuttling down the yard and out of the gate without a backward glance.

After he had disappeared, Meg stood, red and mortified, realizing that Robert must despise her for her outburst of temper, and wishing that at least she had been more dignified in her expression of disapproval. She became uneasy at the long silence, and finally ventured to raise

her eyes to his, prepared for the scorn and contempt she knew would be in his glance.

Instead, his eyes were dancing with enjoyment, and when he met her look, he laughed outright. Then he said deliberately, “I think I know you well enough now to call you Margie.”

CHAPTER V.

> “A creature not too bright or good
> For human nature’s daily food;
> For transient sorrows, simple wiles,
> Praise, blame, love, kisses, tears and smiles.”

“Come out for a boat-ride,” Robert called to Meg, who was hemming kitchen towels on her rose-embowered porch. She had seen him between the leaves, as he came striding up the walk, but gave a very natural start of surprise when he spoke. “I’m not deaf,” was her rejoinder, as she kept on with her sewing.

“Neither am I dumb,” retorted Robert, turning around and starting down the path.

Meg flung the towel from her, scattered thread, thimble and scissors in every direction as she flew down the steps and overtook him. “What was your first remark?” she asked demurely.

He looked down at her, and tried to preserve his dignity, but the eyes which met his were so innocent and wide opened, the little white face so alluring, that his anger melted, and he said, “I asked you to go boating.”

“Oh, you yelled so that I didn’t distinguish what you said. Yes, oh, yes,” catching his arm as he started away again, “certainly I will go with you. It’s a lovely day, isn’t it?”

His eyes smiled into hers as he said gently, “Well, get your hat. I’ll wait here for you.”

She was gone only a moment, and rejoined him with her big hat thrown back somewhat rakishly on her head. “Aunt Amelia is cross. She wanted me to wash her hair for her, but I told her I was no lady’s maid.”

Her eyes sought his face and found no response to her frivolity. “Perhaps you think I should have stayed at home to wash her hair,” she suggested anxiously.

Then, as he still did not answer, she stopped and said in an offended tone, “Oh, well, if *that’s* the way you feel about it, I’ll go back and do it.”

Robert turned and said to her gravely, “It is not for me to say whether you shall or shall not wash your aunt’s hair, but if you must have the truth, I think your manner of refusing a trifle rude.”

She flushed, and the quick tears came to her eyes, but she kept a brave appearance as she said, “Perhaps I was rude, but if you had to live with Aunt Amelia and wait on her like a slave, as I do, you might forget your manners, too, sometimes.”

He turned and looked at her as he said, “I don’t want to quarrel with you to-day, little girl. You may be as rude as you please to your aunt, only be good to me.”

Her eyes flashed up with sudden joy, and she looked quickly at him, but the calm, impersonal glance she met, quelled the thought she had entertained for that brief second.

Then she said contritely: “I *do* owe every thing to Aunt Amelia, for I couldn’t live on my pittance anywhere else,—but I do, truly I do, earn my board. However, if you say so, I’ll go right back now and apologize to her.”

“Oh, don’t do that,” he hastily interposed; “the apology will keep, and the daylight won’t.”

When they reached the river, he helped her into the boat, and taking off his coat, folded it for her to sit on.

Neither was talkative at first, both preferring their thoughts to idle conversation. Meg watched him warily, taking in the splendid muscular development of his arms and chest, the straight, clean-cut features in a face that in repose was somewhat grave and stern, but infinitely tender and charming when he smiled. She was wishing, as she gazed at him, that Fate had given her a brother like him.

As for Robert, with eyes on the setting sun, his reveries were of the life about to open for him. For the time being he had forgotten his companion, and was holding pleasurable communion with himself, absorbed in the contemplation of his usefulness when once he had entered upon that mission for which he had been always fitting himself. He was aroused by an almost inaudible sigh, and he glanced across at Meg with eyes which were as yet blind to emotion.

She was not looking at him now, and he watched her with satisfaction. She had puzzled and bewildered him ever since he had met her, and he had only occasionally had glimpses of her real character. There were times when he distinctly disapproved of her, and his training had been such that he considered it almost an imperative duty to tell her of it.

Then with a quick subtle change of manner she would do something, some little gracious act, that would cause him to repent of his harsher judgment. But through all the varied changes of her moods, she attracted him.

She had fallen into one of her silences, and sat looking out over the water with an expression so tender and childish, that for some reason he would have been unable to explain, a great wave of pity swept over him, and the longing to shelter her from harm became uppermost in his mind.

When she spoke, it was dreamily. “I do love the water, and the sunset, and the sound of the oars as they lap the waves.” Then, in a more sprightly manner,—“It has the effect of shaded lights and soft music. I am so *good* at such times! All my thoughts are uplifting. Do you feel that way?”

Amused by her vagaries, he nodded, and the encouragement started her off again: “I almost weep to think how noble I am. Nothing that is petty or mean has any connection with me. Even Aunt Amelia I view through that rosy mist, and conjure up the kind things she *might* have done,

the tender words she *might* have spoken,—and I think with a swelling heart that I will try to appreciate those 'might have beens,'—that I will so conduct myself as to make them possible."

"And then?" as she paused.

"Oh, then," with a trace of bitterness in her voice, "then the red lights flicker and go out, and the pungent odor of kerosene oil is all that remains of them. The music stops with a last protesting wail of the violin, and the musicians hurry away after their beer and pretzels."

"And what becomes of you and your noble thoughts?"

"Oh, I take my noble thoughts and go home, and quarrel with Aunt Amelia."

Robert laughed so heartily that Meg leaned forward and said: "Sometimes I light the piano-lamp, and start the music-box going in the parlor after I go home."

As they walked up the flower-bordered path to the house, Meg remarked softly, "I feel that I could wash and crimp Auntie's hair, and make it look just lovely, now."

CHAPTER VI.

"Speak low if you speak love."

Robert was walking, with no particular aim in view, when he saw a familiar figure on the walk ahead of him, and hastening, he soon overtook her.

Meg turned her head as his step accustomed itself to hers, and smiled. "May I go with you, my pretty maid?" he asked lightly.

"Show me the girl who has been teaching you to say that kind of thing," she exclaimed with mock anger.

"Lend me your pocket mirror and I will."

"Never!" she said emphatically.

"Never what?"

"Never carried a pocket mirror in my life. Never taught you to make pretty speeches," she said tartly. "Why, the first time I saw you, you sat and twirled your thumbs like a 'bound boy at a corn-husking,' and never said anything but 'Yes'm,' and 'No'm,' and then only when you were spoken to!"

"That proves what I affirm. That was the way I was when I met *you*,—and look at me now!" with an air of conscious pride.

"Yes, look at you now!" she mocked scornfully, "with Mother Goose platitudes tripping off your tongue like extracts from the Hebrew Decalogue. Why don't you stick to your last? You might say all the nice things you wished in Latin, Greek, French, German or Spanish, and I'd have to smirk and act as if I understood, and felt very much flattered."

"And all this because I asked to accompany her on her walk!" he murmured as though to himself.

She gave him an upward look through her lashes that made him feel very peculiar, as she said sweetly, "Well, you know I didn't mean it. I *like* to have nice things said to me."

"By every one?" he queried idly, without looking at her.

"Well, no," she admitted slowly.

There was nothing more said for a few minutes; then he remarked carelessly, "You didn't tell me where you were going."

"I am going to see my cousin-in-law. I hate her, but I love her husband."

"That's frankness that might be misunderstood."

"I know it," Meg replied earnestly, "but it's true. You see, Ada has always felt that she married beneath her, and she has convinced poor Charlie that she did. But how she came to cherish such a notion I don't know, for he's the salt of the earth!"

"Was it a question of family?"

"Yes. Her father was at one time pretty well off, and at the time she married Charlie some people thought she might have done better. Charlie's one of those big-souled men who never accumulate anything, and he is blunt and hearty in his manner. Now she thinks because she crooks her little finger when she drinks a glass of water, that she is more refined than he!"

Robert laughed boyishly at her quaint description, and said, "I think I know them—not this particular couple, but their prototypes."

"Are there others like Charlie, I wonder," she said musingly. "He stands out so in my mind because he's the best, the very best man I ever saw."

After a short walk, she stopped in front of a modest two-story house, and turning to her companion, said coaxingly, "Come in with me, and meet Ada—then you'll see for yourself."

"You are sure it won't be an intrusion?"

"Of course I'm sure," was the response.

They were admitted by a tall, overgrown girl of thirteen, who beamed with pleasure when she saw Meg. "Come into the sitting-room," she said; "Papa's in there, and he will be so glad to see you."

"Why, what's he doing at home in the middle of the day?" Meg asked.

"He's not feeling very well—just indigestion, he says," answered the child, leading the way.

The room they entered was forlorn in the extreme, and in it was everywhere evidence of the taste of the wife, as well as of her notably poor housekeeping. There was dirt in the corners of the room, and dust on the few uncomfortable, cheap, but ornate chairs. There was a rug with big bouquets of red roses upon the floor, and soiled, sleazy, fringed silk drapes hung over the few highly colored, gaudily framed pictures. The wall paper was as startling as the rug, and at the windows were coarse, cheap lace curtains.

Charlie Walker was a huge, broad-shouldered blond, with kind blue eyes, a roaring laugh which always made his refined wife shudder, and a hand-clasp that was warm and cordial.

He looked so pleased when he saw Meg, that it was plain to see how well he liked her. As for the child, who had inherited her father's size, blondness, and disposition, she evidently regarded her small, grown-up cousin as a veritable princess in a fairy tale.

Meg noticed with concern that Charlie really looked ill, but it was a habit with her to say but little about such things; so, instead of questioning him fully, she looked around the untidy room and asked, "Where's Ada?"

"Gone to her card club," replied Charlie.

The child, Gertie, had taken up the mending-basket and was painfully trying to darn a large hole in one of her father's socks. It was evident that she had had no training, but was trying to teach herself, that she might assume that part of the household tasks.

"Let me do that," said Meg impulsively, and taking it from the girl, began deftly putting in the stitches.

Charlie watched her a moment, and then remarked, answering the unspoken accusation of her mind, "Ada had so much to do this week that she couldn't get around to it."

Meg drew the thread viciously and made no reply.

"She has had to practice a good deal for that concert she is to take part in," he said.

Still Meg did not speak, and the set of her lips impelled him to add anxiously, yet with a certain amount of dignity, "It is in accordance with my wishes, that she keeps up her music."

"Yes, of course it is," answered Meg meekly, for, as she told Robert afterwards in discussing it, "Big as that man is, I would no more hurt him than I would a baby."

After that, Charlie drew Robert into the conversation. Each man had taken the measure of the other, and approved. They had talked indifferently for awhile on matters pertaining to the town, when the front door opened and a step was heard in the hall.

Robert, looking at Charlie Walker, saw a light leap into his eyes, as he turned toward the door leading into the hall. "What manner of woman is this?" he asked himself, "who can bring such a look to a man's face after so many years of married life?" All unconsciously his eyes wandered to Meg.

Mrs. Walker was pretty, in rather a coquettish way; with soft brown hair and eyes, a weak red mouth, and a complexion which still retained its girlish fairness. Her hands were little, white, helpless ones, and about her was an air of childish innocence and irresponsibility. Her dress was in keeping with the furnishing of the room, cheaply pretentious and ornate.

Robert felt instinctively that while such a woman could never possess any attraction for him, she was the type some men would die for,—notably, her husband.

The talk was desultory for a while, and then Meg asked her cousin to play for them, "Which was generous of me," she confided later, to Robert, "for it showed her to the best advantage."

Without demur she seated herself at the piano and at once began to play with such sweetness and power that Robert was amazed. Glancing toward her husband, whose face reflected his appreciation of the music, as well as his adoration of the performer, Robert felt that he held the key to the puzzle.

As they were walking home, Meg asked him suddenly, "What did you think of my kin-folks?" As he paused, she continued, "Never mind the house,—I know what you thought of that,—but tell me what you think of Charlie?"

"He is a man I could love like a brother. I have never felt so drawn to a stranger."

"You dear boy!" cried Meg impulsively; "I always knew you were nice, but I never dreamed you were *that* nice. You see, Cousin Charlie is my hobby, for I think he is a grand character, and I want him to be appreciated."

"Is he not?"

"By everybody but his wife."

"I thought that, but I didn't want to judge her hastily," commented Robert.

"She does not appreciate him," Meg vehemently exclaimed. "I wish I could shake a little sense into her. He was too sick a man to be left this afternoon, but she didn't know it, or didn't care if she did know it. Why, if I had a husband like that, and he had nothing more serious the matter with him than a boil, I would stay with him!"

"I believe you would." She looked up suddenly, surprised by a new note in Robert's voice, and found him looking at her earnestly. The interchange of glances embarrassed both of them, and to cover it, he continued rather hastily, "I don't understand how a woman of her evident lack of feelings can have such a divine conception of music."

"I can explain that," said Meg confidentially. "It was a case of mixed identity. That gift was meant for me, but got switched around some way. I have the love of music, the capacity to suffer manifested by her playing, while she,—she simply expresses what I feel."

Robert smiled at her whimsical conceit, but made no reply. At her gate she put her hand in his and said, "Good-bye," simply and quietly. All the defiance and willfulness which usually characterized her were gone, and in their place was a gracious sweetness which enveloped and engrossed him the rest of the evening.

CHAPTER VII.

> "Alas! how light a cause may move
> Dissension between hearts that love."

Meg came down-stairs to breakfast humming a gay little air to herself, and looking so young and

fresh that Mrs. Weston looked at her disapprovingly as she took her seat at the table.

The morning light was unmerciful, showing up the wrinkles and sallowness of the fretful little woman, in direct contrast to the smooth purity of Meg's skin and the brightness of her eyes. The elder woman wore a somewhat soiled blue wrapper, and there was not the care bestowed upon her appearance that usually characterized it.

She glanced pettishly at Meg as she poured the coffee, and said, "I don't see why you always wear white."

Meg smiled at her sunnily, and replied, "Well, I like it—it doesn't fade, washes well, is economical—"

"And—?" queried her aunt with uplifted eyebrows.

"And is becoming," finished the girl calmly. Then she added: "What would you have me wear? It would be neither suited to you nor to the glorious summer season to wear drab."

"Pink?" suggested her aunt.

"Oh, Auntie, with my hair!"

Mrs. Weston almost smiled.

"Yellow?" she continued.

"Too vivid," objected Meg.

"Then blue," said her aunt hesitatingly.

"That's *your* color," replied Meg, with laughing eyes, "and as it wouldn't become me so well, I wouldn't think of wearing it."

Mrs. Weston's smile deepened, spread all over her face, into the creases she still fondly believed to be dimples, and diplomatic relations were established.

Meg picked up the morning paper, and propping it against the coffee-pot, began scanning the head-lines of the first page. "I declare," her aunt commented, "you are as bad as a man about reading at the breakfast-table."

The girl smiled. "When I marry," she announced, "I shall take a lesson in managing a husband from that dear, clever little friend of mine in Atchison, whose husband takes his 'ease in his inn,' sitting in a rocking-chair while he eats. He shows his appreciation of the privilege, by holding her hand between bites. Just think!" she added pensively, "they have been married five years, and he still loves her!"

"I don't see what that has to do with your reading the paper at the breakfast table."

"Why, Auntie," and Meg looked reproachfully at her over the paper, "you know I do it to save you the trouble of reading it yourself. Let me see what is happening." And she glanced over the front page. "'More Macedonians murdered,'—we won't go into the details, please,—'Jealous lover shoots sweetheart,'—I'm glad I'm redheaded; it saves complications,—'Woman murders faithless husband,'—oh, what a bloody world we live in! No, it is a beautiful world," she said softly, after a little pause, "when there are such women as Helen Gould in it. She has been giving the waifs another outing at her lovely home. Mrs. Stuyvesant Fish has consented to an interview. She declares that America must have an aristocracy. She doesn't say whether it will be an aristocracy of brains or money. It must be the former, as she deplores the depredations on the outskirts of society, committed by the vulgar rich. Yes, of course it is of brains,—that order of brains which can originate 'cute' things with which to amuse and entertain the elect."

Mrs. Weston, growing restive, interposed, "That does not interest me. Read the local news."

"You are so provincial, Auntie," was Meg's comment, as she turned the paper; "you belong so hopelessly to Valencia!"

"Well, so do you," was the brief retort.

"Not in the way I mean, my dear Aunt! My spirit is cosmopolitan, though, Prometheus-like, I am chained to Valencia. While my head is in the clouds, my feet are, oh, very much on the earth!"

"You do talk the greatest nonsense."

"Do I? Then I'll read to you instead of talking. 'Mrs. Guy Worthington Deflurry has returned from an extended Eastern trip.'"

"Mrs. who? oh, Mrs. Deflurry? I suppose she had some handsome clothes made while she was gone." Mrs. Weston was tremulous with excitement.

"Do you know the lady?" Meg asked idly. "No? I thought from your interest that she was a dear friend. 'Miss Cordelia Jamison has departed for Michigan to visit friends.' 'It is rumored that a rich bachelor is to be wedded to a handsome young widow.'"

Mrs. Weston was all in a flutter instantly. "Who can it mean? Surely,—" she giggled foolishly, "surely people cannot think that Mr. Spencer and I—"

Meg put down the paper with a judicial air. "I have always held," she said, "that the newspaper habit was a pernicious one for some people. I will read no more to you. It goes to your head."

"Why, Meg Anthony, you might at least remember that I am older than you, and treat me with some respect!"

Meg opened her eyes wide. "But you are not!" she protested. "I am centuries older than you. I am a relic of the dark ages, while you,—Auntie, I really believe you are the youngest woman I know."

A smile encompassed Mrs. Weston's entire face at what she considered a compliment, and in the exuberance of her sudden good-humor, she said, "How would you like to invite Mr. Spencer, his sister and nephew to come to dinner to-morrow night?"

"Oh, Auntie, can we really do it?" Meg cried ecstatically.

"Yes," answered her aunt; "I'll go and interview Delia about it. I think I'll have some little-neck clams—the canned ones, you know,—some kind of cream soup, a roast course, an entrée, salad—"

"Auntie!" interrupted Meg sternly, "You know we can't afford any such frills! And with only one servant! Let's call it supper, and give them just a plain meal, nicely cooked and served."

A dull purplish color mingled with the yellow of Mrs. Weston's face, as she questioned with

angry dignity, “Am I, or am I not mistress here? When did I give over the reins of government into your hands? If I need your advice, young lady, I’ll seek it.” With ruffled plumage, she went into the kitchen to settle the details with Delia.

CHAPTER VIII.

> “I cannot eat but little meat,
> My stomach is not good.”

On the evening of Mrs. Weston’s dinner—for she held to the dinner idea in spite of Meg’s protests—the weather was so hot that the heavy, poorly cooked meal was appreciated by no one but the hostess, who plumed herself that she had surprised the guests with her cuisine. Which, indeed, was true.

They sat in the stuffy dining-room while course after course was brought and taken away. Through the window Meg caught the scent of roses, and could see that a breeze gently stirred the leaves of the trees. Turning with a sigh from the temptations without, she glanced at her aunt. The work of entertaining, with the heat, had robbed her hair of its curl, and the damp, straight locks hung limply around her forehead, which was beaded with perspiration.

Meg felt an impish satisfaction when she beheld the wreck. Turning, she met Robert’s eyes, and asked, “What were you saying?”

“I was recalling a remark you made the first evening I met you,—that you were a gourmand. You have scarcely tasted your food to-night.”

“I was several hundred years younger then,” she retorted; “but if you had been giving the proper attention to your own plate you would not have noticed it.”

Leaning toward her, he murmured, “I know it’s horribly rude, especially as you are co-hostess—” she put up a deprecating hand—“but my extreme youth and callowness will have to be my excuse.”

“Callousness, did you say?”

“You know what I said. When will this thing come to an end? I’m dying to get out on the porch and get a whiff of air.”

“So am I,” she whispered back. “Let me see,—where are we?”

He glanced down at his plate, and then said apologetically, “Well, really——”

“Oh, yes,” she interrupted, stirring the contents of her plate with a fork, “this is what Delia called the ‘entry.’ Delia claims to be the direct descendant of a famous French cook. I believe his name was Brian Boru.”

“Ah, Delia and I are cousins. And after the ‘entry,’ what then?” he whispered.

She counted them off on her fingers, “The ‘poonch,’ salad, dessert, and coffee. And as you and Mr. Spencer are sociably inclined, Auntie will forego the pleasure of withdrawing, and leaving you with your wine and walnuts. After coffee, the porch.”

“Thank you for the information,” he said humbly.

When the dinner was finally finished, they went out on the porch. There the conversation was general for a time, and then Robert said lightly to Meg, “‘Come into the garden, Maud,’ and get me a flower for my coat.”

She rose without demur, and together they strolled down the walk. Mr. Spencer looked after their retreating forms, and then, meeting his sister’s eyes, he deliberately winked.

That wink, while not elegant, served as an elixir to Mrs. Malloy, and under its influence she became fairly sparkling and gay. Mrs. Weston was astonished, for she had never seen her in such a mood, though she had never seen her despondent. Her gayety was short-lived, however, for Mrs. Weston killed it with a word.

“What a fine-looking boy Robert is,” she began; and then, enthusiastically, “I think it is just lovely that he is to go into a monastery!”

There was no response, but she prattled on. “So romantic! And he will be such a handsome monk in his brown bath-robe! And will he have to go barefooted, and have his pretty curly hair shaved?”

She waited a moment, and then asked gushingly, “Don’t *you* think it romantic?”

Mrs. Malloy’s voice was even but cold, as she replied, when forced to do so by the direct question, “I would hardly call it romantic.”

“Oh, *wouldn’t* you? Most people see more romance in a love affair, but I confess that the idea of a monastery appeals to me!”

“Let’s join the youngsters,” interrupted Mr. Spencer. “They probably are boring each other to death by now.”

Mrs. Weston started up with alacrity, but his sister, with the look of a wounded animal in her eyes, said, “I will be there presently. I want to enjoy these wild roses a little longer.”

CHAPTER IX.

> “Blessings be with them, and eternal praise,
> Who gave us nobler loves, and nobler cares.”

A strong friendship sprang up between Robert and Charlie Walker, unusual in its warmth, and surprising, as the two men were totally different in taste and character, and as there was considerable disparity in their years.

Charlie Walker was a man of many friends, for he loved the world, yet of them all, none was, perhaps, so dear as this young friend. Robert was a man of few friendships, for he was as reserved as the other was open-hearted.

Scarcely a week passed that did not see them together. Charlie was never well from the time he had the first attack of indigestion, though he was able to be at his office most of the time, and still kept his hearty, healthy appearance. His hand-clasp was as strong, his laugh as infectious as ever, but there was a strained look about his eyes, which told of suffering borne in silence.

Robert and Meg, who went often together, commented on it to each other, but his wife remained ignorant of the real seriousness of his condition, which was what he desired. She still kept up her music and her club duties, at his request. It was evident that the man, in his great unselfishness, was determined to shield her from worry or trouble, while there was life in his body.

One day Meg and Robert went to see him, for they had learned that he had been unable to be at his office for a week. When they reached the home, they found Mrs. Walker softly playing the piano. Greeting them, she asked sweetly, “Do you want to see Charlie? Just go upstairs. He will be *so* glad to see you. I will come up as soon as I finish my practicing.”

In silence they ascended the stairs and stepped to the open door of the bed-chamber. Charlie was propped up in bed with pillows, and they were both shocked at the change in his appearance, wrought by his illness of the past week. Gertie was curled up awkwardly by the foot of the bed, and her eyes were big and woe-begone.

“Well, well, young people,” he called heartily when he saw them, “this is all the medicine I need!”

At the word “medicine,” Gertie started, and going over to a stand where there was an array of bottles, said, “It’s time for your powder, Papa.”

He made a slight grimace, and addressing himself to Meg, said: “Now did you ever see such an unnatural child? Every time I really begin to enjoy myself, she comes and stuffs some vile medicine down my throat!”

The child’s eyes were solemn as she said, “But, Papa, you have to take it. The doctor told me not to neglect it.”

“Well, little Miss Literal, I see you are ‘she who must be obeyed,’ so I’ll take it. Though I can’t imagine why I need anything else when I have these two youngsters to look at.”

Meg turned to Robert and said, “Delia isn’t the only descendant of Brian Boru in these parts, you see.” There was a little laugh at her remark, but it was only half-hearted, for both Robert and she were too much grieved at the change in Charlie to enjoy any joke.

He tried to be gay and natural, but after each effort he sank back among the pillows exhausted. As he laid there, a light of exquisite enjoyment came over his features, for the strains of the piano floated up from below.

Ada was playing something in a minor key, and the strange, sweet notes were so in harmony with the sadness of the occasion, that Meg was obliged to rise suddenly and go to the window, that Charlie might not see the tears in her eyes.

There was no sound in the room till the notes died away, and then turning to Robert, Charlie said: “Did you ever hear anything like that? Her music is an indication of her soul.”

Just then Ada came noiselessly into the room, and going over to the bed, asked gayly of her husband: “Did you like that piece? I think I will play it at the recital next week.”

“I would,” he replied, without a break in his voice, looking at her adoringly; and then, to Robert and Meg, who had exchanged glances, and were preparing to leave: “Must you go now? You will come again, won’t you?—Come soon—” he added, in a voice he tried to make expressionless.

After they were outside Meg could contain her grief no longer, and began to sob. “Oh, can’t *you* see that he is dying?” she asked.

“I fear so,” was the grave rejoinder.

“And after he is gone, some one will have to shake that woman and say, ‘Wake up,—Charlie is dead!’”

CHAPTER X.

> “Life’s a short summer,—man a flower—
> He dies—alas! how soon he dies!”

For the next few weeks Meg and Robert were almost daily visitors at the Walker home. They could see that Charlie was failing very rapidly, but it was plain that his wife did not realize it, and that he did not wish her to.

One day Robert drove up to Mrs. Weston’s in his uncle’s phaeton, and Meg knew instinctively why he had come. Throwing on her hat, she ran out and asked breathlessly, “Oh, is it about Charlie?”

His face was grave as he answered, “The doctor has just told me that he cannot live through the day.”

“And Ada?”

“She knows,—now,” was the low reply.

“Poor, poor girl!” Meg said in quivering accents.

Robert looked at her with an expression he was himself unconscious of, but she did not meet his eyes.

Nothing more was said by either till they reached the home. Tossing a coin to a boy who was

loafing in the yard, Robert asked him to take the horse back to the stable.

They went upstairs, and Ada came from the room with eyes swollen and red, and said, “You may go in,—he will want to see you.”

As they entered, and Charlie recognized them, he called out in his old cheery tones, much weakened by suffering, “My two young friends, I’m so glad to see you! Gertie, honey, get another chair so they can both sit down. How’s my little cousin?” he continued, looking at Meg. “What’s that, what’s that? No crying, little girl. We want to be cheerful and happy here.”

Meg dried her tears and tried to smile at him. “That’s it,” he said. “That’s one reason I’ve always loved this little cousin so much,” he explained, turning his eyes toward Robert. “She’s always cheerful,—never makes a fellow feel badly.”

“Perhaps we—or at least I—would better not stay in here,” said Robert, noticing how exhausted he was.

Charlie put out his hand feebly and laid it on Robert’s—“Don’t go. I might get blue. *She*—” nodding toward the other room,—“has gone all to pieces, and you know I can’t bear to see her unhappy.”

He seemed at times, from then on, to lapse into unconsciousness, but whenever one of them would rise to call Ada he would rouse himself and ask them not to. “The poor girl loses control of herself when she sees me. I’ll tell you when to call her. I don’t want to make it any worse for her than is necessary.”

After a little while he said: “Robert, I don’t belong to any church, but I’m not an infidel. I’ve tried to live right. Won’t you say a little prayer for me? Not any set form, my boy, but just a prayer from your heart.”

Kneeling by the bed, Robert made a simple, touching, earnest prayer in a few sentences, a prayer which brought the quick tears again to Meg’s eyes. At its conclusion Charlie said, “Thank you,” very softly, and turned his head away for a few minutes.

When he spoke again it was lightly, to cover his emotion. “Meg, I’ve played a great joke on Ada. She thinks we are poor. We *have* had to economize a good deal, but there will be fifty thousand dollars life insurance for her after—well, after a while. That ought to keep her and the young one from starving, don’t you think?”

The room grew very silent, for neither Meg nor Robert had any heart for conversation. Gertie sat in her usual place at the foot of the bed, dry-eyed and sad, watching her father’s white face.

Outside, in the hall, could be heard the murmur of voices. It seemed to disturb the sick man at last, for, opening his eyes, he asked, “Is it the neighbor-women waiting to see me die? Just tell them that I’m not at home to callers, will you?”

He tried to laugh at his pitiful little joke, but the laugh was so hollow that it startled even himself. He nodded as Robert and Meg arose, and said, “Yes, send her in, I want her. Good-bye, dear friends,—God bless you!”

They started for the door, when he called feebly, “Meg!”

“Yes,” she cried, running back to him.

“Don’t let the doctor or any one disturb us. I just want *her*,—and little Gertie.” As she started again he caught her hand and said entreatingly, “Be good to *her*, little cousin!”

When she found Ada and sent her in to him, she whispered, “If you need me, call me, dear.”

From the room came the sound of Ada’s sobs, above which, with remarkable strength, arose Charlie’s voice, encouraging and cheering. Then weaker and weaker it grew,—and ceased altogether.

A moment later a wild shriek rang through the house, and Meg, running in, found Ada in a swoon on the floor, while Gertie, the child, with an expression of heart-breaking despair, was striving to lift her mother’s head, though she never took her eyes from the still, white face on the bed.

Meg and Robert left the house an hour later. There was nothing more they could do, for the Masons, to which lodge Charlie belonged, were in charge of the body, and the neighbor-women had taken possession of Ada and Gertie.

It had grown almost dark, and the lights were beginning to shine in the houses along the way. There was little said between them, for both were too deeply stirred by the sad events of the day to talk much.

Finally Meg broke the silence. With a little catch in her voice, she said: “I am so wicked! When poor Charlie told me that Ada would have fifty thousand dollars, my first thought was that there were many men whom that amount of money would tempt.”

As there was no reply, she said, with attempted lightness, “Will you absolve me?”

Meeting her mood, though both their hearts were heavy, he answered, “There is no need of absolution where there is no sin.”

Nothing more was said until her gate was reached, and she cried: “It doesn’t pay! It doesn’t pay to love, and marry, and be separated by death!”

CHAPTER XI.

> “Domestic Happiness, thou only bliss
> Of Paradise that has survived the fall!”

About a week after Charlie’s funeral, Meg and Robert chanced to meet at the Walker home, where both had gone to see the desolate young widow.

As they walked home together, both were silent. When within a block of Meg’s home they passed a little cottage, plainly the home of people in moderate circumstances. When they were

just opposite the gate, a comely young woman came out of the door and called, “Supper’s ready.”

Her husband, who was on the lawn in front, picked up one child, swung him on his back, while the youngster squealed with glee, and called, “Supper’s ready. Didn’t you hear Mama call, boys? The first one in gets all the hot biscuit.”

Off he capered over the yard, the child on his back kicking and pounding, and crying, “Get up, old horsie,” while the other two little lads raced after him as fast as their short legs would carry them. The mother stood in the open door, her hands on her hips, watching the race, her face radiating good-humor and joy.

It was such a domestic scene! Rough and uncouth though they might be, these people typified home, with all of the sweet meaning which is often lost amid the environment of wealth.

Robert watched with his heart in his eyes. He noted each of the little lads, for he loved children very dearly. He saw the look of idolatrous pride on the mother’s face. He was absorbed in the delight of the domestic scene.

And then they entered the house; the door closed upon them! It was as though he had been given a glimpse of Heaven through a crack in the door, which had suddenly been closed, leaving him out in the dark and the night of his own despair.

Something of what he felt was in his eyes as he turned and looked at Meg. Then the veil which had obscured his mental vision was lifted, and he found himself face to face with his great soul-problem!

He seemed to see her for the first time. He took in the pure little profile, the fresh red lips, the dark-lashed eyes, in a way he had never done before. He even found himself looking with tender, amused eyes at her reddish hair, and vaguely wondered what she would do if he were to call her, school-boy fashion, “Sorrel-top.”

Suddenly he remembered! Not for him those charms, not for him the companionship of this winsome little creature, of whose deeper nature he had been given a glimpse, during the sad communion of the last few weeks!

When they reached her gate he dared not trust himself to shake hands with her. He feared the touch of the soft little hand, and knew he must be alone to fight it out by himself.

As Meg stepped up on the porch and was about to go in, a querulous voice said: “Well, I see you have been gallivanting around with Robert Malloy again. I should think he would be disgusted with you, the way you run after him!”

“Oh, Auntie, don’t, please,” she pleaded, holding out her hands beseechingly.

“Every one sees it,” continued the merciless voice, “even his mother. And from the way she spoke that night she was here, I could tell that she was very much displeased.”

“Are you sure of that?” Meg asked quietly.

“Of course I’m sure,” was the impatient answer.

“Very well. I’ll see that no one has reason to criticise my actions again. Thank you for telling me. Good-night,” she said gently, as she started to her room.

CHAPTER XII.

“*Pray, goody, please to moderate the rancour of your tongue.*”

Meg did not see Robert for a week after that memorable walk. The days of his absence were not sweetened by the comments of her aunt. “I knew he would grow tired of being pursued. Men are not won that way,” was the remark, with variations, which greeted the girl every day of the seven during which she did not have the saving grace of Robert’s presence to help her endure the torture.

All that was broad and sweet in her nature rejected the imprecations, but what there was of suspicion, engendered by the loveless home life she had led, listened to her tormentor.

It was not surprising, therefore, that she became irritable and nervous. It was in this mood that Robert found her, when, after his week of battle, he again walked up the narrow, flower-bordered path. It seemed to him that he had never really been there before. Just as Meg, after the great revelation, had appeared in a new light, so now did her surroundings.

There was a certain tender gravity in his face as he offered her his hand, which she purposely ignored. He flushed at this, but being familiar with her somewhat prickly disposition, saw nothing significant in her refusal to shake hands with him. “How is Aunt Amelia?” he asked idly, as he seated himself.

“As ravishingly disagreeable as usual, thank you,” was the somewhat snappy retort.

“Has your supply of kerosene oil run out? You don’t seem to have been lighting the piano-lamp lately, with the music-box accompaniment.”

She almost smiled, but thought better of it, and replied, “My ambition in that line has been nearly killed for lack of encouragement. Candles and a jew’s-harp are about as near as I can approach to my shaded lights and soft music.”

After a pause she said: “I’m sorry she’s not here just now. It will grieve her to learn that she has missed a gentleman caller. They are not standing in line any longer, so she can’t afford to lose one.”

“I did not come to see your aunt.”

Meg ignored his remark, and kept on: “She heard this morning of a new skin balm, and she has torn madly down town to procure it. She will be in rare good-humor when she returns. She always is after buying something to enhance her beauty.”

Robert was watching her face with intense interest as she talked, and made no reply.

“It’s something *all* the time,” she complained; “either her face is smeared with grease, or thick

with some chalky mixture which gives her a clown-like appearance, or else,—oh, the worst of all, the very limit, was the rubber mask! While she wore that I used to lock my door at night for fear she would come in my room for something, and scare me into spasms!"

As she talked a severe expression came into Robert's face. "Margie!" he remonstrated.

It was the first time he had used the dear name by which her mother had called her, in spite of his threat to do so, and though she felt the reproof of his tone, she thrilled when he spoke it. "Do you know," he began, "that your comments on your aunt are, to say the least in poor taste?"

She flushed deeply, but there was defiance in her voice and in the tilt of her head. "Why don't you say outright that I am a vulgar, ill-bred, common little thing?" she demanded.

"Because I don't think it."

"Oh, yes, you do," she retorted angrily. "I just wish you had to live with Aunt Amelia! It might shake a little of the priggishness out of you! You don't seem to understand that I would go mad if I couldn't take it out in ridiculing her."

His face softened, but before he could speak, she said in a hard, expressionless tone, entirely devoid of the passion which had just marked her utterances: "You will be leaving soon to enter your monastery. I suppose it is proper to wish you *bon voyage*, as one does people about to embark upon a long journey."

His face went from red to white, and he studied his shoes, as though trying to make up his mind to speak. Then he said slowly and hesitatingly, "Let us not talk of that now. What are you reading?" and reaching over, he lifted the book from the bench beside her where she had dropped it on his approach.

"Nothing which would interest you," she said tartly; "just the story of a son's devotion to his mother."

"What do you mean by that?" he demanded sternly.

"Oh, nothing at all," was the light reply; "you are more interested, are you not, in foot-washing, shaven heads and cowls?"

He rose instantly, his face dark with passion, but as he talked, it cleared, till in the end it was serene and calm. "I understand you now. You take this means, this cruel means of wounding me, so that I would know of your indifference. I have been having a mighty battle with myself, as between my church and my love for you. And, though I should blush to own it, my love won."

He paused a brief second. She, too, was standing, and she was trembling with emotion, but he did not observe it, nor that her lips were quivering. "I came here to-day to ask you to marry me. I was willing to forego the vows I was about to take, for which I have been preparing all my life."

He took a step nearer, and looked down at her. "Margie, I love you so! I did not know such a thing existed as this fire which has permeated my entire being! It will be my curse in my chosen life, because I will never be able to concentrate my mind on the work before me. Your face will be always between me and my duty. I could almost hate you for shattering all the hopes and aspirations of a lifetime!"

He waited for some sign that she heard him, but she stood like a piece of marble. "Yet perhaps had you loved me, and we had married, I would neither be happy, nor cause you to be. So, though you are dearer to me than all the world, dearer than the cloistered life I thought would be all-sufficing, I thank you for not returning my love."

Wheeling abruptly, he walked down the path to the gate.

"Oh," she whispered to herself, wringing her hands together, "he thanks me for not loving him!"

CHAPTER XIII.

> "Thus repuls'd, our final hope
> Is flat despair."

During the week that Robert was trying to choose his path for life, Mrs. Malloy watched him with anxious, loving eyes, conscious of his struggle, herself elated and depressed according to the moods his face reflected.

On the morning of the day he called on Meg, he had gone to his mother, and nestling at her feet as had been his habit since his early childhood, had leaned his head against her knee. She laid her hand caressingly on his head, as though inviting him to speak.

With averted eyes, and a manner he strove to make careless, he said, "Dear Mother mine, would you despise me for a weak, shilly-shally sort of creature if—" he hesitated a moment,—"if I should, after all, alter the plan of my life and not go into the monastery?"

Her face was transfigured, but she answered calmly, realizing fully that it was delicate ground upon which they were treading: "Of course I would not, dear. Whatever is for your happiness is that which I desire. And no one, not even a mother, can decide for you."

He reached up, and pulling her hand down, kissed it reverently. And then she said softly: "While my boy was little I guided him through the shoals, avoiding the rocks, and I longed,—oh, *how* I longed to be always at the helm, to keep his boat in the still, deep waters. But I realized that it would be no kindness to have him depend on me alone for guidance. I would grow old,—my hand would lose its cunning, my eyes their keenness of vision,—or I would have to leave him altogether—"

He kissed her hand again, in protest. "Old age and death have nothing in common with my young mother," he whispered.

She smiled sadly as she shook her head. "Nevertheless, one must always be prepared. At any rate, I taught you how to steer your own boat, my boy."

“Then you desert the ship, do you, O most wise woman?” he asked gayly.

“I but abdicate the captaincy,” she replied in the same strain.

When he left the house to make his call, there was something in his bearing which would have convinced his mother, even without their previous conversation, that his decision was made and that he went to put his life in the hands of the one woman in the world she would have chosen for him. Her heart was light, for she had no doubt as to the outcome.

Mr. Spencer came in singing, “Hail to the chief who in triumph advances,” and then, seeing his sister, he stopped abruptly and said, “I told you so.”

“You think he has gone to put his fate ‘to the test, to win or lose it all?’”

“Did you see the set of his shoulders as he left the house?” demanded her brother, and then, without waiting for a reply, he continued: “You can’t fool me. I know the signs of the zodiac. It’s the full of the moon, that part of the month when it gets into a fellow’s blood, and he forgets everything except that here is the one being he loves. Why, Stella, I’d have been infected with that same fever every full moon for forty years, if I hadn’t been vaccinated.”

Mrs. Malloy laughed heartily, and then he said, more earnestly: “Robert will be a lucky man to win that girl. I’ve known her for so long, and have been so fond of her, that nothing but my age prevents my stepping in now and interfering with Robert. The first time I ever saw her,” he continued reminiscently, “she was a mere child, a quaint red-headed little thing, with a world of tragedy in her big eyes. That was a few months after she had lost her father. She had replied to a question of her aunt’s, simply ‘yes,’—and Mrs. Weston was striving to make her say ‘yes, ma’am.’”

“Which won?” Mrs. Malloy asked idly.

“I don’t know. The last I saw of them they were walking down the street, Mrs. Weston dragging her along and saying, ‘You *won’t* say “Yes, ma’am,” to me! Well, I’ll teach you some manners if you live with me!’ But as I have never since heard Meg say ‘Yes, ma’am,’ I have an idea that she won the day.”

When Robert returned, he sought his mother and said briefly: “Another hand than mine has turned the boat back into the still waters of the monastery. My novitiate begins in six weeks. Let us leave here in a few days, that we may spend the remainder of the time alone together.”

All the glory had departed from her face, and she only nodded, not trusting herself to speak.

CHAPTER XIV.

> “Unto every one that hath shall be given, and he
> shall have abundance; but from him that hath not
> shall be taken away even that which he hath.”

Meg did not see Robert again before he left. Mrs. Malloy she saw only for a moment, in the presence of her aunt, when she came to tell them “Good-bye.” “We leave to-morrow,” she explained with an attempt at a smile; “Robert has only six weeks more of liberty.”

They looked into each other’s eyes, the two women who loved him. Soul recognized soul, and Meg, throwing her arms around his mother, whispered, “God give you strength to bear it.”

For reply, Mrs. Malloy clasped her close a moment and said so low that Mrs. Weston could not hear, though she strained her ears. “If I find I cannot bear it alone, and send for you, will you come?”

Meg could only nod. A moment more, and she was gone. Meg stood staring after her till her aunt’s rasping voice broke the spell: “Do you want the neighbors to say that you are dying of love for that young man? No? Well, then, don’t act so mawkish about his mother!”

Meg could stand no more, and ran up to her room to escape the persecution.

The days dragged on hopelessly and drearily. One day, about three weeks after Robert’s departure, Ada Walker came to see her. She looked very pretty in her mourning-clothes, and her face wore a pensive air which was becoming to her.

“I have come to say ‘Good-bye,’” was her greeting. “Good-bye!” asked Meg in astonishment.

“Yes, I am going to put Gertie in boarding-school, and then I am going East to study music.”

“And the home?”

“I have sold that,” was the reply.

“Sold Charlie’s home!” gasped the girl.

“Certainly. He always wanted me to keep up my music, and I couldn’t be bothered with a house.”

Meg said nothing. “You know, Meg, Charlie would have wished it,” she said somewhat peevishly.

“Yes, Charlie would have wanted you to do just as you wished,” replied Meg drearily. Then suddenly she burst into tears, and throwing her arms around Ada’s neck, cried, “Oh, I can’t bear to see you go! You are all of Charlie that is left to me, and *everybody* is going from me!”

Ada looked surprised at her burst of emotion, and said patronizingly: “Why, I didn’t know that you cared so much! We people of deeper feelings are sometimes at a loss to understand you frivolous ones!”

The words acted like a tonic on Meg, who dried her eyes, and said with bitter lightness, “You must allow us frivolous ones to mope occasionally. We are not always gay.”

“I suppose not,” said her cousin, eyeing her disapprovingly.

After she had gone Meg went up to the attic where she kept the little trunk containing her mother’s things. Unlocking it, she clothed herself in the dress and apron of which she had spoken to Mrs. Malloy. With the addition the spectacles, the use of which her mother’s near-sightedness

had compelled, and the piece of unfinished work, she looked like a child masquerading in grown-up clothes. But no child could have worn the look of absolute despair depicted upon her face.

She sat gazing into vacancy for a while, and then, remembering her game, began to talk: "Margie, dearie, don't you realize that you are only a light-minded little thing? You must try to be serious, darling, try to have sober thoughts, try to feel as people of deeper natures do.

"And another thing you must remember,—you must not stand in anybody's way. When you find that you are standing between anyone and the light, just step aside. Never mind about yourself. You are of no consequence. You are just a waif,—you don't belong anywhere, and don't belong to anybody—"

Suddenly the little red head went down on the folded arms, and she began to sob, "Oh, mother! mother!"

CHAPTER XV.

"As a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings."

For a week or so after their return, Mrs. Malloy found herself, in spite of her philosophy, growing bitter. She compared her life, replete with all the bodily comforts that wealth procures, with that of other women, who knew not the luxury of ease and comfort and beautiful environments, but who, nevertheless, were surrounded by the dear ones who alone make happiness.

She looked around her house, which in the minutest detail evidenced exquisite refinement of taste, and thought with despair that in a few weeks those rooms would be empty,—empty of the presence of her best beloved.

But something occurred which obliterated her reflections, and roused all the strength and courage of her character. Robert became very ill with typhoid fever, and for days it was impossible to foresee the issue.

During his delirium he was like a child who dreads the dark, except that the thing he feared was the monastery, that haven of rest for which he had longed. He would beg his mother piteously to keep Margie from pushing him through the gates.

One day he returned from the Crossway leading into the Valley, and smiled a sane, rational smile. And simultaneous with his recovery, fell the scales from his eyes.

He looked at the havoc anxiety had wrought in his mother's face. Back of the ever-ready smile, was a look he was beginning to understand.

And from having doubts as to his duty to fulfill his vows, he became positive that his place was with her. As day after day he thought it out, he felt horror of himself for the wrong he had unconsciously intended.

Finally he told his mother. He begged her forgiveness for ever having contemplated leaving her after his father's death, and promised that in the years to come he would try to make it up to her. She clasped him in her arms, and murmured incoherent words of love, as she pressed her face to his dark curls, as a mother does with a baby. "Oh, mother mine, has it meant so much to you?" he asked in sorrow.

"So much more than you can ever know," she answered, "but this moment compensates for a whole lifetime of suffering!"

After a pause, during which he stroked her hand in silence, Mrs. Malloy said gently, "Robert, I don't want to rush in where angels would fear to tread, so just stop me if the subject pains you,—but I don't understand why Margie refused to marry you."

"She didn't exactly refuse me, Mother," he said hesitatingly; and then he told her of their conversation.

His mother regarded him, during the recital, with amazement, amusement, and consternation. When he had finished she observed quietly: "My son, I see I neglected an important part of your education. You are not schooled in woman-lore."

A little later a telegram went out to Meg from her, saying, "I need you. Come."

CHAPTER XVI.

"To know, to esteem, to love,—and then to part,
Makes up life's tale to many a feeling heart!"

Valencia, to Meg, had become a barren spot on the map. Nothing relieved the dreary monotony but the nagging tongue of her aunt, who, it would seem, had found her mission in life, that of saying and doing the little things which crucify.

Meg felt that she could have endured having her house of cards tumble about her feet; could even have been stoical, because accustomed to a loveless life. But the constant jarring note,—the mean, cutting words which dwelt upon the lips perpetually of her one relative, kept her soul in such a turmoil, that she seriously thought of embracing Catholicism, and retiring to the peace of a convent.

That consolation, however, was denied her. She had not listened to Mrs. Weston's exordiums on unrequited love, without acquiring a tolerably accurate idea of the remarks which such an act would call forth,—remarks which she felt would follow and torment her, though thirty convent walls, instead of one, hemmed her in from the strife and malice and unwisdom of the world she had left.

When she took a mental inventory of her accomplishments with the view of engaging in some

business, she knew she could not qualify. She was skilled in cooking and housework,—but courageous as she was in her convictions, she shrank from the social ostracism that would surely follow, should she employ her one talent in earning her independence.

While she was turning these things over in her mind, and trying to come to a decision, the message came summoning her to the aristocratic little Eastern city where Mrs. Malloy had made her home since the early days of her wedded life.

Before speaking to her aunt about it, Meg counted over her scanty savings from her insufficient income, and found that she would have barely money enough for a round-trip ticket. It had not occurred to her to refuse the summons. She felt it her positive duty to go, and, putting her own trouble behind her, to do what she could for the stricken mother who had turned to her in her need.

When she timidly mentioned it to Mrs. Weston, she said sharply, “You surely don’t think of going! Why, it will only strengthen the opinion most of the people have,—that you are desperately in love with Robert Malloy.”

Meg raised her head with a gesture of pride and dignity, though the red blood mounted to her cheeks, as she replied, “You may tell the neighbors should they inquire, that I *am* in love with him.”

“Why, Margaret Anthony, I never heard so shameless an admission in my life!”

“I thought you might as well know, being my nearest of blood. You have thrown out so many innuendoes about the matter, that it may ease your mind to know the truth. Now you have the knowledge, you may sow it broadcast. No,” as her aunt started to speak, “there is nothing more to be said between us on the subject. You may discuss me with the butcher-boy, or the garbage-gatherer, whom I would consider a proper receptacle for such gossip, or any one who inspires you with a desire to talk,—but I demand silence for myself!”

It was a new phase of Meg’s character, which Mrs. Weston did not understand, and as she did not possess a spirit of adventure, she wisely refrained from disobeying the injunction.

The following day, with her few clothes, her ticket, and a small lunch-box which Delia had smuggled to her, Meg set out on her journey. To her it was a new experience, for since her orphanhood she had scarcely been away from Valencia. It would have been a pleasurable trip, but for the sorrow which she anticipated at its close.

She was so intensely alive, that everything interested her: the occupants of the car, and the moving panorama without, the rolling prairies of her own State, the cool, wooded forests of Missouri, the rich farms of Illinois. But as she neared her journey’s end, and contemplated what it meant to her, and to that other lonely woman who loved him, her thoughts took shape, and, closing her eyes, she tried to realize the full force of the blow that had fallen alike upon his mother and herself.

In imagination she saw it all! A dim, high-ceilinged cathedral, with the monastery at the rear. The gloom was relieved only by the candles at the altar. A priest was droning the Latin of his prayer-book, while the organ in the loft was playing some soft, monotonous air, that got into her brain and nearly soothed her into forgetfulness. Suddenly it burst into a triumphant Te Deum, as the altar boys appeared, followed by other priests, and lastly, by five young men clad in the brown robe of the order of St. Francis.

Her eyes sought their faces, one by one, till the last one was reached. He was white, and in his eyes was the look of a man who had lived, and loved, and lost. Over the heads of the other novitiates, beyond the forms of the priests, his eyes met and held hers. And when he should have responded in Latin, with the others, no sound issued from his lips, but his eyes, fixed on hers, said: “Margie, I love you so! You are dearer to me than all the world, dearer to me than the cloistered life I thought would be all-sufficing!”

She held out her arms to him, but into his face had come the gray pallor of a living death. The service went on and on, endlessly, it seemed to her. It was all so meaningless! Her mind comprehended nothing. Her heart, tense and ready to break, knew only that he was leaving her. The beauty of the music, the impressiveness and solemnity of the service meant but the one thing,—Robert was leaving her!

The service ended, his eyes said farewell to her,—and, with the others, to the same monotonous music of the organ that had first lulled her senses, he retreated, farther and farther away from her, until at last he disappeared entirely. There was a moment of terrible suspense, as she strained her ears to listen. Then came the clang of the monastery gates, as they closed behind him, shutting him out of her life forever!

“Missy, de train’s done reached Welcomeville. Ain’t dis where you all get off?”

Meg sat up straight and looked at the colored porter in a dazed manner for a moment. Then, gathering her few possessions together, she left the train.

CHAPTER XVII.

“Chewing the food of sweet and bitter fancy.”

Mrs. Malloy became oppressed with an uncomfortable feeling of guilt, in the days following the sending of the message. It was foreign to her nature to do anything about which there was necessity of being secretive, and she shrank from the consequences of the revelation, should her act meet Robert’s disapproval.

But dominant over that and every other sensation was her joy at her son’s defection from his chosen path, and the anticipation of his happiness in knowing that Meg loved him.

She did not meet Meg at the train, sending her trusted coachman alone, for she preferred

receiving her in her home. When the carriage drove up, and she saw Meg's white, drawn face, she became momentarily nervous. But the nervousness gave way to happiness when she held the girl in her arms, and caressed her hair. "Dear Mrs. Malloy," Meg whispered, "I seem so helpless! What can I do to make the burden easier?"

The silence that followed became uncomfortable. And Meg, looking up, saw such a light on the face bending over hers that she added wonderingly, "Why, how strange you look! What is it?"

"Please listen patiently, dear little girl, and don't misunderstand me. But first, let me take off your hat,—there—and now sit down. What would you say if I told you that Robert had given up the monastery?"

Meg looked at her in a dazed manner, but made no reply. Mrs. Malloy continued: "He awakened to the knowledge that he was more necessary on *this* side of the gates."

Meg suddenly sat up very straight and asked in a strained voice, "And the message? When did you send the message?"

Mrs. Malloy laughed softly, "Just as soon as he told me."

"But you said you needed me." The girl's tone was hard.

For the first time Mrs. Malloy realized that here was an undreamed of force, and she was suddenly reduced to an uncomfortable knowledge that she had perhaps made a mistake. She hastened to adjust matters by an explanation. "I felt I *did* need you, my dear, for Robert. He told me he loved you, and as I have always tried to procure for him everything he wished, I thought I would bring you to him." She tried to laugh, but the effort was a failure.

"Then you have spoiled him by getting him all the playthings he wanted," Meg said dryly. "A little denial earlier in life would have been morally beneficial. You should have let him cry for the moon, and he would have learned the futility of tears."

"Margie, dear,—" Mrs. Malloy leaned forward, and her tone was pleading,—"don't talk like that. It breaks my heart. I have blundered, but only through love of my boy and you. Can't you forgive a foolish old woman?"

Meg smiled, but there was no warmth in the smile. "Certainly I will forgive you. But Rob—your son: does he know you have sent for me?"

"No, he has no idea of it. And now that I see how you regard it, I fear to meet his contempt when he knows that I have interfered, fruitlessly, with his affairs."

"But he need never know it," Meg said quickly; "I will take the first train back, and he need not know I was here."

Robert's convalescence had reached the stage where he longed to prove to his loving mother that she had been needlessly alarmed about him. Therefore, slipping out of his easy-chair in the library, he started into the hall to find and surprise her. Following the direction of her voice and that other low-toned one, which was so strangely familiar, he pulled aside the heavy draperies, and stood framed in the doorway.

"Margie!" he cried, steadying himself by the curtains.

At the sound of that cry, and at sight of his thin, white face, she half started toward him with an inarticulate exclamation. But suddenly she remembered, and advancing formally, gave him her hand to shake, and said in a conventional tone, as though they had met the day before: "Good afternoon, Mr. Malloy. I hope you are improving in health."

Robert dropped weakly into a chair, and with his eyes still fixed on her face, said to Mrs. Malloy: "Mother, is it a cruel hallucination? Or is it really my Margie, standing there?"

Meg flushed deeply, but before she could say anything Mrs. Malloy interposed: "Let me explain, dear. I have been a foolish meddler. I wired Margie that I needed her, and she came, thinking you had gone into the monastery."

An awkward pause followed, which Robert broke, falteringly: "Margie, it is not a time to stand on formality, and I know from my former experience that a delay in speaking is sometimes disastrous. So I am going to ask you a question in the presence of my mother. Will you be my wife?"

Meg's face was white, and her voice quietly cold as she replied, "I am not unmindful of the very great honor you do me, Robert, but I must decline it." And turning to Mrs. Malloy, "Is there a train I can take to-night?"

"No, dear, not till morning. Let me take you to your room, and you can rest, for I know you are tired."

"Thank you," Meg said sweetly, and giving Robert a little nod she followed his mother from the room.

After opening her door for her and seeing that everything was as she had ordered, even to the flowers, and the cheerful grate fire, Mrs. Malloy turned to leave the room. At the threshold she paused, and Meg was really concerned to see the look of age which had overtaken her features. "You would better rest a while," she said, "and I will have you called in time for dinner."

When she was alone Meg threw herself down in a chair before the fire and sat staring into the glowing embers. She was deeply wounded and offended. "Do they think I have no self-respect?" she said to herself. "Mrs. Malloy, knowing me to be dying of love for Robert, and being accustomed to gratifying his slightest whim, hands me to him on a platter, with her compliments. And he, so polite, having been taught to say 'Please,' and 'Thank you,' accepts me graciously. 'Thank you, Mother dear; you have the knack of always getting me just what I want. It's very pretty. I would prefer it to that monastery or any other toy.'"

Just then a glowing log separated, and fell with a hissing sound; gradually the glow faded from it and it became gray and lifeless. "That's it," Meg soliloquized; "that log represents life. One moment so full of color and warmth, the next, a handful of ashes.—I hate Robert.—He looks very badly.—I wonder if he was in any danger.—I suppose his mother must have been terribly anxious. —Auntie would say I was sentimentalizing.—I wonder—" The tired head fell back against the cushion of the chair, and she slept dreamlessly and sweetly, till she was summoned to dinner.

CHAPTER XVIII.

"Her children arise up and call her blessed."

Meg, refreshed by her nap, was her usual sprightly self at dinner. Mrs. Malloy looked weary and old, and had little to say. Robert, who dined only by courtesy, his repast consisting of a bowl of bouillon, conversed with Meg on the impersonal topics she selected.

He found it impossible to get on the old familiar footing. Even the subject of Aunt Amelia, she treated with respect, refusing to see the opportunities for ridicule which his polite inquiries furnished, and of which, once, she would have taken advantage. She was bright and gracious, but there was a new dignity about her, which forbade any approach to the doorway of her emotions.

Robert had forborne to reproach his mother. Being by instinct and breeding a gentleman, he did not say a word to wound her. Yet ever in his deference, she was conscious of his resentment. She knew that he attributed his failure to win Margie, to her interference. That, had he been left alone to shape his fate, his desire would have led him back to Valencia, there to woo and win the maiden in the old-fashioned conventional manner.

And through her over-zeal, his bubble had burst,—the prize was beyond his seeking!

She was very miserable in her self-communion. More so, perhaps, than either of her companions. With Robert, hope was not by any means extinct. With Margie, in spite of her schooling, and her wounded pride, the warmth and glow of life came into her heart, as she looked across at Robert, listened to his deep, expressive voice, and met his eyes, containing the message of love he dared not speak.

As they started to leave the dining-room, Mrs. Malloy turned suddenly white, and before Robert could catch her, she sank in a crumpled heap on the floor. It was only a fainting spell, induced by her unhappiness following so closely upon the exhaustion and anxiety attending Robert's illness.

But this they did not know, those two young creatures! To them it resembled the sleep of death, and they both knelt beside her, frantic with self-reproach, crying and calling to her to open her eyes and speak. When she finally emerged from the swoon, she looked from one to the other of them. Thinking she was dying, and that the wish she could not frame in words was her last request, Meg sobbingly cried, "Yes, dear Mrs. Malloy, I *will* marry him if he wants me, for I do love him."

Whereupon Robert, putting his arm around Meg, said solemnly, "Mother darling, it shall be as you wish. We love each other, and will send for the priest at once if you say so."

Mrs. Malloy closed her eyes from sheer weakness, but even in her half-swoon the look of youth stole back to her features, and a beneficent expression of peace came over them. When she felt strong enough to speak, she asked to be helped to the couch.

The young couple bent over her solicitously, and when she again opened her eyes, Robert asked in a low voice, "Shall I send for the doctor for you, and the priest for us, Mother dear?"

She smiled faintly. "I do not need the doctor, for I simply fainted. As for the priest, suit yourselves, but don't send on my account, for I think I will live till morning. And now, if Margie will come to help me, I am going to my room to lie down. I would rather have you than a servant, dear. Good-night, my boy. I will send Margie back to you soon."

A little later, Meg whispered to Robert, "I believe she fainted on purpose!"

CHAPTER XIX.

"Sweet is every sound,
Sweeter thy voice, but every sound is sweet."

Meg was writing to her aunt, and Robert leaned over her shoulder and read: "So I will be married here, and then we will take a trip for Robert's health. Auntie, please don't suspect me of marrying for money, but did you guess they were rich? *I* didn't, till I came here, and then I saw. Most of the rich people we know make such a vulgar display, and that is why, I suppose, I did not suspect it of them. I feel like a fairy princess—"

Meg stopped writing and leaned back in her chair. "Robert Malloy," she said with pretended severity, "I am surprised that your mother never taught you it was impolite to look over people's shoulders. I suppose she wanted to leave part of your education to me."

"Speaking of fairy princesses, tell me the rest of that story you began the day that poor, dear little boy stubbed his poor, dear little toe."

She blushed at the remembrance, but passed on the reference, and began her story without a preface: "Well, the beautiful, amiable princess, almost too good for this world, finally met her Prince, or at least a very good imitation of one, but he thought *he* was too good for this world—"

"I don't think I care for your story," and he pretended to yawn.

"And I don't think you would make a good monk. You are not fat enough," remarked Meg irrelevantly; and then, seeing a tense look on Robert's face, she leaned forward and said contritely, "Oh, Bobbie, I never will make light of it again! Honest! Cross my heart and hope to die!"

"I hope not, dear one," he said gently; "I have given it all up, and I have no regrets, but,—"

"Yes," seriously, "I understand."

Robert had drawn a chair up beside her, and was holding and caressing her hand. "Tell me, little girl, where you would like to go, when we leave the world behind us."

Her face assumed a prim look, as she replied: "I have always been taught that if I mended my

ways and became very, *very* good, I would go to Heaven."

Robert laughed. "But in the meantime? I would like to travel more or less for a year, especially as Mother can be with us part of the time. After that, I will come home and go into some kind of business."

Meg's eyes were shining with excitement. "Won't it be fine!" she exclaimed; "I have always longed to see the world. I want to view the universe from the summit of Pike's Peak. I would like to gather oranges in Florida, to be prodigal with flowers in California. It is my desire to be made dumb by the magnificence of Yellowstone Park,—temporarily dumb, you understand,—and deaf by the roar of Niagara!"

"And you have never been to any of these places?"

"No, but I once went to Tecumseh! That's fifteen miles from Valencia," she replied confidentially.

Robert laughed. Her voice became softly reminiscent, as she continued: "I used to 'pretend' that I was traveling. I wandered through quaint old streets in the unfrequented northern parts of Great Britain. I spent whole weeks in that little town with its one street, paved with cobblestones, leading straight down to the sea. I reveled in the strong, salt air, and the odor of the fish, freshly caught,—though I never could bear to smell them in a meat market in Valencia!" and her small nose went up at the recollection.

"And did you never visit France, Germany, or Italy?"

"Oh, yes,—and Spain, where were all my possessions! I didn't miss any of the usual places, but I was contrary enough to prefer the unbeaten path. That, I suppose, is the spirit of my pioneer ancestors in me. I dearly loved Ireland, and the warm-hearted Irish people,—indeed, indeed, I'm not saying it to flatter you!"

Robert was enjoying himself thoroughly, and to encourage her in her whimsicalities, he asked, "Did you never visit Japan?"

"Yes, it was there I learned the exquisite art of arranging flowers. But auntie, being a born and bred Valencian, could never be convinced that it was not artistic to stuff a vase full of nasturtiums, geraniums and sweet peas, with a garnishing of alyssum and petunias!"

"You must have gained quite a smattering of the languages in your travels," Robert said idly.

"*Just* a smattering! Not enough to make me forget the everyday language which years of association had made familiar, if not dear. My travels usually ended as abruptly as though a cablegram had called me home. Just as I would alight from one voyage, and, living over again my delight in the scenes which had enchanted me, before preening my wings and preparing for another flight, I would be jerked back to my commonplace existence by a familiar voice saying, 'Meg, tell Delia to boil some cabbage for dinner!' Auntie was addicted to cabbage," she concluded plaintively.

There was something of sadness in Robert's smile, as he said: "Poor little bird with the clipped wings! How much of pleasure and happiness you have missed. Please God, I shall make it up to you!"

Meg gave him a grateful, upward look, as she exclaimed impulsively, "Oh, Robert, my dear, you will have to give me so much love to make up for the fifteen years I have missed it."

"For twenty years, for forty years, if you say so, sweetheart, for the supply is unlimited. And you,—will you turn on your shaded lights for me?"

"No," she said, with sweet gravity, "for shaded lights are artificial. They may, at any time, flicker and go out. Nothing but the sunlight and the moonlight will do now, to express my love."

CHAPTER XX.

An after-thought.

Mr. Robert Spencer to Robert Malloy:

"Valencia, Nov. 5.

"*Dear Robert*: Hold on. Wait for me. I made the match, and it's no fair playing the game out till I come. Will take the first train. But what a combination of hair and name for your wife! It fixes her nationality, all right. Red-headed Meg Malloy! Salute her, for

"Uncle Bob."

Mrs. Amelia Weston to Miss Margaret Anthony:

"Valencia, Nov. 5.

"*Dear Niece Margaret*: For such I suppose you will prefer to be called, now that you are to marry a rich man. I hope you will not forget your former friends and relatives who befriended you in your hour of need. And I trust you will profit by the refined example I have striven to set you. Be careful of your table manners. You always had a tendency to put your elbow on the table. I used to think you did it to annoy me. Perhaps if Robert never speaks of it you may cease doing it. I am very much afraid the neighbors will say you pursued Robert to his very home to marry him. They are likely to say you were afraid to come back to Valencia to be married for fear he would change his mind. It is just awful the way people gossip!

“Of course, I am glad you are going to marry well. But I can’t help thinking how sweet Robert would have looked in that brown bath-robe.

“I have bought a new complexion beautifier that I like so much. The young lady agent explained that my complexion really didn’t need improvement, but that this was a good preservator. She is a very pleasant young lady.

“Give my respects to Mrs. Malloy and your future husband. I hope he won’t live to regret choosing you instead of the monastery.

“Your loving Aunt Amelia.

“P.S.—I am having the sweetest little dress made! It is of light-blue cashmere, trimmed in the cutest little chiffon ruffles. The dressmaker thinks it is going to be very becoming to me.”

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