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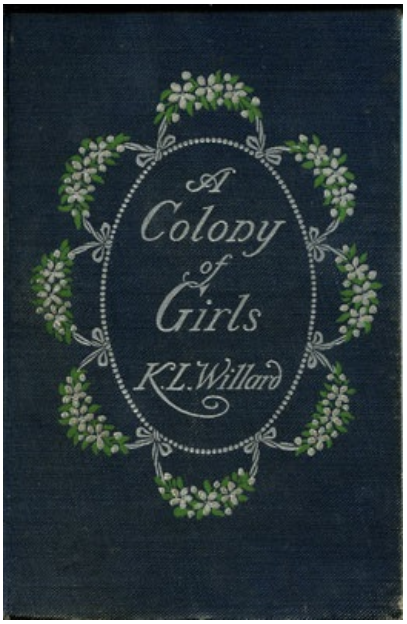

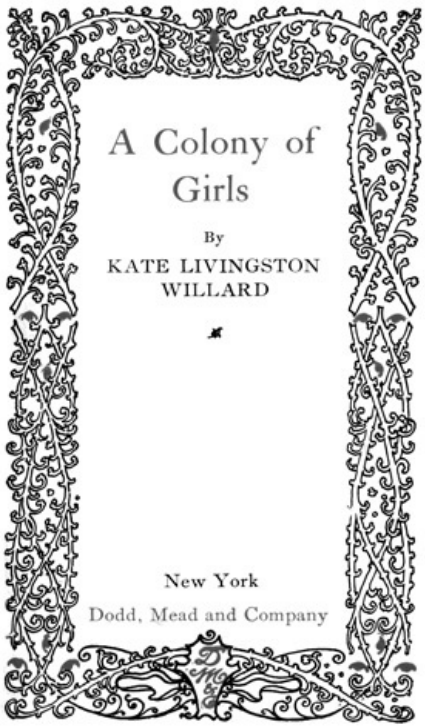


# A Colony of Girls

By

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# CONTENTS.





# A COLONY OF GIRLS.



## CHAPTER I.

## THE LAWRENCES AND OTHERS.

"I cannot understand why the children do not return from the beach. They have been gone so long."

"None too long," sighed Nathalie Lawrence, swinging lazily to and fro in a hammock which was hung across one end of the veranda. "What a heaven it is without them. I declare, Helen," she continued, addressing her sister in aggrieved tone, "we do get a lot of those children, somehow or other. For my part, I cannot see why you let them stay about with us all the time, when they are a thousand times better off with Mary," and she gave a vindictive tug at a rope fastened to the railing, which sent the hammock back and forth with the utmost rapidity.

"Take care, Nat; you will be out next, and there will be a hubbub worse than the children would think of making in their wildest moments."

The young girl who thus spoke laughed a low, musical laugh, and looked up from her book with a pair of wide-open blue eyes. 2

"Nathalie, as usual, thinks only of herself," said Helen with a frown, as she walked away.

"I never can say one word about those children without raising Helen's ire. She spoils them, and she might as well admit it."

"In my short and uneventful career," responded Jean smiling, "I have not found that people are over-fond of admitting anything, least of all their weaknesses. I don't see how you can expect Helen to be superior to all the rest of the world—yourself and myself included. Now, imagine," she continued tantalizingly, "if anyone insisted upon your admitting your weakness for Mr. Church——"

"Oh, keep quiet, Jean; you are too stupid."

"Dear, dear," cried Jean, jumping up and closing her book, "of course I am, and that is my weakness; so now we are quits."

Nathalie tossed her head as much as her position would permit.

"Jean Lawrence," she said solemnly, "you bore me."

"What a catastrophe!" Jean flung back her head with a merry laugh. "Good-by, dear; you are the picture of injured innocence."

"Jean, come back," cried Nathalie, struggling to obtain an upright position. "I do think you are too bad. Ah, well, some day,"—then breaking into song:

"Some day, some day, some day I shall meet you,
Love, I know not when nor how;
Love, I know not when nor how. Only this,
Only this, only this, that once you loved me;
Only this, I love you now——"

"Rats!" called out a small voice from the lawn below. 3

Nathalie raised herself on her elbow, and peered through the railing.

"Larry, I am thunderstruck. What is the meaning of that weird expression?"

"Nathalie singing a love song," cried Larry, scampering about on the lawn. "Oh, what fun!"

"Larry," called Helen, coming out once more on to the veranda. "Where are Willie and Gladys? Why did you stay so long? I have been worrying about you."

"Oh, they're coming along. Now, don't you worry, Helen, 'cause we was all right. You don't need never to send Mary with us," he added eagerly, "'cause we wouldn't get drownded, nor nothing, really."

Jean strolled back from the other end of the veranda, and put her hand on Helen's shoulder.

"Larry, love," she said, looking down at her little brother, "your grammar is something to be deplored."

A fleeting smile lit up Helen's pale face and gentle brown eyes.

"Ah, here come the little culprits," she cried, starting forward. "Gladys, my precious baby, I have been worried to death about you. What naughty chicks to have staid so long. Willie, I can never trust you."

Willie was a grave little fellow, the eldest of the three children.

"Why, Helen, we weren't gone long. Gladys was good, and so was Larry—that is pretty——" he added deprecatingly. "The moment I said 'Come on, children,' we all started; only Gladys, she 4
couldn't walk very fast, so Larry wouldn't wait for us. Oh," sighed Willie, his grave little face in a pucker at the recollection, "I would rather Mary went along with Gladys another time."

"Anyhow I was awful good, sister," lisped little Gladys, trying to frown on Willie, "only——"

"Only your short little legs would not carry you any quicker. Is that not so, darling? Well, since you were all good, there is nothing to scold you about."

"Helen's faith is sublime," laughed Jean, in an aside to Nathalie.

Helen took little Gladys in her arms, and sat down in a large rocker, which stood close to the front door.

She was a slender, frail-looking girl. Her soft, brown hair was arranged close to her head with the utmost simplicity, and her rather pale face would perhaps have been plain, had it not been redeemed by a pair of beautiful sad brown eyes. She was the eldest of the Lawrences, and it seemed to her only a brief time since the Angel of Death had, twice in one short year, visited

their home, leaving them bereft of father and mother.

Her father had been a physician of undoubted skill, a man of wide learning and great culture. Had the lash of poverty given an incentive to his somewhat lagging spirit, he might have commanded the attention and the admiration of his fellow-men; but his was a nature of great shyness and reserve, and when his father died, leaving him a comfortable fortune, he had, with an almost unconscious sigh of relief, turned his back on ambition and withdrawn to the old homestead in the sleepy little town of Hetherford, content with a small country practice which left him undisturbed hours among his books and in his laboratory.

Mrs. Lawrence's inclinations were thoroughly social; but so unbounded was her faith in her husband's judgment that it never occurred to her to complain of the narrowness and isolation of their life in Hetherford. As her girls grew older, however, she reproached herself with the thought that she was hardly doing them justice in thus secluding them from the advantages of contact with the great world which lay beyond their own pretty village. She appeased her conscience by giving them occasional visits to town and one long, happy summer in Europe, which they had enjoyed to their hearts' content.

The winter following this last delightful holiday, Dr. Lawrence had been stricken with a fatal illness and, after weeks of suffering, had passed away.

Mrs. Lawrence survived this blow but two months, and at little Gladys' birth had turned to Helen with a weary, heartbroken sigh:

"My darling, I am so lonely—your father. Take care of the little ones—this wee lamb. God bless you, my——"

Helen had sunk speechless at her mother's bedside, until the sound of a wailing cry brought her once more to herself.

"My dear," said gentle Aunt Helen, leaning over her, "won't you take the poor little baby? Perhaps she will help to comfort you."

And Helen took her little sister in her arms, and made her way into the nursery, where, in two small cribs, side by side, lay her little brothers, fast asleep.

Jean and Nathalie stood by the nursery window, looking out into the night. At Helen's entrance they turned sharply.

"O Helen, how is mamma?" Jean stopped short, appalled at the change in her sister's face.

"Helen," she cried, a sharp ring of pain in her voice, "mamma is not—"

"Yes, Jean—Nathalie—mamma is gone. Oh, what shall we do," Helen moaned.

"My poor children," said Aunt Helen tenderly, crossing the room and putting an arm around little Nathalie, and clasping Jean's hand tightly in hers; "your dear mamma is gone. She was so sad and lonely without papa. Oh, darlings! do not grieve, but think of her as happy and at rest. You, Helen, must learn to be a mother to these little sisters and brothers, and teach them all your dear mamma would have them know. And Jean and even little Nathalie, too, can help."

"Auntie"—Helen's tears were falling fast—"I will do all I can. Poor baby," she whispered, and she kissed the soft little face, which was nestled in her arms, and then she turned toward the cribs, and looked with loving eyes at the sleeping children. "God bless them, and help me."

Since that sad night six years had rolled by. Nathalie was now eighteen, Jean her elder by two years, and Helen's twenty-third birthday was close at hand. Larry and Willie were respectively eight and ten, and little Gladys was fast outgrowing her babyhood.

Aunt Helen, Mrs. Dennis, had since Mrs. Lawrence's death made her permanent home with her nieces and nephews. She was a sweet, gentle woman, a widow and childless, and her lonely life had been thus gladdened by the love of this household of happy-go-lucky children. She had always been delicate, and during the past few years had become so great an invalid that she rarely left her room.

Thus Helen Lawrence had been obliged to assume unusual cares and responsibilities for so young a girl, and these were not without their effect on her mind and character.

For years the manor house of Hetherford had been in the possession of the Lawrences, and no family in the town was better known, or more universally loved. The manor itself was a charming old park, stretching out far enough to make it no small walk to compass its grounds. Grand old trees shaded the well-kept lawns, and pretty graveled paths, lined with box-wood, led hither and thither.

The house was old-fashioned in the extreme, large, square, and commodious. A broad veranda ran around three sides of it, and across the front there was an upper balcony, which, in the season, was covered with trailing vines of roses, honeysuckles, and passion flowers. During the warm summer days this was a favorite retreat of the girls. A few rugs were thrown down, comfortable wicker chairs were scattered here and there, and on the low round table in the center there was always a motley collection of books, writing materials, and work-baskets. Through occasional openings in the vines were revealed pretty vistas of lawn and flowering rosebeds, beyond which stretched the blue waters of the sound, sparkling in the sunshine as if

strewn with a thousand jewels. It was, indeed, an Arcadian spot.

Within doors everything was equally old-fashioned and comfortable. Opening on to the broad hall, which ran through the middle of the house, were four large airy rooms, simply but substantially furnished, and with an unmistakable air of being lived in. Upstairs, in addition to the rooms occupied by the family, each one of which was bright and cheery, and clearly revealed the individuality of its occupant, were several guest chambers, with heavy four-post bedsteads and quaint mahogany dressing-tables, and during the summer season these were rarely untenanted, for the Lawrences' hospitality was as old-fashioned as their home.

Quiet Hetherford was almost unknown as a summer resort, but the few people who had once found their way there came again and again, and with them all the Lawrences were on intimate and friendly terms. It was not strange that young men came but rarely to this out-of-the-way little village, but a colony of girls thrived and were happy there; happier, perhaps, for this very lack of the masculine element. The girls often laughed merrily over it, and no one of them seemed to take it very much to heart, save pretty little dark-eyed Emily Varian, who spent her summers with her uncle, Dr. Evelyn Birdsall, the Presbyterian minister. 9

"It is deplorable," she sighed, "and if the girls were not selfishly lazy they could quite easily get some men to come out here. Certainly town is not so far off as to make us quite out of the world. It is nothing but stupid nonsense and vanity on the girls' part. They think it is something fine and independent never to see anything of men. For my part, I should think they would be ashamed of it."

There was one girl who always laughed good-humoredly at Emily's grumbling, and she was none other than charming Eleanor Hill. However, she had less cause to complain, for while Emily went from her winter home in one little country town to sleepier Hetherford for the summer months, Miss Hill for more than half of every year led the gayest of lives in New York. When June came with its warm sunshine and long days, she and her mother gladly turned their face toward pretty, dreamy Hetherford; to them the dearest spot in the world.

Mollie Andrews said that, for her part, she didn't care. Taking it all in all, she did not see but that they had a pretty good time. The Andrews had been coming to Hetherford for years, and were all deeply attached to the place; Mollie's handsome, scatterbrained brother Dick had set the seal of his approval on their choice of a summer resort, and thenceforth Mollie would have deemed it nothing short of heresy to call the place stupid. To be sure, Dick rarely turned up oftener than once a week, but then her cousin Clifford Archer, nicknamed "the fatal beauty," was wont to put in an appearance for a few days, frequently with his great chum Wendell Churchill, whose yacht 10 was quite a familiar object in Hetherford Harbor.

"It is perfectly absurd of Emily," Mollie would end, with a toss of her head.

Emily always looked scornful, and Nan Birdsall, happy-go-lucky Nan, who rarely went away from Hetherford, would laugh gleefully.

"Poor Em," she exclaimed one evening, after one of her cousin's tirades, "you are man-crazy. Never mind, dear; you wait. I know a thing or two, and by and by when my ship comes in," looking around at the girls, with a mischievous twinkle in her eye, "you will be surprised. Perhaps we will have more men here than we have bargained for."

"What do you mean, Nan?" they cried in chorus; but not a bit of satisfaction would Nan give them.

The parsonage adjoined the manor, and an opening in the hedge made intercourse between the two families an easy matter. Just across the road was the inn, where all the summer visitors stayed, and a quainter retreat could not be imagined. They formed only a small circle of people, but many were the happy times they had together. 11

## CHAPTER II.

## NAN'S SHIP ARRIVES.

"I wonder why we couldn't have a swim this morning, Jean?" Nathalie stood before her mirror, arranging her pretty brown tresses which, in spite of vigorous efforts with brush and comb, would curl, and refuse to be orderly. "Of course, Aunt Helen will say it is too early in the season."

"Well, I think that is absurd. It is warm enough. 'Afric's sunny clime' is not a circumstance to it. Look out, Jean, at the sunlight on the lawn. When it has that pinkish tinge, you may be sure it's hot."

Jean peeped through the half-open shutters.

"Oh! what a sweet day. Yes, it is going to be hot, and, unless Aunt Helen objects seriously, we will surely go in."

She crossed the room and, opening the wardrobe door, took out a pretty striped cotton gown. "Warm enough for this, isn't it?"

Nathalie nodded.

In a few minutes more the girls were both in the dining room. Helen and the children were already at breakfast.

"How late you are," cried Helen, looking up from an open letter. "I wish you——" 12

"Never mind, dear," interrupted Nathalie. "It will all be the same a hundred years hence."

"Oh, yes, I suppose so," sighed Helen. "Gladys, don't beat on the table with your spoon. The noise is distracting."

"And although your tones are dulcet, my love, suppose you give us that little song after breakfast," and Jean slipped into her place at her little sister's side.

Gladys turned and threw her arms around her.

"I didn't see you come in, Jeanie."

"That is because you have not eyes in the back of your head, pet."

"Of course I haven't. Nobody has, 'cept fairies and princesses, I s'pose," and Gladys straightened herself up, and, in so doing, overturned her glass of milk into her lap.

"Gladys," cried Helen sharply, "look at your nice, clean frock. It is a shame."

The little girl's lips trembled, and her bright blue eye overflowed with tears.

"You don't s'pose I did it a-purpose—for nothing."

"No, no, dear. Of course not. Don't cry. I didn't mean to scold you. There, get down and run up to Mary, like a good little girl, and have your frock changed," for the sight of tears always put an end to Helen's best efforts at severity.

But Gladys' feelings had been hurt, and now that she was mistress of the situation, she had no intention of drying her eyes.

"I think you were unkind, Helen," she began plaintively. 13

"Don't be a baby, Gladys," interposed Nathalie irritably. "I declare, I think it a perfect nuisance to have our breakfast spoiled in this way. If you can't behave, you had better have yours in the nursery."

The child's tears were about to begin afresh when a pleasant voice was heard at the door.

"Good-morning. Can I come in?" And without awaiting permission Miss Hill crossed the room. In her pretty flannel gown and garden hat she made a very pleasing picture. "How are you, puss?" And she stooped and kissed little Gladys' tear-stained cheek, smiling meanwhile at the girls, as she divined the situation.

"All right," said the little girl, her face brightening perceptibly, for she dearly loved Miss Hill.

"Helen, here is a rose," said Eleanor, "and when you smell it you will realize that June is here."

Helen smiled her thanks.

"Well, Eleanor, what started you so early?" asked Jean, as she buttered her roll.

"Early? You girls don't know what early means. Why it is after nine and I had my breakfast a good hour ago."

"Horror!" shuddered Nathalie. "The very thought is pain."

"They are spoiled," spoke Helen, "and even I am getting into bad habits. I simply gave up struggling, and set the breakfast hour a half hour later, with the desperate hope that it might bring them down on time." 14

"Girls, you ought to be ashamed," said Eleanor, with well-feigned reproach in her tone.

"What nonsense! You would do exactly the same yourself if Mrs. Moffins were not such a disciplinarian. You can't make me think you are so superior," laughed Nathalie.

Helen rose, and, pushing open the blind door, stepped out on the veranda. It was a beautiful June morning, bright and sunshiny. The air was soft and warm, and the gentle south wind felt like a caress. The fragrance of roses and honeysuckles was almost intoxicating. Every now and then the delicious stillness was broken by the soft plaintive song of a bird. The old manor looked more beautiful than ever to Helen, who loved every nook and cranny of it. She stood for a moment, shading her eyes with her hand from the sun.

"What a pretty day," she murmured to herself. "Oh, I wish——" but then a voice called her, and she went back into the house.

"Helen," said Jean, coming out from the dining room, "ask Auntie if we can go in bathing. It is so warm, and we are wild to go in."

"Very well," nodded Helen, as she went upstairs.

Mrs. Dennis was in her chair by the window, with her breakfast tray on a small table at her side.

"Good-morning, darling," she said cheerily. "Where did these delicious strawberries come from?" glancing at the pretty cut-glass dish which was filled with them.

"They are the first out of the garden, Auntie, and I was determined that no one should have them but your own dear self." 15

"Thank you, my dear, it was just like you to think of Auntie first. I shall indeed enjoy them."

"Do please; and oh, Auntie! the girls want to go bathing to-day. Are you willing they should?"

"I am afraid the water will be cold."

"Well, we have had a good deal of warm weather, and I think it can't be very frigid. I suppose we might as well say 'yes,' Auntie?"

"Of course," replied Aunt Helen laughingly. "Past experience has taught us that when Jean and Nathalie have set their hearts on a thing, we might as well surrender at once. You won't go in, dear?"

"No, indeed," and Helen shivered at the idea. "I must go and tell the girls, for they will want to know."

When the roomy buckboard came to the door, Nathalie jumped into the front seat and gathered up the reins.

"Hurry and get in, girls," she called. "The horses are very fresh this morning," and in a moment more they were bowling down the avenue.

"Stop at the inn, Nat," said Jean, "and we will get the letters, and ask Mollie to go down to the beach with us."

As they pulled up before the inn, Mollie Andrews came running out on to the porch, with a package of letters in her hand.

"Don't get out, Jean; I have your mail. Have you got room enough for me?"

"Certainly. Jump right in," cried Nathalie. "The tide is just right now, so we must hurry. Oh! isn't this jolly? I love the delicious sense of excitement one always feels at the first swim of the season. Say, Moll, will you go in?" 16

"I don't know. Yes, I think I will."

It was quite a pretty scene, this bright June morning, down on the little stretch of sands which Hetherford dignified by the name of "The Beach."

Little children were digging in the sand and filling their pails, and some of the small boys were running up and down, now in the water, and now out. The girls were in a group in front of the bathing houses, all chattering at once, and discussing the momentous question as to whether to make the plunge or not.

In a brief time Jean and Nathalie were swimming far out, and Mollie came creeping timidly to the water's edge.

"Oh! how I dread it," she laughed.

"Nonsense, Moll; go ahead. It will do you good."

Mollie walked off, and Helen and Eleanor, who had found a sheltered nook, watched the bathers for a while in silence. By and by Helen's gaze strayed from the bathers to the stretch of blue water beyond, and a slightly troubled look crept into her eyes. A sudden, deep sigh recalled Eleanor's thoughts to her companion.

"Why, Helen, what world of melancholy does that sigh proclaim?"

"Oh, I don't know," evasively. "I am low-spirited this morning, somehow or other."

"Can't you tell me the reason, dear?" 17

Helen did not answer, and for a moment Eleanor watched her closely. Something in the delicate face and in the eyes, in which, of late, a shadow always lurked, touched her.

"I would love your confidence, Helen," she said at last; "but unless you can give it to me freely, I would not wish to ask it of you."

Helen stirred uneasily.

"Ah, well, for a moment I thought to speak to you of something troublesome, but be glad, dear, that I have changed my mind. I am going to speak of something pleasant instead. Do you remember my friend Miss Stuart? She has visited me several times, but always in the winter."

"Oh, yes! I remember Jean's writing me about her."

Helen turned a questioning glance on Eleanor, but the girl's expression was perfectly non-committal.

"Yes? Well, she is coming here to visit me later. The time is not set as yet, but I hope it will be early next month."

"Indeed. How nice. But, Helen, I thought she was very gay and devoted to society. What will she do in this colony of girls, with scarcely a man to say a pretty thing to her?"

"I don't know," replied Helen, a shade of annoyance crossing her face. "I think, perhaps, the girls may be mistaken about her. I feel quite sure she will be happy here."

Just then Nan Birdsall came rushing down over the sands, warm but radiant. 18

"Going in, Nan?" called Eleanor in greeting.

"No, indeed," breathlessly. "I hate the water more than a cat does," and Nan dropped down on the sand at Eleanor's side, and, taking off her hat, fanned her flushed face.

"Where is Em this morning?" queried Helen.

"What a superfluous question," laughed Nan. "Don't you see that the *Sylph* is in the harbor? Of course, Em has Mr. Churchill in tow."

"How will Nathalie like that?" asked Eleanor with an amused smile.

"Oh, Nat won't care," replied Nan, picking up a pebble and sending it skimming across the water. "She is far too sensible."

"Look over your shoulder, Nan, and see your prediction verified;" and surely enough, strolling across the beach, in their direction, came Emily Varian, with Wendell Churchill at her side.

"Isn't Em in her element?" said Nan, lowering her voice.

Nothing could have been more characteristic than the welcome the three girls gave Mr. Churchill. Into Eleanor Hill's courteous greeting was thrown just enough of personal interest as to be slightly flattering. Helen's "How do you do" was both shy and reserved, and Nan just nodded indifferently, and continued her occupation of skipping stones.

"We ought to be going home," announced Helen presently.

"I wonder if the girls are not ready yet? Oh, yes! there they come!" as the three girls came down from the bathing house and joined the little group. Suddenly Nan dropped her pebbles and 19
sprang to her feet with an exclamation:

"Oh, girls, what fun! My ship has come in at last!"

"Why, Nan, are you going out of your mind?" cried Jean. "What ship?"

"Look, girls, look! Don't you see that big schooner just rounding the point?"

"Yes, but what of it?"

"Why, that's the U. S. Coast Survey schooner *Vortex*, and she's going to be stationed here for a long time, and Dick knows all the officers aboard. How is that for a piece of news?"

"This must be your secret," laughed Eleanor.

"Of course, and didn't I keep it well? Dick told me weeks ago that they were coming."

"I say, it is jolly. We will have some fun, won't we?" It was Nathalie who spoke.

"It is a perfect god-send," declared Emily Varian, solemnly. "Nan, your secret is a success, and I congratulate you."

"I wonder," ruminated Jean, "who the men are, and whether we will really like them."

"Time will tell," spoke Helen, a bit indifferently. "Come, girls, we must be going. Here is the carriage."

Almost every evening the young people gathered together on the Lawrences' broad veranda, and to-night was no exception to the rule. When the girls strolled out from the dining room, they found Nan and Emily sitting on the steps.

"Why, we never heard you at all," said Jean. "You must have come over the lawn like—oh dear, I 20
can't think of a comparison. The night is too warm for one to exert one's brain unnecessarily."

Nathalie seated herself on the railing.

"Here come Eleanor and Wendell Churchill."

"Ah!" laughed Jean teasingly. Her sister looked around at her with heightened color.

"Don't be silly, Jean."

"Do you know I have hardly seen you to-day, Miss Nathalie," said Churchill, finding a place on the railing at her side. "Where have you kept yourself?"

"Everywhere—anywhere. I have not been hard to find."

Nathalie's eyes were smiling wickedly into his, and his gave her back a smile.

"Now, let me explain," he began.

"Oh, don't let me put you to any unnecessary trouble," she interrupted with mock formality.

"You are very cruel to-night," said Churchill laughing. "By the way, Dick and I went down to the *Vortex* this afternoon, and there are some awfully good fellows aboard. I hope you girls will give them a good time."

"It seems to me that the responsibility ought to rest with them," interposed Eleanor Hill.

"Otherwise we should feel absolutely overwhelmed," said Nan comically.

"Here comes Dick now," exclaimed Nathalie, "and he has a strange man with him."

In a moment more Dick Andrews gained the veranda, and introduced his friend Beverly Dudley, of the *Vortex*. 21

It was Jean who came forward and, extending her hand, bade him welcome.

"Ah, Mr. Dudley, I fear you will feel yourself overwhelmed with such a bevy of girls, but let me help you. This is my sister Nathalie—my friends Miss Hill, Miss Birdsall, and Miss Varian. Unfortunately my elder sister is not here to receive you. She will join us presently. Emily, can't you make room for Mr. Dudley on the settle?" she added glancing about her.

Emily smiled radiantly, and Dudley, who seemed to be a charming youth, made his way to her side.

Leaving Nathalie and Em each happy in a *tête-à-tête*, the other girls formed a circle of which jolly Dick was the center, and much good-natured chaffing and light-hearted laughter were in order.

After a while Helen appeared in the doorway with two mandolins in her hands.

"What a good idea," exclaimed Eleanor enthusiastically. "Now we can have some singing."

"I can't very well shake hands, Mr. Dudley," said Helen, in response to Jean's introduction.

"Let me relieve you, Miss Lawrence."

"Thanks. Will you give this mandolin to my sister Nathalie?"

They all joined in a song, and their voices, with the mandolin accompaniment, sounded wondrously sweet in the soft night air.

It was growing late when Nan at last jumped up.

"I am sorry to break up the party, but Emily and I must be going. Father will have the town crier out pretty soon." 22

There was a general move, and Mr. Dudley crossed to Helen's side.

"I have had a charming evening, Miss Lawrence. I hope you will honor us with your presence on the *Vortex* very soon." He spoke with the soft drawl peculiar to Southerners.

"It will be a great pleasure, and indeed we will."

"Won't you let me walk home with you, Miss Varian?" he asked. "It is rather late for you to go alone."

Emily's answer was lost in a merry peal of laughter from Nan.

"Mr. Dudley evidently appreciates the dangers lurking in that desolate stretch of lawn between here and the parsonage," she said with good-natured sarcasm.

The girls joined in a general laugh, in spite of themselves, but Emily frowned portentously.

After "good-night" had been said all around, and Helen found herself alone in her room, she took out from between the leaves of a book the letter she had received in the morning. As she re-read it she glanced up from time to time at a likeness which stood on the table close at hand. It was the face of a very beautiful woman—a face delicate, oval in shape, with straight eyebrows, from under which looked out a pair of eyes with a world of witchery in their depths; the whole crowned by a halo of soft hair.

Helen dropped the letter in her lap, and folding her hands over it, fell into a deep reverie. Rousing herself at last, she slowly crossed the room, and opened a little drawer in her writing desk. There, hidden among some papers, lay another photograph—a man's face this time. As she 23

looked at it steadily a heavy sigh escaped her lips, for it seemed to her that the grave eyes looked at her reproachfully. With a half-impatient exclamation she tossed it back into its hiding-place and closed the drawer sharply, and not until sleep claimed her did these two faces fade entirely from her mental vision. 24

# CHAPTER III.

# A LEAF FROM HELEN'S PAST.

Many years before the opening of this story the Lawrence children counted among their dearest friends a certain pleasant-faced, sturdy little chap, Guy Appleton by name, who never considered a day quite complete unless at least a part of it was spent at the hospitable manor. His own pretty home, Rose Cottage, lay only a stone's throw away, and there the little Lawrence girls passed many a happy hour. Mrs. Appleton and Mrs. Lawrence had been schoolgirls together, and the flight of years had but strengthened their friendship. Mrs. Appleton was delighted that her shy little son had found such pleasant companions, and in every way encouraged his intercourse with them. The Lawrences were all dear to Guy's boyish heart, but none held quite the same place as Helen. She had been especially kind and friendly to him, and for her his affection was particularly deep and adoring.

The years, as they rolled by, served but to increase his love for his little playmate, and from his allegiance to her he never swerved. When his college days were over and he was about to sail for Europe on an extended tour, he found it impossible to say farewell without speaking to her of the 25 subject which lay nearest his heart.

Helen was very young and inexperienced, and these were the first words of love to which she had ever listened. Her tender heart was deeply touched, and Guy went away gladdened by her shy expression of sorrow at his departure, and by the whispered "Yes" that her lips spoke falteringly.

Helen had accepted her youthful lover, and many were the rejoicings among the small Hetherford circle over what they termed Helen's engagement; although the girl herself looked a little grave over so serious a term. At the manor the new relationship was accepted gladly, for it seemed only a fitting ending to Guy's long friendship in their family.

Three years slipped by; years in which Guy bent every energy to the study of architecture, which he had chosen as his profession. He had decided talent, and by continued assiduity was making a name for himself among his colleagues.

Little change had taken place in Hetherford except such as the flight of time must necessarily bring. Helen was now quite a woman, with a pretty air of gravity which the new cares had lent to her.

When finally, one crisp October day, Guy walked in upon them, his face bronzed by the recent ocean trip, his slender figure grown broad and strong, his blue eyes beaming with happiness, he was welcomed with the greatest warmth of affection, and as they sat about the crackling flames in the manor hall his long absence seemed almost a dream.

It was during the following winter that Helen had her first misgivings as to her real feeling for 26 Guy. Indeed, sometimes, her engagement oppressed her strangely, and she was assailed by an overwhelming longing to be free.

Women are indeed incomprehensible, and when the largess of their love is not given, it is rare, save through some sharp lesson, that they appreciate to the full the men whose hearts they possess. In this Helen was, perhaps, in nowise different from the rest of her sex. Be this as it may, Guy's unchanging love and devotion sometimes wearied her, and failed to call forth an answering love in her own heart. Yet the months glided by, and she had not the courage to tell her lover the truth. She was not always successful in hiding it from him, however, and once or twice a faint suspicion of her indifference came to him.

The summer came and went, and almost a year had drifted by since his return. Guy finally broached the subject of marriage.

At his first words Helen was filled with dismay, and as she listened with down-bent head and averted eyes, Guy was suddenly conscious of a great lack in her love for him, and a sense of foreboding swept over him. To his long and pleading request that a time might be set for their marriage, Helen put forth the children's claim upon her; and when he gently urged her to reconsider her determination, she answered him so sharply and curtly that he yielded, convinced that it would be unwise to press the matter any further.

Helen's lips had almost formed the words "Guy, I do not love you as I should," but her lover's

face, pale with grief at her all too evident reluctance, robbed her of the needful courage. 27

Guy was not a man of half measures, and, having accepted Helen's decision, resolutely put out of his mind his painful doubts, and trusted to the future to strengthen her love for him. She was greatly touched by his generosity and half ashamed of the stand she had taken, and now that the question of marriage was indefinitely postponed, persuaded herself that she was deeply attached to him, and that it would have been both cruel and unwise to have broken her engagement.

In September Guy took his vacation and, his mother having volunteered to go to the mountains with him, he induced Helen to accompany them. She had many qualms of conscience at leaving the children, but the invitation was a tempting one, and she had not the heart to disappoint her lover a second time. So, after strict injunctions to Mary, and urgent entreaties to Jean and Nathalie, she started off.

It was a delightful holiday for all three. Mrs. Appleton, who had no thought for anyone but her son, was overjoyed to see him in such high spirits, for of late she had thought him both sad and depressed; and Guy felt that his happiness was quite complete, for never had he had Helen so much to himself, and never had she been so frankly affectionate and sweet with him. The days glided by like a dream, even to Helen. She had thrust all worry and anxiety from her, and entered with eager interest and zest into all the plans for their pleasant journeyings. If now and then she 28
found herself a bit wearied by Guy's unceasing attentions, she strenuously hid the fact from him and called herself strictly to account for the unworthy thought.

It was at a hotel on the borders of a beautiful lake that Helen first saw Lillian Stuart. One morning Guy had gone off fishing, and as Mrs. Appleton was writing letters in the seclusion of her room, Helen took her book and wandered out into the grounds in search of a cool, shady spot where she could read in peace. Coming at length upon a retired nook, she found herself forestalled, for, comfortably ensconced under the shade of a great willow, was a woman so beautiful that, as Helen caught sight of her, she could scarce repress an exclamation. The girl looked up, and their eyes met. Helen shyly dropped hers and passed quickly on, but that brief glimpse left a vivid impression upon her mind of a well-poised head, crowned with the most wonderful auburn hair, of a face dazzlingly fair, and a pair of deep violet eyes.

All day long Helen's thoughts reverted to this vision, and that afternoon, when Guy returned from his fishing, she gave him a glowing description of her encounter.

Just before dinner, while they were standing together in the corridor, the girl came toward them on her way to the dining room. Helen laid her hand impulsively on her lover's arm.

"Please look, Guy," she whispered. "Here she comes. Isn't she beautiful? Why, Guy," excitedly, "do you know her? She is bowing to you." 29

"Is that the woman you mean?" he asked, when he had gravely returned her bow.

"Why, yes. Where did you ever know her?"

"I met her at Baden, when I was over there."

"How strange," said Helen musingly. "Why did you never tell me about her?"

"Because I never liked her," he replied with decision, "and I trust you and she will not meet."

A curiously unaccountable feeling of resentment swept across Helen.

"I don't suppose there is much chance of it," she returned coldly.

It is the unexpected that happens; for one afternoon, only a few days later, as Helen stood talking with some friends on the broad hotel veranda, Miss Stuart joined the group and, before Helen had hardly appreciated the situation, an introduction had ensued.

In spite of Guy's protests a friendship sprang up between the two girls. It seemed to him that there was something almost pointed in the way Helen ignored his request, and followed up this acquaintance, to which he had so strenuously objected. Helen was not only fascinated and charmed by Miss Stuart's meteor-like brilliance, but felt, moreover, the keenest annoyance at the masterful way in which Guy had laid his injunctions upon her. He had maintained a strict reticence concerning his reasons, giving her no further explanation than that the friendship ran counter to his wishes. Helen's defiance was aroused, and perhaps a growing sense of *ennui* in her lover's society increased the temptation to welcome eagerly any new interest. 30

Meanwhile Miss Stuart had a well-defined motive in trying to secure Helen's friendship, and an even stronger desire to lessen Guy's influence with the girl. Whatever her past acquaintance with Guy had been, it would have been apparent to anyone less easily deceived than Helen, that she bore him no good will.

The rest of the holiday time, which had begun so happily, was spoiled for Guy, and he was relieved when at length their faces were turned toward home, feeling sure that a separation from Miss Stuart was all that was necessary to awaken Helen's loyalty to him and to put an end to what he considered a most unfortunate episode in the girl's life. To his deep sorrow their return did not accomplish his expectations, for not only had a correspondence been begun between the girls, but Helen's whole bearing toward him changed completely, and her manner was both cold and distant. Finally, one evening, she came to him, and, after a few preliminaries, announced her

intention of visiting Miss Stuart at her home in town. This brief announcement aroused Guy's quick temper, and before he realized what had happened, bitter words had been spoken, and Helen had swept out of the room.

The following day she left for town. When a week had passed without a line from her, Guy could endure it no longer and sought an interview, battling with his indignation at the thought that it must take place under Miss Stuart's roof.

Many a time afterward he tried to recall the exact words that were spoken on that memorable occasion, but everything seemed unreal to him, save Helen's face, pale with the determination not to accede to his wishes. Finally, he could recall asking her if she desired her freedom. Alas, poor Guy! The quick spontaneity of her response shattered his last hope. 31

"Ah, yes, Guy, please. We will be so much better friends, then."

"Friends!" he echoed bitterly; "after all these years."

Helen put her hand on his shoulder, but he gently pushed her from him.

"It is as well I should know the truth now as later. You do not love me, Helen. There is nothing left now, but for us to part."

When he was leaving a sudden recollection came to him of the cause of all this unhappiness, and crushing down his own bitterness, he endeavored in quiet and carefully chosen words to dissuade her from a friendship which he feared she would rue, but she maintained an almost unbroken silence, and the expression of her face told him that his warning was of no avail. So they parted.

Guy was more than justified in his distrust of Lillian Stuart. Had he been a man of less delicate sense of honor he could have righted himself in Helen's eyes by simply relating to her some incontrovertible facts; but the circumstances which had given him his knowledge sealed his lips.

While at college, the name, Lillian Stuart, had grown familiar to him, through hearing her praises sounded by his chum Nelson Leonard. The year after their graduation they ran across each other at Baden, and their college friendship was resumed. Guy was not long in discovering that there was something radically wrong with his friend, and the cause, which all Baden apparently understood, was soon made clear to him. 32

Among the most noted people frequenting Baden at this time, were a Mrs. Ogden-Stuart and her beautiful daughter. It had been understood on their arrival that Miss Stuart was engaged to the good-looking American, Mr. Leonard, who was traveling in their party. This fact, however, did not seem to stand in the way of her flirting openly with every eligible man in the place, nor prevent her from receiving their constant homage. Leonard was evidently wretched, and there was a touch of recklessness in his manner, which, Guy felt, boded no good to a man of his highly strung, sensitive nature. For a week after Guy's arrival things drifted on, but there was something in the air that seemed to foretell a crisis. Guy had been presented to Miss Stuart, but in spite of her beauty and fascination found nothing in her to like or respect. This Miss Stuart felt instinctively, and as she was accustomed to admiration, it stung her into a desire to win something more than indifference from Leonard's friend. Her efforts were totally unsuccessful, and, as her treatment of her lover became less and less loyal, Guy withdrew altogether from her society, showing her no further courtesy than an occasional bow of recognition. In the meantime Miss Stuart's latest affair, with a certain Frenchman of unenviable reputation, was giving Baden food for gossip and keeping it on the *qui vive* for a scandal.

Late one afternoon, while Guy sat on the veranda reading letters from home, Miss Stuart and Leonard passed him. The girl's face wore a mocking smile, her eyes a taunt; Leonard was white as death, and his lips twitched piteously. Guy's own face grew stern as he looked up at them, and when Miss Stuart threw him a careless word in salutation he could scarcely frame a civil reply. 33

That evening Leonard went to Guy's room, and flinging himself down in a chair, gave voice for the first time to his misery.

"I tell you, Appleton," he exclaimed, with a hard laugh, "I shall throw up the game pretty soon. I may be a coward; but it takes more courage than I have to face this thing any longer."

Guy was more startled than he cared to reveal by his friend's passionate, despairing vehemence; and he made an effort to treat the matter lightly and to divert Leonard's thoughts, but his efforts were not crowned with success. When Leonard had left him he paced up and down the room, revolving in his mind what step he should take. At length he determined to go to Miss Stuart, and appeal to her, hoping that so direct a course would result favorably.

He began the interview awkwardly, feeling that his presumption was almost unwarrantable, but when she met his earnest plea for his friend first with indifference, and then with undisguised amusement, he found his anger rising.

"I do not think you can realize Leonard's condition of mind, Miss Stuart," he said darkly. "If you would only put an end to this once for all, I am sure that he is man enough to go away from you and try to live down his disappointment; but he has a peculiarly excitable and sensitive temperament, and if you continue to torture him in this way, I fear you will have his death at your door." 34

"I am sorry to say," she replied lightly, "that our friend is a fool now," looking up at him with a

glance strangely deep and subtle, "if he were half the man you are——"

"I have nothing further to say," Guy interrupted, flushing with indignation and disgust, and without another word he abruptly left her.

Two days later all Baden was shocked by the startling news that young Nelson Leonard had accidentally shot himself and was lying at the point of death.

Those melancholy hours of watching by Leonard's bedside, in that dreary hotel room, lived in Guy's memory. When the doctor's sad verdict was pronounced, the dying man pleaded to be left alone with his friend.

"Ah, dear old fellow," he said gently, when they were alone, "pretty well done—for an accident? Forgive me," he murmured, as he caught a sharp look of pain in Guy's face. "Forgive——" his voice faltered, and his head fell wearily back on the pillow.

Then the poor boy's mind wandered, and Lillian Stuart's name was constantly on his lips. In broken, halting sentences a pitiful story of deception and disappointment was revealed to Guy—a story which would be sacred to him to his life's end, and, as he listened, his whole soul revolted against the woman who had so willfully trifled with this man's tender, loyal heart. Before morning dawned, Nelson Leonard's eyes had closed forever on a life which he had found too difficult for 35
him. When the sad affair was over, Guy would fain have left Baden at once, but he was obliged to await there the arrival of Leonard's family from America.

In the days that ensued Lillian Stuart was markedly subdued, but if she had any suspicion of the real truth concerning Leonard's death she never betrayed it by word or look. She did all in her power to overcome Guy's aversion for her, but he sternly repulsed her. To attempt conciliation was a new rôle for Miss Stuart, and his cold disregard of all her efforts was the severest wound her vanity had ever received.

Such a slight is not readily forgiven or forgotten by a woman of her type. So when Guy Appleton once more crossed her path, and she found, in his deep love for Helen, his vulnerable point, she felt that her day of triumph had come.

It had been an easy task to secure Helen's friendship, and then to so use her influence with the girl as to effect the annulling of the engagement. Miss Stuart knew Guy's nature well enough to feel almost sure that, however sorely he might be tempted, he would probably never betray his knowledge of that unpleasant episode in her past; so, trading on the man's very uprightness, she revenged herself for the bitter sting of wounded vanity that rankled in her memory.

Her well-planned scheme had been marvelously successful, but one unlooked-for element had entered into it; for Helen's simplicity and purity of nature, her lack of vanity, coquetry, or duplicity, above all, her entire confidence and trust, had touched a tender chord in the heart of 36
this cold and worldly woman, and were in themselves a power so great she felt herself held by them. Could she have foreseen the future, she would, perhaps, have struggled against this most disturbing element.

Guy's return to Hetherford with the announcement that his engagement was at an end, and that he was going immediately abroad, created quite a ferment among the good people at the manor and Rose Cottage, and many were their fruitless conjectures as to the cause of Helen's sudden change of feeling. Across at the parsonage, happy-go-lucky Nan puckered up her jolly face, pondered long over this vexatious question, and hit at last upon the correct solution of it, but wisely kept her own counsel.

Mrs. Appleton took her son's disappointment very much to heart, and when Helen came home again Rose Cottage was closed and its occupants once more gone abroad. When the buckboard rolled by the deserted little place Helen drew her breath sharply, then, catching Jean's reproachful eyes upon her, began hurriedly to speak of other things. The Lawrences frankly avowed to her their regret and disappointment, but not one word of explanation did the girl vouchsafe to them, so after a little they accepted the inevitable, and Guy's name was no longer spoken among them.

And thus it was that of the Lawrence girls, Helen alone had the proud distinction of having had a genuine love affair, the memory of which, however, was tinged with deep regret, and caused her naught but pain. Perhaps she felt intuitively that she had done wrong. What was a pleasant 37
friendship compared to the love of a true man's heart? Yet the thought of a marriage with Guy was out of the question.

So the foolish girl reasoned. Time brings many changes, however, and perhaps what once seemed to Helen a catastrophe may one day seem to open the very gates of Paradise.

And now that we have taken a leaf from Helen's past, let us resume our way. 38

# CHAPTER IV.

# A SAIL ON THE "CYCLONE."

"They have hired the dear old *Cyclone*, Helen, because the men thought the wind was bound to be light to-day and we would have so much more sport in a small boat than on the *Vortex*."

Nathalie stood in the doorway, gesticulating eagerly with her slender brown hands. Her pretty face was quite flushed with excitement, and her hurried words tripped over each other in their anxiety to be spoken.

"You see we must make haste, for Dick says we must be at the dock at eleven, or we won't catch the tide."

"But what about luncheon?" interposed Helen quietly.

A comical expression of dismay crossed Nathalie's face.

"Oh, dear, I suppose you will want to kill us; but Jean and I, in a sudden fit of enthusiasm, said we would attend to that, and not one thing have we done yet."

"Did you think to provide any cold meat for sandwiches?" demanded the young housekeeper.

"Oh, yes; there are three stout chickens, some cold corned beef, and a 'bit of ham bone,' as Bridget puts it, gracing your larder." 39

"Well, we haven't a moment to spare, so call Jean, and let us get right to work."

The pile of sandwiches grew rapidly under the girls' deft hands, and little Larry, wandering in from the veranda, looked longingly at these interesting preparations.

"Wish I could go with you," he ventured, with sudden courage.

"Don't speak of it," replied Helen emphatically, as she ran out of the room to get a fresh supply of bread.

"Guess you'll all be drownded, anyway," and Larry eyed them with a superior and triumphant mien.

"That's right, my cheerful little brother," laughed Jean. "Always look on the bright side of things."

"Now, when shall we tell Aunt Helen we will be back?" asked Nathalie, as they were fitting the cover down on the well-filled hamper.

"Not later than five, I should think."

"Don't let's commit ourselves, Helen," suggested Jean. "It is such a bore, and we will be troubling about it all the afternoon."

"We must be home by five; I am not willing to leave the children any longer than that."

"Perhaps you can manage the wind to suit your own purposes. You know it generally plays more or less of a part in sailing," and Jean gave a vicious tug at the last unfastened strap.

"Don't be impertinent, Jean," Nathalie called out, as she ran swiftly upstairs. "Never mind, Helen, her youth is her only excuse."

"All the same, we shall be home on time if possible, dearie." 40

Jean laughed good-humoredly.

"I am always disagreeable," she admitted, "when anyone speaks with decision. I don't know why, but it sets my teeth on edge."

Dudley met them at the wharf with the cutter from the *Vortex*, and soon they were pulling swiftly out to the *Cyclone's* mooring. As they rounded the stern of the old oyster sloop, a young man was seen standing at the wheel, his slender figure held firmly erect, one hand shading his eyes as he scanned the blue waters of the sound.

"Who is that?" whispered Mollie.

"Up oars!" cried Dudley, intent on bringing the cutter up in good form, and in a moment more they were clambering up the gang-steps, and Mollie's question went unanswered.

"Hullo, Farr," called Dick cheerfully, and thus addressed, Lieutenant Farr left the wheel and moved leisurely forward.

"You will have to individualize for yourself, old fellow, for it would be impossible for me to name all these charming people."

"Time enough," spoke Farr, in a well-modulated voice, as he raised his cap and glanced at the group before him.

"Come, let us get off," he said, turning abruptly to the men, and soon the *Cyclone* was sailing lazily away before a light breeze.

"How delightful!" sighed Eleanor Hill, as she settled herself comfortably to windward. "This is my idea of bliss."

Farr paused an instant on his way aft and glanced interestedly at the girl's earnest face, then proceeded to his place at the wheel. 41

"For pity's sake, let somebody go and talk to that man," said Jean, dropping her voice.

"I fancy he doesn't care much about it," replied Eleanor quietly.

"You go, Em," Mollie suggested.

"Certainly!" and, nothing daunted, Emily started up.

"Who doubted her willingness?" laughed Nan saucily.

Eleanor shook her head at the speaker.

Dick threw himself down in the midst of the group of girls and kept up an incessant chatter.

One voice was lacking in the general interchange of nonsense, for to-day Jean Lawrence, who was usually the merriest of them all, found her interest flagging strangely. Sitting somewhat apart from the others, her eyes wandered persistently to where Farr was courteously and patiently initiating Emily Varian into the art of steering. There was something about the man that caught her attention and held it almost against her will. She noted with what an air of distinction his rough yachting flannels were worn, and how beautifully shaped were the long slender hands which moved so lazily, yet with such a suggestion of strength. His cap was drawn down over his face, so that only the lines of a well-molded mouth and chin were revealed, and Jean found herself waiting with almost childish interest for a glimpse of the eyes so tantalizingly hid from view. A sudden shout of boisterous laughter from Dick brought her sharply to herself, and with a keen sense of shame, and a passionate hope that her defection might have passed unnoticed, she turned and plunged into the conversation. 42

"Let us have some songs, girls," suggested Eleanor. "We are getting very much demoralized, and I don't know what that strange man will think of us."

"Oh, if I were a little bird how happy I would be," began Jean, with more energy than correctness.

"Hold on, Jeanie," interrupted Nathalie, catching up her mandolin, "the other words have lots more flavor."

> "Oh, the first that came a-courting was little Tommy Green,
> The finest young man that ever was seen,
> But the words of my grandmother ran in my head,
> And I would not listen to a word that he said."

"There, that will do, Nathalie," interposed Helen with decision.

"Not at all," cried Jean.

> "Says I to myself there must be some mistake,
> What a great fuss these old folks make,
> If the boys and the girls had all been so afraid,
> Why grandma herself would have been an old maid."

Jean sang the foolish words recklessly, and when she had finished shot a half-defiant glance from under her long lashes in Farr's direction. His eyes met hers with a long, steady look. Somewhat disconcerted, Jean flushed hotly and turned hurriedly away. 43

"That was a daisy, Jean," and Dick roared with laughter.

When the merriment had subsided a little:

"Farr," said Dudley, rising and making his way out of the circle, "I think you have had your turn at the wheel. Suppose I take your place for a while."

"I hope you are not very much bored, Mr. Farr," ventured Jean shyly.

"Quite the reverse—much entertained," he replied quietly.

Jean wondered if there were a touch of sarcasm in this reply, but his face was impenetrable.

"Charming accent he has," smiled Eleanor in an aside to Nan.

"I wonder where he got it, don't you?"

"Have you lived very much abroad, Mr. Farr?" queried Eleanor, turning politely to him.

"And why do you ask?"

"Why, your accent is so un-American."

A broad smile crossed Dudley's face as he caught Miss Hill's words. It amused him not a little to

hear reticent Farr thus catechized.

"Where are you from?" asked Nathalie, coming to the front in her usual outspoken fashion.

Farr glanced at her, and then, after an instant's hesitation, answered languidly.

"From New Jersey."

At this the little group, throwing manners to the winds, burst into merry laughter.

"Doesn't look a bit like a mosquito," said Nan to Mollie in an audible whisper.

Poor Mollie looked quite horror-struck, for she felt sure that the saucy words had reached Farr's ear. 44

If the man felt any annoyance he was most successful in concealing it, for his expression remained quite unchanged. Not so with poor Jean, who had flushed hotly at what she considered Nan's unwarrantable impertinence. She made a swift, angry little movement, and the book she had been holding slipped to the deck. Farr leaned forward, and picked it up. As he returned it to her his eyes met hers with a quiet, reassuring smile, for he had been quick to notice the girl's silent championship, and it had greatly touched him. The color in Jean's face deepened, and with sudden shyness she dropped her eyes.

"Have a cigar, Farr?"

To these two Clifford Archer's question came almost like an interruption, although no word had been spoken between them.

"No, thanks," taking from his pocket a silver case of curious design, "but, if no one objects, I will light a cigarette!"

"I can't help it," cried Nathalie, laughing until the tears were in her eyes, "did you hear the way he said that word 'cigarette,'—with such a lingering over each syllable? I am sure you are a Spaniard, Mr. Farr, in spite of New Jersey."

"I knew it," Nan put in, "the moment you spoke."

"Ah," exclaimed Nathalie, drawing back in mock affright, "you are an exile."

"How interesting," spoke Nan. "Do tell us all about it." 45

"About what?" queried Farr coolly, and Nan subsided, feeling suddenly very much embarrassed.

Eleanor Hill caught an expression half impatient in Farr's eyes, and turned warningly to Nathalie.

"You will be sorry."

"When I'm sober," interrupted the young girl merrily.

"What a rowdy you are, Nat; Helen is looking at you most disapprovingly."

A shrug of the shoulders was Nathalie's only answer, and starting up she crossed over, and stood before Farr, where he sat at Jean's side.

"You have been very good and patient," she assured him with a mischievous twinkle in her brown eyes, "and now I am going to reward you by unpacking the luncheon hamper."

"That's a good idea," cried Dick; "I am almost starved to death."

"What delicious salad," exclaimed Churchill a few moments later, as they sat about the open hamper. "Miss Helen, you are a culinary artist."

Helen smiled her thanks.

"May I not sit by you, Eleanor," pleaded Clifford Archer, dropping down on the deck at her side. "With you near me I could never know hunger or thirst."

"Nonsense," frowning on him in seeming disapproval. "I think your appetite is one which stands you in good stead."

He was a handsome youth, graceful in the extreme. It was a constant source of annoyance to Eleanor Hill that she found him so charming, for, she often assured herself, there was nothing to the boy but his good looks and perfect manners. But who will dare to say that these are nothing? 46

"I do hope there are plenty of sandwiches," sighed Nan, as she sat eating her fourth.

Dick tipped up the plate, depositing a dozen or more in her lap.

"That enough?" he asked innocently.

"You idiot!" cried Nan.

"Do say something new, Nan," called Mollie from the other side of the boat. "That is the third time to-day you have given Dick that appellation."

"How can I help it," groaned Nan, "when it characterizes him so perfectly?"

"You can't," said Nathalie consolingly, "and if I were you I would not attempt to."

Dick looked at both girls with withering scorn, then glanced by them as if their existence were a matter of small import.

"Helen, can I open the beer and ginger ale now?"

"If it will be any comfort to you, Dick, you have my consent."

"I think I will try another sandwich, if Miss Birdsall can spare me one."

"Then catch, Mr. Farr," and Nathalie tossed him one, with unerring aim.

"O Nathalie," protested Jean, with changing color.

"Well, I am glad to know he is not a muff," said Nathalie, as Farr caught the sandwich. "What is the matter, Jean? I didn't know you were so easily shocked." 47

"Look out for the boom," called Dudley most opportunely, and the *Cyclone* came swiftly about.

"What an unfortunate move. Now the sun is right in our eyes," and Jean looked up at Farr appealingly. "Won't you please have it removed?"

"Why, certainly. Are not your wishes my law?" and even as he spoke the sun slipped under a cloud.

"What a wonderful man," Eleanor Hill laughed softly.

The afternoon sped away all too rapidly, and the hours were as minutes to the happy young people skimming the waters of the beautiful sound. Nature was at her very best this sunshiny summer afternoon. Light fleecy clouds scudded swiftly across the delicious blue of the vaulted sky above, and in the distance the low, far-stretching, Long Island shore was bathed in a soft, violet haze, broken here and there by patches of white, glistening sand.

The *Cyclone*, with every yard of canvas set, was running gayly before the breeze, which since noon had grown strong and steady. The swash of the water against the boat, the slight straining and creaking of the rigging, the sighing of the wind in the sails, were sounds sweet as music to the ear of every true lover of the sea.

And now the summer day began to wane, and in the western sky the sun was shining with a brilliant radiance.

"Ah!" sighed Jean softly, as they dropped anchor in Hetherford Harbor, "why do all pleasant things come to an end?"

"But they invariably do," and there was a touch of genuine regret in Farr's voice, which was quite sincere; for in this last pleasant hour, he had thoroughly enjoyed a delightful *tête-à-tête* with his pretty companion, and had every reason, in spite of the merry chaffing of these gay young strangers, to vote the day a great success. 48 49

# CHAPTER V.

# SUNSET-HOUR ON THE CLIFFS.

The following morning the girls were collected together in the upper balcony of the manor, where the clustering vines afforded a welcome shelter from the sun's hot rays. A wicker table, laden down with books and work baskets, occupied a central position, and the low rockers which surrounded it were tilted swiftly back and forth as the girls worked and chatted in an easy, desultory way. On the wide old-fashioned settle in the background sat Eleanor Hill and Nan Birdsall; Eleanor lounging lazily back among the cushions, her hands resting idly in her lap, Nan all curled up in a heap, her sketchbook on her knee, her deft fingers making rapid strokes with a long, well-sharpened pencil.

"Do you know," spoke Eleanor Hill, "I fear we behaved very badly yesterday. I have had qualms of conscience ever since, and a growing conviction that we made perfect fools of ourselves in the eyes of those two strange men."

"Better that than dullards," laughed Nan lightly.

"Hobson's choice," said Jean dryly.

Just then Helen, with a somewhat preoccupied air, pushed back her chair and passed into the house, her mind evidently intent on some domestic question. Nathalie's eyes followed the 50

retreating figure, until it was quite lost from view in the shadowy hallway, and then were bent thoughtfully on her work again.

"To change the subject, girls," she began, after a moment, devoting herself energetically to the threading of her needle, and tossing her head impatiently at every unsuccessful effort; "have you heard the news? Helen's friend, Miss Stuart, is coming down upon us for a visit."

"Yes, indeed we have." Emily's sigh came from the depths of her heart. "I can't imagine what we will do with another girl here."

"What she will do with us may be more to the point," and Jean raised her eyebrows expressively. "I don't know how it is, but I am apprehensive about this visit. I suppose," with a sort of honest protest in her voice, "that I have never really liked Miss Stuart."

"Nor I," agreed Nathalie. "There is something about her that I do not trust. And the worst of it is," with a grimace, "that she winds Helen around her little finger. It always makes me so angry."

"Nonsense, Nat. You do Helen an injustice," objected Eleanor pleasantly. "However, I frankly confess to a fear that the harmony of our own little circle will be somewhat marred by the advent of a stranger."

"That's so, and then you know she is such a swell that she will probably look down upon us poor country girls with the utmost scorn," and Nathalie gave a vindictive tug at her knotted thread. 51

"Of course she is devoted to men?" queried Emily lugubriously.

"Oh, I should judge so, although I have never seen her with them. You know she has only stopped with us in the winter season, when we have been alone."

"Let us do her the justice to suppose that the men are equally devoted to her," added Jean generously.

"It amounts to about the same thing, whether she is devoted to men, or they to her," and there was in Emily's tone such a note of tragic melancholy that the girls could not refrain from laughing.

"Oh, what a happy nook and cranny of the great world this dear old Hetherford is," cried Eleanor, clasping her hands behind her head, and looking out with dreamy eyes over the sweep of softly undulating lawn that stretched away toward the manor gates. "It all seems so idyllic to me. There is so much petty jealousy and miserable heartburning beyond the confines of this little haven of rest. People's motives are so often selfish that one grows strangely doubting, even of one's friends. Do you know," leaning forward impulsively and speaking with deeper earnestness, "I think we girls have found the secret of true friendship—mutual trust and respect. These are what have made our long intercourse such a happy one."

"Indeed you are right, Eleanor, dear," Jean replied gently.

"The bother of it all will be," interrupted Nathalie following out her own train of thought "that Mademoiselle will come here with trunks full of fine clothes, and we will be obliged to dress up." 52

"I would like to see the girl who could make me discard my shirt and blazer," laughed Nan defiantly.

"How would we look *en grande toilette* with such hands as these," said Jean, thrusting forward her own little brown ones.

"Attractive, but from a different standpoint," Nan asserted with a fine assumption of authority. "Everything depends upon your point of view, according to Henry James. Now, from my artistic pinnacle," tilting her head to one side, and surveying the group with critical, but approving eyes, "I declare I prefer brown hands to white ones."

"By the way," asked Jean, with well-feigned indifference, "what did you think of the naval officers?"

"To return to our muttons," murmured Nathalie, with a sidelong glance at her sister.

"Mr. Dudley was very pleasant and agreeable," replied Emily, "but I thought Mr. Farr rather uninteresting."

"Well," laughed Eleanor demurely, "Nan is right. Everything does depend upon one's point of view. Now I thought Mr. Farr decidedly attractive, and Mr. Dudley just a good-natured boy."

"That reminds me of something I saw in the paper the other day," Jean observed smilingly. "To the question 'What is taste?' the answer was given, 'There is no such thing, except on the principle that some people haven't any.'"

"That is a fine way of disposing of one," and there was an expression of quiet amusement in Eleanor's eyes. "Never mind, dear," leaning forward and pinching Jean's cheek, "I will forgive you. Besides," dropping her voice, "you know that you agree with me." 53

"Now, what are you girls whispering about?" complained Nathalie. "Oh, bother this sewing," she went on irrelevantly; "I have had enough of it for to-day," and the bit of work was tossed impatiently into her basket.

This was the signal for a general uprising, and then, as they were dispersing, Nathalie made the announcement:

"Helen has asked Mr. Dudley and Mr. Farr to dinner to-morrow night."

"Yes," answered Mollie, turning back from the open doorway, "and Captain Dodd and his wife, too. Dick says," with an air of profound conviction, "that they are delightful."

"That settles it," laughed Nan, "Dick can't be wrong. Come on, Moll," linking her arm in Mollie's, "I am going to take you home to luncheon with me to-day."

It was late that afternoon when Jean, who had been reading for hours on the quiet veranda, suddenly jumped to her feet, with a little sigh of weariness, and tossed her book into a neighboring chair. She was tired of sitting still so long and felt in the humor for a walk. Slowly she made her way down the broad steps and across the grounds of the manor. Strolling on in a reverie, and heeding but little in which way her steps were taking her, she came upon the great iron gates which opened out into the roadway. Passing through them she wandered listlessly on 54
toward the water.

It was the loveliest hour of the bright, sunny June day. Already the shadows were lengthening, and a little whiff of cooler air was stirring after the warmth of the noonday. The sun was nearing the western horizon, now shining out in bright radiance, now obscured by some light passing cloud. The murmur of a little brook which followed the roadside, and the whispering of the wind among the leaves, made a soft music. Now and then a bird darted by overhead, singing out a shrill note in some high key, then dropping into a soft coo. A squirrel ran out from the thicket, sped across the road, and disappeared over a low stone wall.

"Oh, you foolish little chap," exclaimed Jean, half-aloud, as Master Squirrel gave her one glance from his bright eyes, before dropping out of sight. "You are the swiftest little fellow I have ever seen."

It was growing rough and heavy underfoot now, and in a moment more Jean had reached the beach, and was strolling down toward the cliffs.

The water was alive with boats, their white sails glimmering in the sunlight, as the dying breeze bore them slowly on their way.

At the foot of the cliffs Jean paused a moment. The glory of the golden light fell on her slender, girlish figure, and illumined her wistful, upturned face. As her eyes rested lovingly on the beautiful scene that lay before her a deep sigh of pleasure escaped her slightly parted lips, for to-day the old familiar sights and sounds seemed strangely new and sweet. A narrow beaten track 55
led temptingly to the summit of the cliffs whence a magnificent view could be obtained, and after an instant's hesitation she began the steep ascent. Turning the corner of a sharp rock, which reared itself boldly into the air, she came suddenly to a standstill, uttering a stifled exclamation, for almost at her feet, stretched at full length in a sheltered cranny of the rocks, lay Valentine Farr, his hat drawn down over his forehead, his eyes thoughtfully intent upon the distant horizon. As Jean's exclamation reached him, he glanced quickly up and sprang to his feet.

"Why, Miss Lawrence, this is indeed an unexpected pleasure. You stole a march on me. I did not hear your approach at all."

"Indeed, I am equally surprised, Mr. Farr, and I assure you you really startled me. I came upon you, so suddenly."

Farr's eyes rested admiringly on the soft color in the girl's face as she went on:

"And may I ask how you hit upon my particular retreat in these rocks? Let me warn you. You can only make yourself happy in it with my especial permission."

"I had no idea I was trespassing. Pardon my curiosity, but by what right do you hold your title to this spot?" he queried with an amused smile.

"By the right of priority. Do you know of any better, Mr. Farr?" with a pretty air of defiance. "When I was a little girl in pinafores I played here with my doll; when I was a schoolgirl I studied my lessons in this dear spot; and now that I am a grown woman," drawing herself up to her full 56
height, and glancing at him merrily, "I come here to read, to ponder, and to think."

"A sacred spot indeed," spoke Farr laughingly, but with just a little lowering of his voice. "I yield at once, for I see that no one could dispute your right."

"No one." She threw out her hand with a pretty gracious gesture. "But won't you let me extend to you an invitation to occupy it whenever you feel inclined?"

"Thanks, ever so much," he rejoined heartily, "You are very good. And now, can't I persuade you to rest a little after your climb, Miss Lawrence?"

She slipped down on the rocks, and he threw himself at her side.

"What delightful times you all seem to have here," he went on. "Do you know I think this is a most charming place, quite an Elysium." Jean's soft eyes lighted up with pleasure.

"I am so glad you like it, but I fear you will find very little to interest you in so sleepy a place."

Farr was about to make answer in words of conventional flattery, but something in the girl's tone of sincerity and good faith deterred him and impelled him to reply in kind.

"But I assure you I am delighted with it. You know we knock about a good deal, and some of our stations are almost unendurable. We have been on the Sound for several months now, and this is to me by far the pleasantest place in which we have cast anchor." 57

"It does my heart good to hear you say that," she rejoined naïvely, "for naturally Hetherford is very dear to us."

"You have lived here all your life, Miss Lawrence?"

"Ever since I was a wee little girl. Of course we have been away from time to time, but we are always glad to get back again."

"I can well understand your feeling so, although I have had very little of home life myself." Farr sighed as he uttered these last words.

Jean looked at him with gentle sympathy. "You say that sadly," she said.

"Do I?" He turned on his elbow, and his grave eyes met hers. His next words were prompted by a sudden unwonted impulse. "Perhaps I will tell you about it some day."

Then a silence fell between them.

The sweet stillness held its sway o'er land and sea, its perfect harmony emphasized by the soft lapping of the waves against the shadowy sands below. The breeze was dying with the dying sun. Just off the shore a little white-sailed cat-boat was drifting in with the flowing tide.

Jean drew a long breath and started swiftly to her feet.

"Why, how late it is growing," she exclaimed. "I must be going, Mr. Farr."

"Already?" he said, and then they made their way down the rugged cliff.

"Take care, Miss Lawrence," he cried, as she missed her footing and slipped a little. "Please let me assist you," and he extended his hand. 58

Jean put her hand in his with a demure uplifting of her eyebrows, and just a fleeting smile on her lips. There flashed through her mind the thought:

"How unmercifully Nan would chaff me, if she could catch a glimpse of me now."

The descent was a brief one, and soon they had crossed the sands and were strolling along the road in the direction of the manor.

"You are coming to dine with us to-morrow night, are you not, Mr. Farr?"

"Your sister was good enough to ask us, and I shall be only too delighted to avail myself of her kind invitation."

"I really will not let you come any further with me," she declared as they reached the manor gates. "I fear, as it is, I have taken you very much out of your way, and it must be late."

"It is close upon seven," he told her after looking at his watch. "And you dine?"

"At seven, and let me warn you now that to be late is to meet with my sister's ire."

"I shall remember," he answered, with his pleasant laugh. "And now can I not see you to your door?"

"No, indeed. I must hurry away," she said as they shook hands, "for time, tide, and dinner at the manor wait for no man. Good-by."

"Until to-morrow," he said, as he turned away. 59

# CHAPTER VI.

# A DINNER AT THE MANOR.

It was the evening of the dinner given in honor of the naval officers, and even as the old Dutch clock in the corner of the manor hall struck the hour of seven, Farr was shaking hands with Mrs. Dennis.

"I am so sorry," she said to him with a sweet smile, "that I shall be obliged to absent myself from

the dinner table to-night, but my strength is not very great and I dare not overtax it. My niece Helen," with a proud accent, which was not lost upon Farr, "has taken my place for so long that I feel no hesitation in leaving everything in her hands."

"Oh, Auntie," cried Helen, with shy deprecation, "Mr. Farr will begin to think me that most tiresome of all things, a paragon of household virtue."

Farr made a gesture of dissent, and then as Clifford Archer presented himself, he turned and followed Helen with admiring eyes. Very fair and womanly she seemed to him, in her gown of pale lavender crepe, moving about among her guests, greeting one and all with gentle courtesy.

His gaze wandered on to where, in a further corner of the drawing-room, Nathalie was keeping up a merry chatter with Wendell Churchill. In spite of her eighteen years, she looked a very child to-night, in her white mulle gown, with a broad white sash around her waist, and one red rose in her brown hair. A spoiled child, too, she undeniably was; unused to restraint, somewhat willful and quick-tempered, but with a heart so true and generous that one could always trust this small maiden and know that the good would predominate. 60

Eleanor Hill, standing very erect, her slender figure clad in a severely simple gown of India silk, her hair brushed straight from her fair face, her blue eyes alight with intelligence, her sensitive mouth revealing every passing shade of feeling, held his attention for a moment, for there was something patrician in the girl's mien and bearing which greatly charmed him.

Involuntarily Farr smiled as he caught sight of Nan's jolly face beaming with an unending fund of good humor, and he was man enough of the world for one glance at dainty Mollie Andrews to suffice to tell him that she was an adept in the truly feminine art of dressing, for her white gown, covered with lace and embroidery, was made in a mysterious Parisian fashion, not easily imitated.

What an arrant little flirt was dark-eyed Emily Varian. The smile that Nan had evoked deepened as Farr noted the rapt expression on Dudley's face as he bent over her. Her yellow gown, while not as modish as Eleanor's and Mollie's, nor as artistic as the Lawrence girls', yet showed a fine sense of color, and lighted up her pretty, piquant face, which was surmounted by a smooth coil of hair the color of a raven's wing. 61

They were an unusually lovely group of girls, and, beyond this, unusually pure-hearted and intelligent. Farr appreciated this the more keenly, perhaps, in that he had seen much of the world in his thirty years of life. Sometimes the old ideals of his boyhood had suffered sadly; but his faith in the gentler sex was too deep-rooted to be easily dispelled, and now all that was noblest and most chivalrous in his nature was awakened by the atmosphere of honesty and sweetness surrounding him.

He was brought back to the starting-point of his observations by Helen's voice saying, apologetically:

"I am so sorry my sister is so late," and even as she spoke a little hand pushed the portières hastily aside, and Jean stood in the doorway.

She glanced impulsively across at Farr, and caught a wicked gleam from his eyes as he advanced to meet her.

"'Time, tide, and dinner at the manor wait for no man,'" he quoted maliciously.

"That is one advantage in being a woman," she promptly retorted.

She was radiant to-night in a gown of silver and blue. From under level brows her eyes shone like stars, and some slight inward tremor of excitement flushed her sweet face with unusual color. Her soft yellow hair was gathered up in a simple coil, little tendrils of it curling upon her forehead and on her neck.

"What a bonny little lass she is," thought Farr, surprised by the sudden feeling of tenderness which took possession of him. 62

Then dinner was announced, and, with a half cynical smile at his own susceptibility, he pulled himself together, and offered her his arm.

"Why, I am quite in the navy, am I not?" she asked archly, as she took her place between Farr and Dudley.

"You honor it," Farr returned.

Jean's brows contracted with a slight frown. "That savors of flattery, Mr. Farr."

"I especially dislike your accusation, Miss Lawrence."

"Then I must be more careful not to run counter to your prejudices hereafter."

"If you would be so good," he said to her dryly; then their eyes met, and they both laughed light-heartedly.

"I hope you enjoyed the sail the other day. I meant to ask you about it yesterday afternoon."

"Thoroughly. Your songs were particularly delightful."

Jean blushed, and answered in some confusion:

"They were very foolish. I really hope you will forgive our absurd behavior."

"Charming folly needs no apology," Jean found the glance he gave her a trifle disconcerting.

"But pray, Mr. Farr, do not——" she began, and hesitated.

"Do not what?" he interrogated, with a faint show of eagerness.

"Do not allow your soup to grow cold," she finished, with a merry glance at him from under her long lashes. 63

"While you are in Hetherford," spoke Nathalie across the table to Dudley, "you should make a point of going up to the cemetery. There are some epitaphs there a hundred years old, and they are so funny."

"So Andrews was telling us. Speaking of epitaphs I was very much amused by one I saw in a magazine the other day. Let me see. How was it?

"Here lies the body of Mary Ann,
With her head on the bosom of Abraham;
Pretty soft thing for Mary Ann,
But very hard lines on Abraham."

"Here is a good one," cried Dick, when he had partially recovered from his ebullition of mirth:

"Here lies the body of Mary Bin,
Who having had her little fling,
Burst this outer shell of sin,
And hatched herself a cherubim."

Helen shook her head at Dick in gentle protest.

"What will Captain and Mrs. Dodd think of us." she said.

"Suppose I should recall one to you all," suggested the captain, with a merry twinkle in his eye.

"Please do," they cried in chorus.

"He heard the angels calling him,
From that celestial shore,
He flapped his wings and away he went,
To make one angel more."

"Splendid," exclaimed Nathalie, with enthusiasm. "Mr. Dudley and Dick are quite in the background." 64

"Dick saw his in that charming novel 'Comin' thro' the Rye.'"

"Guess I did, Nancy. By Jove, girls," he whispered mischievously, "you are all stunning to-night," and he drew himself up with an air of pride and satisfaction.

"You shine in a kind of reflected glory; don't you, Dick?" laughed Nathalie.

After dinner they gathered about the great wood fire burning cheerily in the drawing-room. The evening had grown suddenly chill. The wind had veered to the southeast, and the strong sea breeze lowered the temperature by many degrees; a not uncommon occurrence in our American summers.

Helen seated herself at the open piano, and her music did much to enhance the charm of the hour. She felt a bit sad to-night and something of her feeling crept into her music, as she drifted into a plaintive melody, with an oft-recurring refrain almost like a spoken regret. As her eyes wandered about the fire-lit room, with its far-off corners half in mystic shadow, there were awakened within her memories of happy childhood days when the love of her father and mother had been the sunshine of their home. Interwoven with these thoughts came the recollection of one who, in those days, had been near at hand and who was now far away, in strange lands, separated from her by more than the mere expanse of restless waters.

She sighed a little and, bringing her music abruptly to an end, rose and crossed the room. After a few words of courteous explanation to Mrs. Dodd, she ran away upstairs to assure herself that the children were safely in bed. 65

Just as she was passing through the doorway, she caught a glimpse of Jean, who, with earnest upturned face, was talking interestedly with Farr, and something she saw in her sister's blue eyes made her start. What was there in that upturned face, in those eyes, which made Helen feel so strangely, as if something were going to happen?

And Eleanor Hill chatting gayly with Cliff Archer found her thoughts traveling in much the same direction.

In all these summers they had been a very happy little colony of girls, and they had entered into a sort of compact in true girl fashion that no lover should be allowed in their midst, to break the spell. Helen had been engaged, but that relation had existed previous to the making of the bond,

and she had been so little absorbed that no one had thought much about it. One other exception had to be made, for there was no use in trying to hold Emily strictly to any such agreement, for flirt she would whenever the opportunity offered. However, her digressions had been few and far between, for Cliff Archer and Dick were almost the only men who came to Hetherford, and they were so like brothers to her that a sentimental attitude toward either of them would have seemed supremely ridiculous.

So this summer had come around as many others had before, and already a new element had entered into their midst, and that naughty little Nathalie was at the root of the matter; for ever since one bright day in May, when the *Sylph* had come sailing along these pleasant waters and 66
Wendell Churchill had called at the manor to pay his respects, the old order of things had been changed. Until that day the *Sylph* had been better known to Hetherford than her good-looking owner; for rarely had he cast anchor in the harbor without having aboard his yacht a party of gay and fashionable people, who urgently claimed his whole attention. But now he no longer brought strangers to Hetherford, and when, as now and then occurred, he was obliged to absent himself for a few days, the *Sylph* lay at the disposal of the girls. And all this that little minx Nathalie had brought about, laughing while she disclaimed emphatically any disloyalty to the vows of their bond.

The worst of it was the mischief was spreading, and Eleanor's eyes falling just then upon Jean, she experienced a sense of keen annoyance, for warm-hearted Jean had been the most whole-souled, the most valiant of them all. It was a great pity that the *Vortex* had been stationed here, and doubly a pity that there was no immediate prospect of her departure. It would not do to be introducing all sorts of folly into their circle.

Eleanor had quite worked herself up to a pitch of righteous indignation when, on surveying the ground that had brought her to this point, she became uncomfortably conscious of some slight changes within herself; for here before her, looking into her eyes and saying all sorts of pretty things, which of course were nonsensical, was the "fatal beauty" whom she had always looked upon as a boy. Half-vexed, half-amused she rose to go, and when Cliff, after helping her with her 67
coat, gently pressed her hand, she felt immensely like boxing his ears. It was idiotic and sentimental, his looking at her in that way, and there was no occasion whatever for his saying good-night like a lover in a play.

There was quite a little excitement and bustle of departure in the hall-way, as coats and cloaks were sought for, found, and donned. Jean stood by the large open fireplace, where a log lay smoldering, its red ashes still giving out a grateful heat, and at her side was Farr, hat in hand, a light summer overcoat on his arm. He spoke a few words to her as he took her hand in parting, and she looked up at him smiling and defiant. The girl's blue eyes were dark with unwonted excitement, her cheeks flushed with bright color, and Eleanor noted all this and found her impressions of the evening deepened.

When the last guest had gone, Helen dropped down on the foot of the stairs.

"Oh, how tired I am," she exclaimed. "Do put out the lamps in the drawing-room, Nat, like a good girl." Then she rose to her feet with a little sigh of weariness. "I think I am sleepy too," she said.

"I wish I were," spoke Jean from before the fire, her whole expression eminently wide-awake.

"Come to bed, Jeanie," laughed Helen, "and court sleep. Perhaps it will come to you if you do."

Jean paused a moment by the hall table to select one from out of the mass of books and magazines collected there, and then followed Helen up the stairs. 68

When she had reached her room she threw herself down in an easy-chair and opened her book.

"You won't mind if I read for a while, will you, Nat? There is no use of thinking of going to sleep yet."

Nathalie whistled very softly, at which Jean glanced swiftly up at her.

"Eh, Jean? Love at first sight?"

Jean blushed to the roots of her pretty hair, and there was an angry light in her eyes.

"I wouldn't be a goose if I were you, Nathalie," she said scornfully. 69

## CHAPTER VII.

## A WALK IN THE SHRUBBERY.

It was Sunday and Nan and Emily were sitting together on the vine-covered porch of the parsonage, trying to while away the long hour between church time and the midday dinner.

Nan gave a prodigious yawn, and stretched herself out in the comfortable steamer chair.

"Oh, dearie me," she sighed, "I wonder if it would be a crime for me to admit how bored I was in church this morning."

"Well, I don't think it would be in very good taste, considering your father preached," replied Emily severely.

"I can't help it if he did. I was tired, and moreover," crossly, "I am always bored."

Emily raised her eyebrows.

"I am afraid, Nan, your soul longs for Gregorian chants and tapering candles."

"Of course it does; and acolytes, incense, and embroidered altar cloths. Yes, I admit it frankly, I should have belonged to The Church," she ended, with great emphasis.

"I know, Em," she continued, after waiting a moment to observe the effect of her last words, "you will think it absurd; but, I tell you, I really envy the Lawrence girls. To think that they attend that 70
dear, delightful Episcopal chapel, while I——" and the sentence ended with a laugh. "Why, Em, of course you won't sympathize with me, but I do think it is bad form."

Emily looked really shocked.

"Nan Birdsall, I am ashamed of you. What would uncle think of you?"

"Well," replied Nan, with a perverse expression on her face, "I don't intend that the ministers' sons shall have it all their own way. I have just as good a right to live up to the old saying as any of them."

Emily would not stay to listen to another word, and with a great air of dignity, she arose, and swept into the house. Very soon the soft tinkling of a bell told Nan that the noonday meal was ready. Old Mr. Birdsall stood at one end of the table, his hands folded on the back of the chair before him, waiting for Emily and Nan to appear. When they were come the long grace was spoken slowly and impressively, and no one watching Nan's demure face would have guessed at her outbreak of the morning.

They were a somewhat incongruous trio, and what little conversation there was consisted chiefly of good-natured banter of Emily by the irrepressible Nan, to which Mr. Birdsall listened somewhat abstractedly.

The dinner hour had not as yet assumed a position of importance to either of the girls, and as soon as possible they pushed back their chairs, and once more sought the shady porch. Emily gave one furtive glance over her shoulder to assure herself that her uncle was not following them, and then picked up a novel from a neighboring table, and opened it with a great show of 71
interest. Nan watched the bit of deception, and a smile spread itself over her face.

"Puss," she cried, stooping to lift up a little white kitten which was brushing against her skirt, "it is now our turn to be shocked and horrified."

Her remark being received in contemptuous silence, for a while she played languidly with the little creature in her lap, then her hand dropped at her side, her head fell back against the cushions, and Nan was fast asleep. The air was heavy and drowsy, all about the insects hummed so lazily and the very atmosphere lulled one into forgetfulness. By and by, the crunching sound of footsteps on the graveled path roused Nan to sudden consciousness.

"Oh! dear, Nan," Emily was whispering in a tone of suppressed excitement, "please wake up. Here comes Mr. Dudley. I forgot to tell you that I was going for a walk with him."

"That's all right," Nan interrupted her sleepily. "I am going in so he won't see me," and lifting herself lazily from her chair, she slipped into the house through one of the French windows.

Within the house there reigned the solemn stillness of the Day of Rest. The door of the study stood part-way open, and Nan could see her father lying on his lounge, his white head shining like silver against the dark leather of the cushion. She stole in on tip-toe to avoid awakening him, caught up a bright-colored afghan and threw it over him.

"How sweet he looks," she thought with great tenderness, as she stooped and gently kissed him. 72
She paused a moment by the large writing table to find, amid a litter of papers, an old hymnbook, shabby from long usage, and opening it marked the hymns selected for the evening service. Then she passed out and closed the door softly behind her. She waited a few moments until she heard Emily and Mr. Dudley leave the porch, then put on her hat, and started across the lawn to the manor. Coming out upon the drive-way she met Helen walking briskly along.

"Well," she cried, "where are you going?"

"To evening prayers, Nancy. Won't you come with me?"

"Yes, indeed I will. I thought you never left the children Sunday afternoon."

"I don't usually, but to-day I felt just in the humor for church."

There was a note of sadness in Helen's tone, which ordinarily Nan would have readily detected, but to-day the girl was possessed by a sense of personal dissatisfaction and restlessness, and so, absorbed in her own mood, this was lost upon her. There was a pause of brief duration, then Helen drew a long breath, and resumed more lightly:

"How sweet and sunny it is, isn't it, Nan? I love these first early days of summer when everything is so fresh and green. The country doesn't begin to look so lovely later in the season."

"I suppose so," returned Nan laconically. "I am such a country girl that I don't half see the beauties about me. When you are so used to things I don't think you are apt to be so keenly alive to them." 73

"I dare say that is true; you see I go away just enough to appreciate this dear place when I come back to it."

"While I," grumbled Nan, "have never been away from Hetherford but two or three times in my whole life. One year is just like another. There is always father, deeply interested in church matters, and looking upon me as an enigma; and cross old Bridget who runs the house and disapproves of me. I often long to dance a jig before father and to throw something at Bridget's head, just to relieve the monotony."

Helen laughed softly as Nan's grievances multiplied, knowing full well how it diminishes one's annoyances to be able to give voice to them.

"Then Emily comes," continued Nan, with a scowl, "and tells me that my clothes are awful and that I look like a fright, and wonders why I can't cultivate a slight interest in men. I tell her," laughing dubiously, "that I would if I found them eager to do their share."

"You silly child," and Helen squeezed Nan's arm affectionately. "I won't have you depreciate your dear self."

But Nan was not to be so easily diverted.

"I do hope that some day I shall see something of the world," she replied. "I would like to lead an exciting life, full of incident and adventure, and oh, dear me, who could lead one less so. I wish something new and interesting would happen."

"O Nancy," Helen said to her gravely, "don't be so anxious to have things happen. It is so much better when they don't, little girl." 74

Nan looked up at Helen and felt rebuked for her egotism, as she saw the shadow clouding her friend's pale face.

Dissimilar as these two girls were in character, a very warm friendship existed between them. Helen dearly loved Nan for her ready wit, easy-going ways, warm heart, and sunny nature, and Nan simply adored Helen, looking up to her with the greatest admiration, and deferring readily to her judgment in all things. There was a very romantic side to Nan's nature, hidden away though it was, beneath so much nonsense and jollity, and Helen's love affair and its sad ending had touched her keenly. She thoroughly liked Guy, and he, on his part, had always shown a preference for her above the other girls. Perhaps he had guessed at her strong love for Helen and partisanship for himself, for to her alone had he spoken of Helen on his return from that last unhappy interview. His words had been few, but Nan had seen the real grief in his honest eyes, and her heart had ached for him. She made a pretty shrewd guess at the real state of affairs, and she found her firm belief, that Helen's heart belonged to Guy and that it would all come out right in the end, greatly strengthened by her friend's present unhappiness and discontent. To-day she was full of sympathy for Helen, but she respected her reticence too deeply to broach the subject, so she consoled herself with the thought that this mood scored a point in Guy's favor. Her reverie was broken in upon by Helen's voice saying gently: 75

"I consider it a most fortunate thing, Nan, that I am carrying you off to church; I am sure the service will do us both good."

"Well, there's room for improvement in me," laughed Nan. "You should have seen Em's face this morning when I told her that my one ambition was to imitate the proverbial minister's son."

"Nancy, I am ashamed of you," Helen remonstrated, with a reluctant smile. "Come, be a good girl, for we are just at the church door. Let us give our hearts and minds to the service," she added with sweet gravity, "and we will see how much peace will come to us."

"I will, dear," Nan whispered as they started up the aisle to the Lawrences' pew.

The rector of St. Andrew's leaned somewhat toward ritualism, and no form nor observance that to his mind lent beauty and solemnity to the service was omitted. As the girls took their places the solemn chords of the Stabat Mater inclined their hearts to reverential prayer. In a moment more the doors of the vestry swung open and the organ took up the sweet strains of the soul-inspiring hymn, "Hark, hark, my soul." Slowly the choristers filed by; first the cross-bearer, his young face full of dignity, then the singers, two by two, and as their numbers swelled their fresh young voices filled the church.

The grace and beauty of the Episcopal form of worship appealed to Nan. The rhythmic lines of

the confessional, "We have erred and strayed from Thy ways like lost sheep," etc., moved her to a heartfelt penitence for her shortcomings, and inspired her with an earnest desire to live more 76
nobly and unselfishly. One by one her petty trials took their flight, and only a sense of great peace remained. When the benediction had been pronounced and the girls had left the church, they were both somewhat subdued and silent. The slanting rays of the sun fell softly athwart the quaint old churchyard, and on the faintly stirring breeze was borne the sweet perfume of roses and honeysuckle which grew in such profusion against the low stone wall. Passing through the gateway they strolled side by side along the road.

"I wish I could always attend St. Andrew's," mused Nan, slipping her hand within Helen's arm. "I really believe I would be a better girl. The ritual impresses me so deeply, and seems to bring religion home to me in such a convincing sort of way."

"I don't think that is at all unnatural; but as time goes on, Nan, I believe you will find that your love for outside things will diminish, in proportion as your dependence upon what is deep and vital grows."

"I would not fret about it in the least if it were not for my dear father," and Nan's face grew tender as she spoke, "but I know that this disposition of mine toward forms and symbols is a source of sorrow to him. He would have me a strong adherent to the old school of Presbyterianism, and he feels that my tendencies are leading me rapidly along the highway to Rome," and Nan's puzzled eyes met Helen's with a frank appeal for advice.

Helen was silent for a moment, and then spoke slowly and meditatively. 77

"Of course, Nan, each person has to decide such a question for himself, but it seems to me that when two people love each other dearly yet differ in their views, each should be willing to make some concessions and thus grow more generous and lenient with each other—Love is such a great power."

"Indeed it is," cried big-hearted Nan, "and I know that the larger share of yielding should be mine, for dear father has grown old in his opinions, and it must be very hard for him to have me branch out for myself."

They had reached a turn in the road where their paths diverged, and Nan asked:

"You will come over and sing hymns this evening, won't you, Helen?"

"Certainly. Are they coming over from the inn?"

"I suppose so," and then with a friendly nod each went on her way.

It was close upon eight o'clock that evening when Helen and Nathalie started out for the parsonage. The lovely twilight hour was almost over. High in the heavens rode the crescent moon, and, as the slowly fading daylight vanished, its white light penetrated the soft gloom which lay like a shroud over the manor park, and trees and lawns and winding paths came suddenly to life, as by the touch of a fairy wand. A sighing breeze stirred the leaves, from a fountain near at hand came the soft splash of falling waters and the night air vibrated gently with the myriad sounds of insect life.

There was a rush and a scamper, and around the corner of the house the children raced and 78
threw themselves upon Helen, with a shout of delight.

"You naughty youngsters," chided their sister gently. "You ought to be in bed this minute, everyone of you."

"We's going right off," cried Gladys breathlessly. "On'y we wants to be kissed first."

Helen stooped down to fulfill their clamorous demand.

"Now, be off," she laughed, straightening herself up and shaking a mildly reproachful finger at them, "and don't forget to go in and say good-night to Auntie," and then she and Nathalie proceeded leisurely on their way.

They found the vine-covered porch of the parsonage quite overflowing with people. Wendell Churchill and Farr stepped hastily forward, and, after an interchange of cordial greetings, found seats for them.

"How late you are," called Nan, from somewhere in the background. "I thought you were not coming."

Helen left apologies and explanations to Nathalie, and turned to answer an inquiry from Farr in regard to Jean.

"I am sorry to say she is deep in a book," she said, looking up at him with a smile, "and we could not persuade her to leave it. However, she promised to follow us shortly."

"And does Miss Jean always keep her promises?" Farr asked lightly. 79

"I think she does," Helen rejoined, meeting his eyes for an instant.

"Come, Helen. Start some of the good old hymns."

At Mollie's suggestion Helen's clear soprano took up the refrain of "Lead, kindly light," and the others joined in heartily. From long practice their voices blended beautifully.

They had been singing for nearly an hour when Farr rose quietly to his feet.

"Miss Lawrence," he said, bending over her chair, "don't you think Miss Jean should be brought to a realizing sense of her delinquencies and coerced into making some reparation?"

"Indeed, I do," she assented with a frank laugh, "but what are we going to do about it?"

"I don't think my desertion would be noticed if I should go in search of her," Farr suggested, lowering his voice. "Do you?"

Helen gave him a swift glance of amusement.

"'I would not hear thine enemy say so.' But go and see what your persuasive powers can do."

"You have put me on my mettle now," he rejoined, as he stepped over the low railing and dropped noiselessly on to the grass below, and it was with a sense of amusement that he recognized his own impatience and eagerness as he set out for the manor.

He paused to light a cigarette, then strode on over the soft turf, revolving many and varied thoughts in his mind. The brightness died out of his eyes, and the lines of the mouth were stern and compressed, for to-night the past with its perplexities and disappointments rose vividly 80
before him. In his thirty years of life fortune had dealt him some severe blows and had set him adrift with more doubts than beliefs, more cynicism than sentiment. His was a very reserved and sensitive temperament, and under the garb of laziness and indifference his troubles were jealously hidden from curious eyes. The man's best self lay dormant, and some influence was sorely needed to rouse him to the necessity of facing his difficulties and conquering them before they should conquer him.

He had left the hedge behind him, and, as he came out on the drive-way, a gleam of light from the manor house shot out through the trees and brightened his path. Involuntarily he started, and a vision of Jean Lawrence's face came between his mind and all painful memories and robbed them of their sting.

Reaching the veranda steps, he threw away his cigarette, mounted them and crossed to where the outer door stood hospitably open, revealing the wide hall within, its shadowy recesses softly penetrated by the light from a quaint lamp swung from the low, studded ceiling. He lifted the hand knocker, and let it fall, then pushing his hat back on his head, stared meditatively before him, while waiting for a response to his summons. Not a sound broke the stillness, and at length he took his hat in his hand and stepped across the threshold, and made his way to the entrance of the drawing-room, across which the portières were partly drawn. His footfalls on the soft rugs scarce heralded his approach. The scene which met his eyes was indeed a pretty one, and for a 81
brief space he stood motionless.

On a low divan in a far corner of the room, Jean had thrown herself with unconscious grace of pose. The warm coloring of the Oriental rug and bright-colored cushions made a charming background for the slender white-clad figure. A tall lamp shed a bright light across the open page of her book, on which her eyes were riveted. Her face was flushed with interest, her soft hair in fine disorder. Farr noted everything, from the golden head, resting upon the silken cushions, to the dainty slippered foot, just peeping beneath the hem of her gown.

A slight movement on his part discovered him to Jean, and she started up in dismay.

"Well, Mr. Farr, you did give me a fright," she cried, laughing confusedly, for his steady gaze disconcerted her somewhat. "I should think you would be ashamed of yourself for having startled me so."

"I am," recovering himself with a slight effort, for the swift change that had swept over Jean's expressive face at his unexpected appearance had set his heart to beating with unwonted emotion. "You will forgive me, will you not?" he finished, as he stood at her side and looked penitently down at her.

"Why, yes, but I don't advise your making a practice of strolling into people's houses, and appearing suddenly in their drawing-rooms; you might be mistaken for a burglar, and I have heard," with a malicious little laugh, "that it is unpleasant to be shot." 82

"Oh, come now, Miss Jean, you are very unfair to me; if you only knew the real facts of the case."

But Jean was still a little resentful, for she felt that she had been taken at a disadvantage.

"Really?" she answered incredulously, with a mischievous shrug of the shoulders.

"Yes, very," he protested, with a glance of amusement into her upraised eyes. "I did everything I could to gain admission in the regulation way, but was quite unsuccessful."

"What a shame," she said, interrupting him with softened voice. "I suppose the maids were all out in the garden for a stroll this fine night, and I was so absorbed in my book that I didn't hear the knocker."

"And then," he resumed, with a valiant disregard of the truth, "I came in making as much ado as I

conveniently could, without calling out or overturning the furniture."

"Under the circumstances I see that you must be forgiven. Won't you be seated, Mr. Farr? I don't know what I have been thinking of, to allow you to remain standing all this while."

"Thank you, no. On the other hand, I want to persuade you to arise."

"Why?"

"Because I am here on a mission. I have come to reproach you for not keeping your promise to join us at the parsonage."

"And to whom am I indebted for this kind and flattering interest?"

"None other than myself."

"Oh, you are too good," she cried laughingly, springing to her feet, and making him a sweeping obeisance. 83

"If that is your honest opinion, Miss Jean, suppose you prove it by going back with me."

"I can't be a traitor to my words," and she tossed her book on to the table, and preceded him out into the hall-way.

"Is it cool enough for a wrap?"

Farr surveyed her muslin gown with a critical eye.

"Indeed, it is."

"All right," she yielded carelessly, "but I never take cold."

She picked up a coat from the rack, and Farr helped her on with it, and then they wandered out into the night.

"Is it not delicious?" Jean sighed, as they sauntered leisurely along.

"It seems so to me," he returned, with a glance into the girl's eyes.

"Miss Jean," he began, after a brief silence, "Did you not tell me once that there was a pretty walk through the shrubbery?"

"Yes?" with a note of interrogation.

"In which direction would it lead us, if we should take it now?"

"To the parsonage, eventually, but," hesitatingly, "by a much longer way than by the path through the hedge."

"The longer, the better—for me."

"I don't know what they will think has become of us," she demurred. 84

Farr laughed easily.

"I never trouble myself too much about what people think."

"I don't doubt that you are in no way different from the rest of your sex. I believe it is generally conceded that selfishness is its salient characteristic."

"A popular fallacy. Do I not prove it to you, Miss Jean?"

"Oh, of course you are the exception that proves the rule," she returned with gentle sarcasm.

He stopped suddenly, midway in the path they were traversing, and looked straight down at her. There was a ring of deeper feeling in his voice as he spoke:

"I want you to think just as well of me as you can, and I cannot imagine having a more earnest desire than that I might always prove worthy of your kindest thoughts."

There was a tinge of defiance in Jean's manner as she answered him flippantly:

"Don't you think I would be using my time rather aimlessly, Mr. Farr, were I to give it up to thoughts of you?"

An expression of keen displeasure crossed Farr's face.

"I beg your pardon," he said stiffly.

Instantly Jean repented of her foolish words, and was heartily sorry to have wounded her companion, but the slight tremor at her heart warned her that to confess would be unwise.

"I think of you quite as much as you deserve," she ventured with a nervous little laugh, and she began to walk on toward the shrubbery at a brisker pace. 85

Farr made no immediate rejoinder, and when he spoke again it was in an altered tone.

"There is quite a fragrance to this box-wood, is there not?"

"Yes, indeed, and a very pleasant one. The perfume is heavy these warm nights after the sun has been shining on it all day."

"You have no idea what a charm the country has for me. I have really been in it so little since I was a boy."

"But your home is in the country, is it not?"

"Yes, but my family spend the winters in Washington, and our country home is only open during the summer months. I don't often get a chance to go down there. My mother keeps the house pretty well filled, for my two married brothers live at home."

"And have you no sisters?"

Farr's voice, which had sounded a little cold when speaking of his home, changed to sudden tenderness.

"Yes, one, and she is the dearest little girl in the world."

"I suppose you love her dearly, and do your best to spoil her?"

"Well, Clarisse and I are certainly great chums," he assented.

"How nice it must be to have an older brother. We girls have always regretted so that we did not have one, although," with a sad little sigh, "we used to have a dear old friend who was just as good as a brother; but he has gone away now." 86

"I suppose that there are times when they are of some use," said Farr, "although men are so hopelessly selfish."

"I would not think of contradicting you," Jean laughingly averred. "Come, we are talking a great deal, and not making much headway, and it must be growing late."

"I am all tangled up in this maze of by-paths. In which direction is the parsonage from here?"

"If you don't mind climbing a stone wall, we can turn to our right, and take a short cut, and we will be there in no time."

Farr agreed, and they walked on in silence until they had emerged from the shrubbery into a small clearing, skirted on the further side by a wall, its line broken at a certain point where some stones had been thrown down. Farr sprang lightly across, and turned back to assist Jean. Just then the moon, which had slipped under a cloud, shone out again, its soft rays falling directly on the girl's face. She had one foot already on the first stepping stone when he put up his hand to stay her.

"Well," she asked, as he did not speak. "What is it? Are you not going to help me?"

"Of course I am, but," leaning a little toward her, "this wall is a sort of a Rubicon. Once crossed we cannot go back, for we are then in the parsonage grounds. It has been a pleasant walk, and one to be remembered, has it not?"

"Yes," she murmured, with a quick indrawing of her breath.

"I wish——" he began impetuously. 87

"Mr. Farr," she interposed with gentle decision, "will you please help me over."

He gave her his hand, and gravely assisted her to the ground on the other side.

They were nearing the porch, and already the sounds of gay voices reached them through the stillness of the summer night, when Jean turned abruptly to the man at her side.

"By the way, Mr. Farr, we are to have a visitor shortly, and I hope you men will help us to make it pleasant for her."

He uttered some polite commonplace, and Jean went on:

"Perhaps you know Helen's friend, a Miss Stuart of New York."

A sudden recollection flashed through Farr's mind.

"Not one chance in a thousand that it should be the same," he thought, as he answered indifferently, "I think not."

"I thought possibly you might have met," she said carelessly. "She seems to know almost everyone."

He half turned to put a question to her, but already they were at the vine-covered porch, and Nan's jolly greeting lost him the opportunity. 88

# CHAPTER VIII.

# NAN REBELS.

Into the days that followed were crowded more gay doings than the quiet village of Hetherford had ever seen before. Old Dr. Birdsall shook his head disapprovingly over all this unseemly frivolity, but Aunt Helen's gentle voice championed the young folks, and persuaded him to allow Nan to join in the good times. The naval officers were in constant demand whenever they were not on duty, and at the end of the week the other men came out from town, and their advent was the signal for a series of rides, drives, walks, tennis matches, and amusements of every description.

Emily pronounced herself perfectly satisfied, and when Nan and Mollie grumbled over a few of the changes that had followed in the train of all these merry-makings, she declared them heretics and disdainfully turned her back upon them.

It was after a day on the *Vortex* that Eleanor, Nan, and Mollie sat together in Eleanor's box of a room in the inn, and held a council of war.

They had had a beautiful sail. There was a "smoky sou'wester" blowing, and Uncle Sam's schooner, decked in holiday attire, had flown before the wind like a bird. Captain Dodd proved a genial, pleasant host, and Mrs. Dodd's heart had been quite won by Helen's notice of her three- 89
year-old boy, a jolly little chap, whose tow-colored hair showed in strange contrast to his sunburned face. No stone had been left unturned to make the day successful, and as the girls were all good sailors, the stiff breeze and careening of the boat only added zest to their enjoyment.

However, nothing in this world is quite perfect. Nan and Mollie scowled at the general tendency to wander off in pairs. Mollie termed it bad form, while Nan sniffed, and called it utterly ridiculous. Finally Nan was roused to action. She called to Jean, who, with Farr at her side, was leaning against the rail well up forward, and demanded a recitation. Jean complied somewhat reluctantly. She stood in the midst of the little group, one hand holding fast to the companion-way to steady herself, the other tucked away down into the pocket of her reefer. She hesitated a moment, searching about in her mind. Her choice at length fell upon one, dearly loved by all the girls, called "Sister Felicité."

The beautiful lines were spoken with the greatest simplicity, but there was a depth of pathos in the girl's low voice that went straight to the hearts of her hearers. The short silence that followed her last words was more flattering in its import than would have been the loudest applause. There was a slight pallor in the girl's face when she had finished, and during the rest of the afternoon she was very subdued; and Farr, who had been deeply impressed by her rendering of this sad and beautiful poem, seemed to share her mood. 90

Nan, and Mollie, who were both a little rebellious at the turn affairs were taking, noticed this incident, and so the council of war had been called. Nan's conscience was quite clear, and she plunged bluntly into the conversation.

"Now that Jean has turned sentimental and emotional, I think it is high time for us to take matters in hand. Em always has been a backslider from the compact, but when Jean begins that sort of thing it is going a little too far."

"Punning is sadly out of place, Nan, on such a serious subject," laughed Eleanor, not sorry for an excuse to interrupt the discussion.

Nan was thoroughly in earnest, and beyond a chuckle at her own discomfiture, she took no notice of Eleanor's frivolity.

"I don't think love affairs are much fun, anyway," sighed Mollie. "Surely Helen's was miserable, and only resulted in making everybody unhappy and uncomfortable."

"That strikes me as a trifle pessimistic, Moll," said Eleanor. "Happy marriages may be rare, but it can't be denied that they exist."

"Oh! dearie me," groaned Nan, "when you talk like that you make me feel as if the world were turning upside down. I never dreamed of it being a question of love affairs, and marriages."

"I was not referring to anyone in particular," Eleanor protested hastily, "we were merely arguing in an abstract way. Weren't we, Moll?"

"All I meant was," Nan went on in a dolorous voice, "that we have lost our originality when we begin to act just like other girls—flirting, and all that sort of rot. We used to have fun in the good 91
old days when we all staid together. There were never any discussions as to how we should walk or drive for everybody was willing to go with everybody else. *Tête-à-têtes* were unheard of, and nobody was ever silly."

Mollie's sentiments chimed in with Nan, but Eleanor's assent was somewhat slower in coming.

"I suppose it is only a question of time," she said, "for the *Vortex* can't be here much longer, and

Mr. Churchill always takes the *Sylph* back to town in September. Then we can settle down, and have a good old-fashioned time during 'the autumn.'"

"When will Cliff go?" Nan asked, with a sly laugh.

Eleanor turned her head away to hide the tell-tale color that rose in her face.

"Oh! come, Nancy, your imagination is running away with you. Nothing will satisfy you short of the banishment of the sex."

"Qui s'excuse, s'accuse," quoted Mollie in an undertone.

Eleanor laughed in spite of herself. She pushed back her chair, and crossed to the open window. Along the dusty highroad Cliff came sauntering. When he was just in front of the inn he looked up, and caught sight of Eleanor. He raised his hat, and called out to her to come down, and go for a stroll before supper. She gave him a curt refusal, and turned back into the room. 92

"You shouldn't punish Cliff for my impertinence," reproved Nan. "It was not his fault."

Eleanor frowned and spoke impatiently:

"Cliff is only a boy, and a rather foolish one at that. But to continue. All this nonsense, as you call it, Nan, will be of brief duration, and my advice is to make the best of it."

"There is a worse time coming," Mollie declared. "The *Vortex* has wrought changes enough, but I don't suppose we will recognize the old place at all when the magnificent Miss Stuart arrives."

"Sufficient unto the day," said Nan. "Well, good-by, girls I must be off."

When the door had closed upon her two friends, Eleanor went back to the window, and leaning against the casement, looked abstractedly out. She thought of Cliff, and the disappointed look his face had worn when she spoke to him so rudely. Certainly Cliff had come under the spell that was over them all this eventful summer. She had striven to deter him, but in spite of her best efforts, he had found a moment in which to tell her of his love. To this she had lent the coldest ear, holding out to him no hope whatever. Cliff had listened very patiently, but there was something in his quiet refusal to accept this answer as final that had made Eleanor, woman of the world as she was, feel singularly helpless. They had taken up life again just where they had left it before Cliff spoke, and since then no reference had been made to the matter.

The smile had quite died out of Eleanor's face. She went over to her writing table and picked up a 93
little note which Cliff had written her on some trifling matter. She looked at it for a moment, then half raised it to her lips. With a shame-faced laugh she dropped it back among the letters on her table and turned impatiently away.

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One sultry morning toward the end of July, as Helen sat sewing on the upper balcony, a maid came out through the French window with a small tray in her hand, on which lay a yellow envelope. Helen leaned forward and picked up the telegram.

"Thank you, Susie. Is the boy waiting?"

"Yes, Miss."

"Well, you may go. I will bring the answer down myself when I have it ready."

When the maid had withdrawn Helen tore open the envelope. The message read thus: "Can you come to town for the night? Want to see you. Please don't disappoint. L. S."

Helen read it through twice.

"Oh I should love to go," she thought. "I wonder if Auntie or the girls would object."

She folded the telegram and fitted it into the envelope, and then sat looking absent-mindedly at the address, the while her face wore a puzzled look. Her indecision lasted for an instant only, and then she sprang up and ran through the hall-way to Mrs. Dennis' room.

Aunt Helen met her request with a ready consent, and in a moment the little boy was riding off to 94
the station with Helen's answer carefully stowed away in the pocket of his coat.

As Helen entered her room a glance at the clock told her that a little celerity would enable her to catch the twelve forty-five express, and she went to work with a will to collect her traps. She was in the midst of packing when a knock came at the door, and Jean, without waiting for permission, entered. She looked around the disordered room with a questioning glance.

"What is the matter?" she asked.

Her sister answered from the depths of her closet:

"I am going to town unexpectedly, and you are just the girl I want to see, Jeanie, for I have a lot of things to say to you before I leave."

"Where are you going to stay?"

"With Lillian."

Jean's face fell, and she spoke coldly.

"What train do you take?"

"The twelve forty-five, and I haven't a moment to spare. It must be noon now."

"It is. The village clock struck as I came in."

"Oh, dear! Put those things in the valise, Jean, won't you, while I hunt for my hat and gloves. The carriage will be at the door in five minutes."

Jean complied, and, as she was making room for the last few articles in the already crowded valise, Helen came and stood beside her.

"Dearie," she said, as she drew on her gloves, "will you please be very attentive to Aunt Helen while I am away, and not leave her too much alone? And, oh, Jean, do look after the children. 95
Don't have them off your mind for a moment. I am always so afraid that something will happen to them when I am not here."

Jean laughed cheerily.

"That is nonsense, Helen. Why in the world should you worry? Of course I will look after them."

"I know you always do, dear; only I wanted to remind you."

"Well, you need not be anxious. When will you return?"

"To-morrow, I think. You might have the carriage meet the afternoon express. Now I must fly."

Jean caught up the valise, and carried it downstairs, while her sister went to say good-by to Mrs. Dennis.

The carriage was already at the door when Helen came out on the veranda. She stopped a moment to kiss the boys and charge them to be good, and caught Gladys up in her arms.

"Do you want to go to the station with sister?"

"Course I do," enthusiastically.

Helen put the child in the carriage, and then stepped in beside her.

"Is my valise in, Jean?"

"Yes, dear. Good-by, and have a good time."

"I will," replied Helen, as Nathalie took her place on the front seat and gathered up the reins. "Remember, Jean, you have the entire responsibility of the children, and do not let Gladys out of your sight." 96

Jean nodded smilingly, and stood on the steps and watched the carriage until a turn in the road bid it from view.

Then, as she slowly made her way into the house, the light died out of her face, and involuntarily she sighed.

"I wish I did not distrust Lillian Stuart as I do," she thought. "It is so unfounded—as yet." 97

## CHAPTER IX.

## A FLYING MACHINE AND WHAT CAME OF IT.

Early that same afternoon Eleanor and Nan dropped in at the manor and suggested a game of tennis. The Lawrences acquiesced, and after a search for balls and rackets they wandered down to the courts. Jean stopped behind for a moment to find the children and tell them to follow her, for nurse had begged a holiday and had gone off for the afternoon. The sun's hot rays beat down upon the unshaded courts, discouraging even Nan's enthusiasm; so, after one set played with flagging energy, they threw down their rackets and retired to a pretty little summerhouse, just at the foot of the terrace. By and by, when they were cool again, Eleanor arose and suggested that they should stroll down toward the station to meet Cliff and Dick, who were coming up early. Jean alone demurred. It was sweet and peaceful within the shelter of the little summerhouse, and the prospect of a long hot walk along the dusty road was not tempting. Most opportunely she remembered Helen's injunction in regard to the children, and pleading this excuse she sent the

others off with a half-promise that she might join them at the inn later, if nurse should get home in good season.

When Jean was alone, she leaned back in her comfortable corner with an air of great contentment. She rested her elbow on the ledge of the seat, and propping her chin in her hand gazed dreamily, unseeingly out across the sunlit lawn. The children were playing under the shade of a widespreading elm, and the clear treble of their young voices was a pleasant accompaniment to her happy thoughts. Now and again, as some look or gesture of Farr's recurred to her with peculiar distinctness, a shy and tremulous joy dawned in her face, and lingered there. 98

Ah, Jean, such moments are indeed golden, when in your dreams all life seems sweet and fair. Do not hasten the inevitable awakening, for with the realization comes ever a sting to make the heart ache and throb. In after days this peaceful scene will live with you, the memory of its happiness haunt and mock you, until you fain would thrust it from you!

Meanwhile Valentine Farr was making his way down the terraced pathway in search of Jean, his heart strangely stirred with the thought of the sweet voice that would speak to him, of the pair of blue eyes that would welcome him. Then, as he walked blithely on, there fell on him the shadow of a memory fraught with pain. He threw back his head and drew a deep breath, as he squarely faced the difficulties that lay before him. He knew that before he might dare to hope, before he might dare to speak to Jean, there was much that must be told her, and although his heart grew heavy within him, the look of resolution on his grave face betokened a strong determination to overcome all obstacles so far as lay within his power.

He was descending the last terrace when little Gladys ran out from her shady playground and, holding out her arms to him, begged for a ride. He caught her up and swinging her on to his shoulder held her there securely as he hastened on toward the summerhouse, whence he had seen a flutter of Jean's white gown. Gladys was wild with excitement, and her shrill little cries of pleasure roused Jean from her reverie. She shifted her position a little to see what was going on, and then started up and moved forward to the arched doorway of the summerhouse and stood waiting for them. From her elevated position, Gladys waved frantically to her and then flung her arms tightly around Farr's neck. 99

"That is hot work, little one," he declared with a laugh, as he deposited the child on the ground and raised his hat to Jean.

"Oh, it was grand!" cried Gladys, capering around and shaking her golden curls into a tangled mass.

Jean smiled and extended her hand to Farr, but her words were for Gladys.

"I have not a doubt of it, darling," she said, "but I fear Mr. Farr found you a very heavy load to carry this hot day."

Gladys' head drooped, and she gave Farr a shy glance from out of the corners of her eyes.

"Was I vewy heavy?" she asked, in such a plaintive little voice that he had hard work to keep his face straight as he hastened to reassure her.

"Is not this a sylvan retreat, and are you not glad you came?" Jean queried, looking over her shoulder at him as she led the way into the summerhouse. 100

"Glad!" he echoed. "Glad does not begin to express it."

"Wait until you see how sleepy and stupid I am before you make such a rash assertion. Evidently you are in no way disheartened," she added, as Farr, looking somewhat incredulous, took his place beside her on the low seat.

"Not one whit," he replied softly. "It would be a very novel experience for me to find you stupid."

Jean turned a quizzical glance upon him.

"What an extravagant compliment. Where did you learn such gallantry?"

"When first I saw you," he returned, and although he spoke lightly there was an undercurrent of earnestness in his tone.

Gladys, who had been chasing a butterfly around and around the summerhouse, now stopped at the doorway and peeped in. She lingered a moment, tilting her head, first on one side and then on the other, and smiling encouragingly on the twain. Then, as neither Jean nor Farr took any notice of her, she twisted about and scampered off toward the playground. Larry and Willie hailed her with delight, and anyone watching the three little heads so close together would have known that there was mischief brewing.

"I know some splendid fun," Willie was saying in a cautiously lowered voice. "I read lots about it in a book. It's all about flyin' machines an' human birds. Let's go over to the orchard, an' I'll tell you how to play it."

"Me, too, Willie, please," piped Gladys. 101

"Oh, yes. You can come along, 'cause you're just the person we might want," and Willie's air of importance was most impressive.

"I guess Jean won't mind," said Larry.

Willie was far too excited to vouchsafe a reply, and the children scurried along toward the orchard. Their route lay past the summerhouse, and when they were opposite it some pin-prick of conscience made them pause and look within. Jean and Farr were deeply absorbed in conversation, and it was quite apparent, even to their childish minds, that their sister would never notice their absence. Of one accord they broke into a run, and did not subside into a more demure pace until the shrubbery hid them from view.

"You see," said Willie, when he had recovered his breath, "it is the greatest fun to play birds. All we've got to do is to use our arms right, an' then we can fly good enough. It said so in the book," he ended with a wise little nod of his head.

Gladys' eyes grew big with wonder.

"Can I fly, too?" she pleaded.

"Course you can. You're just the most principal."

Gladys beamed upon him, and her face wore a proud smile. To have Willie call her "the most principal" was a very deep and far-reaching compliment.

Willie heaved a sigh of relief when, after scrambling over the stone wall, they were at last within the orchard.

"Now, nobody can find us. We've all got to learn to fly. See, Larry, you just flop your arms so. They've got to be our wings." 102

"Don't guess I'se got any wings," sighed Gladys, "'cause they don't f'y me a bit."

Willie and Larry were racing around the orchard, swinging their arms in the air until they looked like animated wind-mills. Gladys trotted after them, striving to imitate their motions until her little legs and arms grew very weary. Then she stopped and stood watching them disconsolately.

"I don't fink you games any fun at all," she exclaimed, in an aggrieved tone, as the boys ran up to her puffing and panting from their exertions. "You don't f'y a bit like birdies, any more nor I do."

Willie eyed her with great scorn.

"Oh, you're only a baby. Course you can't do anything."

"You said I was most principal," Gladys reminded him, with quivering lips.

"Oh, I say," Larry broke in, "I'll tell you what we'll do, Will. We'll play she's a baby bird, an' then we'll teach her to fly. We must put her up in a tree, an' then pretend to shove her out of the nest, just the way the mamma bird does."

Gladys' face brightened, and she smiled sunnily.

"P'r'aps," objected tender-hearted Willie, "she might tumble herself an' break her wings."

Larry scouted the idea.

"You're a regular muff, Will. Gladys ain't afraid; are you, Gladys?"

"Course I aren't," cried Gladys stoutly.

After an exciting and somewhat heated discussion, the boys finally arrived at a satisfactory decision as to the best way of getting Gladys up into a tree, and, in the midst of much chaffing and some wrangling, a rustic bench was drawn to the foot of a gnarled old apple tree, and the difficult task was begun. "Oh, dear!" ejaculated Willie, very red and very warm, "She's a terrible heavy bird." 103

They were in a perilous position, and Gladys' burst of laughter nearly brought them all to the ground.

"Guess I eated too many worms," she said.

When at last she was safely perched on a projecting branch, Willie clambered down and drew away the bench, and Larry, sitting astride another branch, assumed the rôle of master of ceremonies.

"Now, little bird," he said authoritatively, "I ain't goin' to bring you any more worms to eat, an' you just got to learn to fly yourself. You must flap your wings like this, an' when I count three you must fly away."

Gladys' first attempt to follow these instructions nearly upset her, but she regained her balance and gripping tight hold of an overhanging limb turned a troubled face toward her brother.

"I guess my wings is gwowed w'ong."

"Cause there ain't any feathers on 'em, I s'pose," giggled Larry.

This sally proved too much for Gladys, and flinging back her head she burst into a merry peal of laughter. In her sudden movement her little hands lost their hold on the limb, and plunging

forward she fell heavily to the ground. One sharp cry and then the child lay still and silent, her little white face upturned. 104

"Oh!" gasped Willie, "p'r'aps she's broke her wings."

Larry slipped quickly down from the tree, and leaned anxiously over his little sister's prostrate form.

"Get up, Gladys," he pleaded, and then, as the child did not stir, he began to cry piteously.

For an instant Willie stood irresolute, his hands tightly clinched, his ruddy face grown pale with fear.

"I'm going to find Jean," he said, and turned and started on a run toward the shrubbery.

Larry caught hold of him and clung to him in an agony of fear.

"I'm awfully scared, Willie. Please don't leave me."

Willie shook him off impatiently, and pointed a reproachful finger to where Gladys lay in an unnatural stillness, and then, without another word, he was gone.

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During all this time Jean had not once thought of the children, and Helen's injunctions had been completely forgotten. While Farr was waiting an opportunity to broach the subject that was uppermost in his mind, Jean herself opened the way for him. She had been telling him in her happiest vein of numberless incidents of her childish days; laughing outright at the memory of many a scrape and frolic, and speaking with a pathetic quiver in her voice as she showed him the reverse side of the picture, recalling those dreary days when to the poor little orphaned Lawrences, in their desolation, it seemed that the light of their lives had been forever darkened.

As Farr listened to the innocent recital, told in Jean's own forceful dramatic way, he found his heart growing very tender, yet sad withal. It made him feel infinitely far away from her to hear her speak thus lovingly and trustfully of her family. Ah, yes, love was indeed the keynote of life at the manor. Farr had never realized this more strongly than he did to-day as he mentally contrasted the happy atmosphere, the tender relationships of Jean's home life, with his own unloved, unhappy boyhood. So deep was he in thought that he did not notice that Jean had ceased speaking, until she turned and called him by name. 105

"Mr. Farr, I have been very egotistical and I want you to do me a great favor to prove that you have forgiven me."

"I would find it hard to refuse you."

"Do you remember that day down on the cliffs, so long ago?"

Farr signified his assent, and she continued:

"Well, that day you said that perhaps sometime you would tell me something of your life."

Farr's face flushed with gratification, and he would have spoken but she stopped him almost imperiously.

"I have thought that your 'perhaps' signified a great deal; that it was put in to save yourself in case, on further acquaintance with me, you felt that you did not want to give me your confidence, and I confess," looking up at him with a reproachful smile, "that I have been not a little hurt by your silence."

"Please don't say that, Miss Jean; and do you know that, strangely enough, I came here to-day to tell you—to tell you that miserable story, but I scarcely knew how to begin it." 106

He paused a moment, and then resumed bitterly:

"I never knew half how miserable the story would sound to you until I listened to you this afternoon, and realized all that I had missed out of my life."

Jean looked at him sympathetically, and her eyes urged him to continue, although she did not speak.

"I am going to try not to bore you with any complaints, Miss Jean, and I must beg you not to be distressed if I speak plainly in regard to my family, with whom I am on exceedingly bad terms."

"Surely that does not include Clarisse?"

"Oh, no; not Clarisse, bless her heart. She and I have always stood faithfully by each other. My troubles began when my father died. I was quite a little chap at the time, but I loved my poor old governor dearly. My mother is a woman of great strength of character and with an unbounded love of power, and she and I were decidedly antagonistic. My father, who was the mildest of men, had the greatest admiration for her and in most things yielded readily to her stronger will, but where I was concerned he took a firm stand; so, although I was in great awe of my mother, I always had a refuge in my father. My older brothers, Lansing and Fred, never took to me at all. They were wise in their day and generation, and even when they were youngsters studied to

please, and so in our quarrels and disputes my mother invariably took their part. I felt the injustice without being able to reason about it, and grew daily more surly and defiant. From the day my father died I had a very bad time of it, and was always in disgrace. I know I was by no 107
means blameless, but there was something in my mother's cold disregard of me that roused a very demon of defiance in me. Clarisse was the only person in the world whom I honestly loved, and the first serious trouble with my mother was on her account," and even at this day Farr's face grew black at the remembrance. "It was a rainy day, and we children were all playing in the nursery. Clarisse was just recovering from an illness, and was not yet very strong. In some way she accidentally broke a new boat of Fred's. He was angry and, after scolding her until she began to cry, finally struck her across the face. I sprang toward him, my blind rage lending me unusual strength, and beat him unmercifully. Lansing, nurse, and Clarisse set up a great hue and cry, and in the midst of it all my mother walked into the room. Fred, who certainly did present a rather battered appearance, rushed to her and bawled out a garbled version of the affair and I slunk off into a corner, looking thoroughly guilty, I have not a doubt. My mother did not wait for any explanation, but summarily sent Clarisse and myself to Coventry. I might have forgiven her for the injustice to myself. I was so used to it as to have hardly noticed it, but I never forgave the unkindness to poor little Clarisse."

There was a brief silence, broken at length by Jean.

"I cannot understand it, Mr. Farr; surely a mother must love all her children."

"I suppose my mother did in her way. I do not tell you this, Miss Jean, to prejudice you against 108
her nor to exonerate myself, but only to, in a measure, explain subsequent events. There was never any sympathy between us. My manner, my character, my very looks were distasteful to her, and she made no attempt to conceal this from me. Up to the time of this occurrence I had had moments of feeling very contrite, when I had striven to overcome my faults; but from that time I hardened myself and never tried to break down the barrier that had been raised. Clarisse shared my feeling to a great extent, but she was far too gentle and loving to oppose my mother. She did her best to soften me and to prevent circumstances from embittering me. As I grew older my relationship with my family became more and more strained, and it was my great ambition to enter the navy and cut adrift from my home. When finally I broached the subject to my mother, I learned for the first time that my father had left his entire estate, which was a considerable one, to my mother, and that I was entirely dependent upon her. My mother was exceedingly generous in those matters, and in justice to her I must say that, however much she may have denied me her affection, she always treated me most liberally in a material way. I had been given every advantage without stint, and had been brought up in the greatest comfort and luxury, and without any adequate knowledge of the value of money. She did not favor the idea of my entering the navy, but I was troublesome at home, so she made a concession and I was allowed to go to Annapolis. In the meantime my brothers had obediently followed the careers my mother had marked out for them, and having furthermore married in accordance with her wishes, she provided each of them with a most liberal allowance, retaining, however, a controlling hand in 109
their affairs. Those years at Annapolis were the happiest I had ever known. I had been very much touched by my mother's yielding, and when I was at home I did my best not to annoy or antagonize her in any way, and we really got along very smoothly."

Farr had reached a difficult point in his story, and hesitated a moment to mentally review the past, and then began again in the same quiet voice that had characterized his telling of it so far.

"The summer preceding my senior year I went home to find stopping in the house a distant cousin of mine, a very nice pretty girl, whom I shortly discovered my mother had selected to be her third daughter-in-law. Then I revolted. In the first place Carrie, poor girl, was quite ignorant of the scheme and felt no interest whatever in me, and——" He broke off undecidedly, and looked with thoughtful eyes out across the level tennis courts. There was one thing he could not quite make up his mind to recount to Jean. The memory of it was growing faint (he could not but smile a little grimly as he thus argued to himself), and why rake up that disagreeable part of his past. In truth, how could he tell clear-eyed, pure-hearted Jean of that other!

"Well?" interrogated Jean, cutting short his brief reverie.

His indecision was at an end. He straightened himself, squared his shoulders, and answered with almost a show of relief.

"Well, the very fact that I was to be compelled to marry aroused such a tempest of resentment 110
within me that I had no room for any other emotion. For several weeks the atmosphere was thunderous, and at the end of that time the storm broke. I boldly announced my determination to remain single. My mother—well, she did not spare me. She told me I had always been a most unnatural and ungrateful son; that I had deliberately and intentionally thwarted her in every possible way without once considering the duty that I owed to her. She gave me to understand most emphatically that, from the day I finished my course at Annapolis, she would consider her obligations to me at an end. That I might go where I pleased, do what I pleased; but, that her home was no longer mine."

"Oh, how cruel!" escaped from Jean. Her little hands were tightly clenched, and her eyes flashed indignantly.

"It did seem rather hard, especially just at that time," he returned slowly, some unexpected thought lending an expression peculiarly somber and grave in his face. "But since then I have

often thought that I gave my mother a great deal of provocation."

"By not marrying according to her desire?" asked Jean, a little quickly.

Farr looked straight in her eyes for a moment before answering dryly:

"That was certainly a great factor; you see Carrie was an heiress, and owned a lot of property adjoining ours."

"Oh!" was all Jean said, but the monosyllable was most expressive. 111

Farr laughed light-heartedly. He had been wrought up by this opening of a long-closed chapter in his life, and it was a relief to have the tension relaxed.

"I have never for one instant regretted it, and certainly now——"

"You haven't finished your story," Jean interrupted with but scant courtesy, "please go on."

"There is not much more to tell, and I fear, too, that I am tiring you. No? well I took my mother at her word, and from that day to this I have never darkened her door. It came hardest on poor little Clarisse, I think," he went on sadly; "she had learned to depend upon me, and when she found that I was going to desert her she broke down completely. It wrung my heart to leave her, but it had to be done. I never like to think of that scene."

"Poor Clarisse!" murmured Jean softly.

"It was uphill work, at first," Farr resumed. "The lesson of poverty, with its grinding necessities, was bitter, and its bitterness redoubled by experiences that shook my faith in humanity." He flung back his head and drew a deep breath. "Somehow I lived through that first year, and then it grew easier; a maiden sister of my father's died and left me a legacy which, though small, is yet sufficient for all my needs. It is a good many years ago now, and I have only seen Clarisse once or twice, when I have happened to be in Washington in the winter. She is lonely, poor little girl; but we console each other by planning the good times we will have in some indefinite future." 112

After a moment, he began speaking again:

"I know how terrible this must seem to you, Miss Jean. A man at variance with his family is at a great disadvantage, and after all, you have only heard my side of the story. I almost dread," gloomily, "to have you tell me what you think of me now."

"Oh, how unjust you are to me," cried Jean indignantly. "Do you think that your trouble could make any difference to me, except to make me sorry—oh, so sorry—for you, and to make me like you and want to be your friend more than ever."

She stopped suddenly, half frightened by the look in Farr's eyes. He had grown very pale, and he spoke huskily.

"You must not be so kind to me; you tempt me to tell you why——"

"Jean! Jean!"

This piercing cry, so fraught with terror, brought them to their feet. They started forward, and even as they did so Willie stumbled across the doorway and leaned up against the post, sobbing piteously.

"Gladys, hurt," he panted, and then, his courage forsaking him, he burst into a storm of tears.

Every bit of color faded from Jean's face.

"What do you mean? O Willie, where is Gladys?"

Farr put his hand on the boy's shoulder.

"Come, little man," he said kindly, "don't cry, but take a long breath. There, that's a brave little chap. Now tell your sister where Gladys is, and what has happened."

"We were playing birds in a tree, and Gladys fell, and she can't get up," faltered Willie. 113

"Where?" Jean asked sharply.

"In the orchard."

Almost before the words had passed his lips, Jean pushed by him and was flying toward the orchard. Farr stopped a moment, to tell Willie to run up to the house and have them send down a couple of pillows to the orchard and to dispatch a man on horseback for the doctor; then he started in pursuit of Jean. He quickly overtook her, and they sped across the intervening space in silence. As they entered the orchard Larry's heartbreaking sobs indicated the scene of the accident, and in another instant Jean had fallen on her knees beside her little sister. The child's face was drawn, and the wide, distended eyes were strangely, unnaturally bright.

"Gladys, precious, where does it hurt you?" But a moan was her only answer.

"Oh, Mr. Farr, what can I do? How do you suppose she is hurt?"

Farr bent tenderly over little Gladys, and laid his hand lightly on her arm. A wail of pain escaped

from the child's white lips, and she again lost consciousness.

Everything grew black to Jean and she swayed a little, leaning against the trunk of the tree for support. Farr's voice sounded very indistinct and strange to her.

"Come, Miss Jean, you must not faint. Do you hear me? Now, take a mouthful of this," holding out his flask to her.

Jean obeyed him unresistingly, and rallied at once, the color coming back into her face. 114

"Gladys has broken her arm," he went on, in a quiet, even voice that somehow helped to steady her. "There, that is right. Now you look like yourself again."

"Never mind me," she returned resolutely, straightening herself. "Is there nothing we can do for Gladys?"

"I sent Willie to the house to tell nurse to come here with pillows and to send Barnes for the doctor. Now give me the flask and put your arm under her head and raise it a trifle, so that I can give her some brandy. There, she is coming to now."

The white lids fluttered, and Gladys' eyes opened slowly.

"Jeanie, I twied to f'y, but I was too little," she murmured weakly, and she smiled up at her sister, who was bending over her with so much tenderness.

The sound of footsteps reached them, and nurse, a comfortable, motherly-looking woman, bustled up to them, her arms laden with pillows and restoratives.

Her presence brought great reassurance to Jean.

"Oh, nurse, I am so glad you are here. Gladys has been hurt."

"My poor baby, Nana will make it all well. She shouldn't have left you at all. Whatever will Miss Helen say!"

Jean's face contracted sharply, and she turned away to hide the tears that sprang to her eyes. Farr threw an angry glance at nurse, who, all unconscious of her offense, was petting and comforting Gladys.

"This is no time for talking," he said. "We must get Gladys home as quickly as possible. Miss Jean, will you help me lift her?" 115

Jean recognized the kindly intent in his words, and her eyes were eloquent with gratitude.

"Little one," he went on to Gladys, "will you be a good, brave little girl and let me carry you? I will put you on this pillow, and I will be as gentle as possible. I can't promise that it won't hurt you some, but when you are once home you will be so comfortable."

"All right," assented Gladys, looking up at him with touching confidence.

But in spite of all their care, it was a very painful ordeal, and the poor child was quite spent before the manor was reached. As they mounted the steps of the veranda the doctor's gig drove up to the door. They carried Gladys up to the nursery, and Farr lingered there long enough to hear his opinion confirmed that the child had sustained no further injury than the breaking of her arm.

"I will wait downstairs," he said in an undertone to Jean, and he went out and closed the door softly behind him.

The moments dragged slowly, and he had almost renounced all hope of seeing Jean again, when he heard her footfall on the stair. She came down toward him, her white face showing the traces of tears. He sprang forward to meet her.

"I can't stay but a moment," she said to him, "for I must go right back to Gladys. The doctor has set her arm and has given her something to make her sleep and he is going very soon now." 116

He laid his hand on her shoulder and looked tenderly down at her.

"You look worn out. Won't you try and rest a little?"

She did not resent his action, but she moved a step away from him and his hand dropped at his side. Her lips quivered.

"I don't care about myself. I shall never, never forgive myself for my wicked thoughtlessness. That poor baby's suffering haunts me."

"I won't have you blame yourself," he declared vehemently. "I was more at fault than you, for I claimed your attention with my stupid story."

"Don't talk nonsense," she returned gently, but, nevertheless, her face lost much of its misery.

They were silent for a moment. The past hour had broken down the last barrier of reserve between them and had drawn them very close to each other. Of the two, Farr was perhaps the more conscious of the subtle change that had been wrought, and he was filled with unspeakable joy.

"You must go now," Jean told him, "but you will come back to-morrow, won't you?" She was so sure of his answer that she did not wait for him to speak. "I don't know how to thank you for all you have done for Gladys—and me," she added very low.

"If I have been the least help to you, Jean, it is more——" he began, when the outer door was pushed open, and Nathalie rushed in like a whirlwind.

"What in the world has happened," she cried excitedly. "Larry says that Gladys is hurt, but he is too frightened to be clear about it." 117

Jean hastened to give her an account of the accident, shrinking back a little from the light that streamed in from the open doorway, for fear of what her telltale face might reveal to Nathalie's keen eyes. Farr bade them good-by and went away, and then the two girls went directly to the nursery. 118

# CHAPTER X
# MISS STUART'S ARRIVAL.

On this selfsame day, after a two hours' trip on the cars, Helen found herself at length at her destination. It was somewhat after three when she stood ringing the front-door bell of a substantial brown-stone house in a quiet side street. The city seemed hot indeed after the dewy freshness of the country, and the sun's rays beat relentlessly upon the stone flagging and cobblestones. The rumblings of carriages and wagons rolling by, the tinkling of the far off car-bells, the constant roar of the great city fell strangely upon the girl's ears so unaccustomed to the ceaseless din. Just then a street vender passed by, his shrill voice crying now and again, "Peaches! peaches! ten cents a quart!" Helen watched him pityingly until her attention was attracted by a hand-organ grinding away, "White wings, they never grow weary." Two poor little urchins sat on a neighboring doorstep pitching pennies, their small pale faces making her heart ache as she wondered what a glimpse of green fields and winding lanes would be to them. A feeling of sadness assailed her, as these sights and sounds, so familiar to city life, awakened within her a realization that outside of her sheltered life lay so many full of sorrow and suffering. Her reverie was cut short by the appearance of the maid, who immediately ushered her into the 119 darkened drawing-room. Between the closed shutters crept a few rays of straggling sunlight which fell upon the furniture in its muslin slips, the bronzes and gas jets in their wrappings of tarlatan.

Helen had hardly found a seat, when someone hastily descended the stairs, and pushing open the door, made a rush across the room and threw her arms about her.

"You dear girl," Miss Stuart cried, "how glad I am to see you, and how good of you to come. You cannot imagine how overjoyed I was when I received your telegram."

"But I wanted to come, Lillian. You do not seem to take that into consideration." Then, after a pause, "Ah! how lovely you look, but then it seems to me you invariably do."

Helen was right, for Miss Stuart, gowned in a dainty peignoir of white silk covered with filmy lace, looked especially charming.

At the compliment she laughed softly, and pinched Helen's cheek. "There is no curing you, is there, dear? I thought, perhaps, a separation from me might have improved you."

"But you must not expect it," Helen maintained naïvely, "unless you grow less pretty."

Miss Stuart kissed her warmly. "Let us talk sense now," she said reprovingly. "Were you surprised at my message? I must explain. I was obliged to come down for mamma on a matter of business, and as it was too long a trip to return again to Bar Harbor to-day, I thought it better to 120 rest, and remain overnight in town."

"And do you go back to-morrow?"

"Well, no; not if you will take me to Hetherford with you."

"Indeed I will, with the greatest pleasure."

"And you are quite sure it is convenient now? I did not expect to be with you until the middle of August, but being obliged to come down at this time, I thought perhaps I had better go to you at once for my visit. Later I have several others to pay, and do not know that I could manage then to get to Hetherford at all."

"I am delighted to have you at once, Lillian; you could not come too soon to please me, and you can always be sure of a welcome at the manor."

"Yes, with you, but I am not so sure of those sisters of yours."

Helen flushed. "Pray don't say that."

"Ah, my dear, don't let it trouble you. I rest quite content in your affection."

But whatever there was in Miss Stuart's words or tone, a shadow rested on Helen's face for some little while afterward.

Perhaps Lillian Stuart saw it, for, by and by, she began to speak again of the manor.

"You have no idea, Helen, how much I long to see your lovely home, nor with what pleasure I look forward to being with you, dearest."

"You are good to say so, Lillian, and I will do all in my power to make you happy."

"You will not have to try, dear, I am sure." 121

Miss Stuart rose and touched a bell. A quiet middle-aged woman answered it.

"Mrs. Perkins, Miss Lawrence remains with me overnight. See that dinner is prepared for us."

"Yes, Miss."

"Wait, Perkins. I want you to send Virginie to me."

In a moment the French maid was knocking on the door.

"Virginie, preparez la chambre voisine de la mienne, et portez-y le sac de Mlle. Lawrence."

When the girls at length were seated in Miss Stuart's pretty boudoir, they fell into a long and pleasant chat, finding much to say to one another after several months' separation.

By and by Miss Stuart presented a programme for the evening, saying. "Now, Helen, you little puritan, don't dare to find fault or criticise. My cousin, Harry Stuart, is going to take us to the theater, and it will be perfectly charming. He is almost like a brother to me, and there could not be the slightest impropriety in it."

Helen did not demur then, but, after returning from the theater and in looking back over the evening, she felt some misgivings. "Harry" proved to be a gay, scatterbrained youth, more or less in love with his beautiful cousin. He stared a little curiously at Helen on being presented, and then devoted himself exclusively to Miss Stuart, whom he treated with a lack of deference, a familiarity, which Helen hotly resented. Miss Stuart, however, was apparently quite oblivious of it, and flirted with him openly, exchanging glances of amusement with him, as Helen's face grew 122
graver and graver.

A chance remark of his, which unfortunately reached Helen's ears, did not tend to soften her judgment of him.

"Who is your little friend, coz? She is tremendously respectable, and doesn't approve of us at all."

Helen retired to her room that night in a frame of mind to find serious fault with her fascinating friend.

Miss Stuart realized that she had gone a little too far, and determined to overcome the impression she had made. She well knew the power that her great beauty exerted over Helen, blinding her to faults that he who ran might read, so she coiled her mass of auburn hair most becomingly, slipped on a dainty pale blue wrapper, encased her feet in slippers of the same hue and presented herself in Helen's room, and proceeded to make herself so charming and agreeable that in ten minutes Helen had completely forgotten her grievance.

The following morning, at an early hour, they left for Hetherford. Helen neglected to wire Jean of their change of plan, so no carriage met them at the station, and they were obliged to rumble up to the manor in the old Hetherford stage.

Helen's heart sank when Jean ran down to the veranda to tell her of Gladys' accident.

"You cannot imagine how I felt, Helen, for I knew it was all my fault. I should not have forgotten her for one moment." 123

"Indeed, I think you were very careless, Jean." Helen spoke sharply, for her anxiety made her nervous and irritable.

Jean had gone forward and shaken hands with Miss Stuart, but at these words she turned abruptly away. She felt so reproached and woe-begone. It almost seemed to her that all the world must know how completely absorbed she had been in that sweet talk with Farr, to have allowed her mind to wander from the little sister. In this guilty and depressed state of mind, her welcome to Miss Stuart somewhat lacked cordiality, and the latter, who had never liked Jean, found herself no whit better pleased.

Nathalie came flying down the stairs, making a fortunate diversion.

"Now, Helen, don't scold Jean, for she is heartbroken. Gladys is doing splendidly and will be about in a few days. How do you do, Miss Stuart? I am very glad to see you, and so sorry that our anxiety about Gladys is making us forget to make you at home. Please let me take your bag, and

come right up to your old quarters."

Helen looked gratefully at her sister, and Miss Stuart's manner relaxed under this warm cordiality, and she followed Nathalie up to her room.

Jean went out upon the veranda, and walked slowly up and down. Her thoughts, which for a moment had been diverted, flew swiftly back to Farr. He had not spoken the words, yet she knew he loved her. She trembled a little, startled at the depth of emotion this knowledge aroused in her. So this was love—this sudden wild beating of her heart, this passionate joy of living. 124

"Poor fellow," she thought, with yearning tenderness, "how much he has suffered."

It was a blessed comfort to feel that it lay within her power to help to brighten his lonely, loveless life. She stood quite still and clasped her hands tightly together. "I love him! I love him!" The unspoken words sent the blood to her cheeks, and she was filled with dismay. She roused herself abruptly from her dream and hastened upstairs to join Helen in the nursery.

That day seemed interminable to Jean. When the long afternoon had worn away and Farr had not come, she consoled herself with the thought that the evening would surely bring him. She tried to curb her impatience by filling the slow-footed moments with manifold unnecessary duties, but it seemed to her that the happy time would never come.

They were all very quiet at dinner, for Helen was listening for the slightest sound from the nursery, while Jean's absorbing thoughts held her tongue in chains.

"Well, well," cried Nathalie at last, "what will Miss Stuart think of us? No doubt that this is the home of the Sphinx. Our silence is growing gruesome."

Thus recalled to her duties as hostess, Helen glanced quickly at her friend, and was distressed to see the expression of cold disdain that rested on her face.

"I beg your pardon, Lillian," she said penitently, leaning forward and taking Miss Stuart's hand. "I 125
am so upset about Gladys that I have forgotten my manners."

"Pray, don't apologize, Helen. It is of no consequence whatever." Miss Stuart spoke with studied indifference and withdrew her hand. She deemed it only her right to be first with her friends always and under all circumstances; and to have Helen, adoring, subservient Helen, relegate her to a position of secondary importance was an offense which merited instant punishment.

Jean and Nathalie, on the alert for any slight to their sister, exchanged significant glances.

Helen made no further demonstration of affection, but began to talk gently and courteously to her guest. Jean and Nathalie came valiantly to her assistance, until at last Miss Stuart was forced to respond to their friendly overtures. When they were leaving the dining room she slipped her hand into Helen's arm. It was the nearest approach to an apology of which her nature was capable, and Helen had fain to be content. All her life Miss Stuart had been in the habit of snubbing people at her own sweet will and had found it a diverting occupation; but somehow it hurt her to snub Helen, the girl was always so patient and generous about it.

They drifted quite naturally out onto the veranda. The sky was overcast, and a faint wind sighed among the trees. The heavy clouds promised rain, and the earth, after reveling in days of sunshine and nights of brilliant beauty, seemed wrapped in melancholy submission. 126

Before very long Nan and Emily came running across the lawn. Nan greeted Miss Stuart cordially, but Emily was very cool, and looked askance at this dangerously beautiful addition to their circle. When she had shaken hands, she faced the girls as solemn as a judge.

"Girls, what do you suppose has happened? The *Vortex* has gone away, and those miserable men never came to say good-by, and did not even send a line."

"Now see here, Emily," Nan interposed warmly. "I don't believe in being unjust. It must have been a sudden move, and of course we will hear from them."

"It is a great shame," complained Nathalie. "What shall we do with ourselves?"

At Emily's first words Jean started forward, then fell back in her chair, dazed and stunned. She pressed her hand against her heart to stay its loud throbbing, passionately grateful that the kindly darkness sheltered her from view. She could not tell how long it might have been when she was aroused by a sentence from Emily which arrested her attention.

"Yes, it is such a pretty stitch. I'll teach it to you some day, Helen."

Had she heard aright? Could it be possible that the *Vortex* was already forgotten—its officers banished to the indifferent past? Her sudden excitement died away and a dull feeling of pain tugged at her heart. Her hands dropped nervelessly into her lap, and her lids closed wearily over her aching eyes.

The conversation drifted into local channels, and Miss Stuart was beginning to feel very much 127
bored when Eleanor and Cliff sauntered up the driveway and joined the party. She awaked from her apathy to survey Cliff critically, and then proceeded to monopolize his attention. Cliff dropped into a chair beside her and lent himself readily to her plan. She was a charming woman, a beautiful woman, so he assumed his most devoted manner, and apparently succumbed at once

to her gracious, subtle flattery. Eleanor cast an amused glance at him over her shoulder; she felt too sure of him to be disturbed; and pushing her way among the group until she reached Jean's side:

"I met Johnnie Matthews at the gate, dear. He was on his way to the manor with a note for you, and, since it required no answer, I volunteered to bring it up."

"Thanks, Eleanor. I suppose Mrs. Matthews wants me to take her class again next Sunday. She has been ill."

Eleanor had dropped the note into Jean's lap and was moving away, but something in her friend's voice startled her. She looked at her curiously, but in that light she could not discern her expression. She hesitated a moment, and then sat down on the arm of Jean's chair.

"How is Gladys to-night?" she asked.

Jean made an effort to speak more naturally.

"Very comfortable, thank you. The doctor says her arm is doing nicely, and so far she has not had any fever."

"Eleanor, did you know the *Vortex* had gone?" 128

As Nathalie spoke Eleanor impulsively took Jean's hand in hers. It was very cold, and trembled in her clasp. Jean's unhappiness was explained, and at the same moment another idea flashed through her mind. She answered Nathalie with well-feigned lightness:

"It can't be more than a temporary absence, I am sure." Then added in a lower tone to Jean, "Don't you want to read your note, dearie? It may not be from Mrs. Matthews."

Jean gave a start, and, instinctively, her disengaged hand closed over the note in her lap.

"I think I will take it to the light."

She rose hurriedly and made her way to the doorway, where the light from the lamp fell upon her letter. The handwriting was unfamiliar, and Jean's heart seemed to stand still as she tore open the envelope. The opening words dispelled the last doubt; her whole expression changed, and she eagerly drank in the contents of the sheet, all unconscious of the pair of eyes that were watching her narrowly. Nothing escaped Miss Stuart. She saw plainly the sudden start, the rising color, the tremulous happiness in the young girl's face. Perhaps the sight stirred some strange memory, deep hidden in her heart, for she smiled bitterly, and answered some pleasantry of Cliff's with such stinging cynicism that even that languid youth was aroused to retort.

But to Jean the whole world was forgotten, as she read the lines:

> My Dear Miss Lawrence:
>
> It is with deep regret I write you that the *Vortex* has been ordered up the Sound to survey a certain locality. Most unfortunately, our orders came very late. We have only just time to catch 129
> the tide by weighing anchor at once. I do not know whether you realize how great is my disappointment at leaving Hetherford, or how great is my regret at not seeing you before I go. Our stay, I trust, will not extend beyond a week, and I look forward with great pleasure to the time when we once more cast anchor in your harbor. I shall be anxious for news of little Gladys, and if I did not fear to presume, I should ask you to write me. Perhaps your goodness of heart will prompt you to forgive and indulge me at the same time. My address will be F——, which is the post-office nearest to our anchorage.
>
> Yours faithfully,
> Valentine Farr.

Jean raised her eyes and let them rest on the group of people outside the doorway. No one, apparently, had a thought for her; for Miss Stuart had discreetly withdrawn her gaze, and they one and all seemed absorbed in the merry conversation. She longed to slip away to her own room, that she might be alone with her happy thoughts, but paused, irresolute, wondering, as she crumpled the note in her hand, if it would be unpardonably rude to leave her guests thus abruptly. Helen came to her rescue.

"Jean, will you please go up and see if Gladys is asleep?"

Jean nodded her head in assent, and gladly disappeared. Eleanor looked after her with a kindly smile, yet she sighed a little, notwithstanding.

"What would Nan do if she knew this?" she thought.

Shortly afterward a servant came to the door, bringing word that Miss Gladys was sleeping soundly, and that Miss Jean begged to be excused, as she had a headache. 130

In the night the rain fell heavily, and the rising wind sighed and sobbed like a child in pain, but Jean's dreams were sweet, and her last sleeping and first waking thoughts were of Valentine Farr. 131

# CHAPTER XI.

# DULL DAYS.

The days that followed were the quietest that this summer had brought to Hetherford. Not only had the *Vortex* gone, but Wendell and Churchill had carried the other men off on the *Sylph* for a long-planned fishing excursion, and the girls were left to their own devices. This was too common an occurrence to be looked upon as a great hardship; yet it was quite obvious, even to Nan, that they did not revel so much in their once treasured independence, and that the old-time simple pleasures had somehow lost their zest. There was something strangely amiss in the little colony. Jean, who had always been depended upon to set the ball rolling, and to keep everyone in good spirits, failed them utterly. She was so quiet and absent-minded, so unlike her usual self, that Eleanor began to fear that her surmises in regard to the letter had been incorrect after all. Miss Stuart's presence at the manor acted as a great restraint upon everybody. She did not adapt herself in the least to their quiet, humdrum existence, and maintained a stoical silence that was especially irritating. The weather was very depressing. A fine drizzling rain fell persistently, the sky was gray and leaden, and the roads and lanes were almost impassable with the mud. The 132
dampness retarded Gladys' recovery, and she was fractious and troublesome. Poor Helen was in despair, for Miss Stuart was unreasonable enough to resent her spending so much time in the nursery, and took small pains to conceal the fact that she was almost bored to death.

By Friday Aunt Helen was seriously fretting over her niece, for Helen was looking pale and tired and seemed quite incapable of coping with the anxieties of housekeeping, Gladys, and the entertainment of her difficult friend.

On the afternoon of this day the rain ceased and Nathalie, in despair of any more interesting amusement, declared her intention to drive to the station to see the express arrive.

"Not that anyone ever comes here," she said dolorously as she drew on her driving gloves.

An hour later she burst into the drawing-room, her face radiant, her eyes twinkling. Helen sat before the low tea-table serving tea, Miss Stuart lounged in a huge armchair, while Jean was on her way between the tea-table and Miss Stuart, with a dainty cup in her hand. She paused, and looked expectantly at Nathalie.

"Well, cheer up, girls, for I have some news at last. Who do you think arrived to-day?"

Even Miss Stuart leaned forward in her chair, and lost something of her air of languor.

"Don't ask tiresome riddles, Nathalie," pleaded Jean, "but tell us."

"Mrs. Archer."

Miss Stuart looked blank; Helen laughed softly, and Jean handed Miss Stuart her cup of tea with 133
a disgusted expression on her bonny face.

"You must, indeed, be in the depths to call that good news," she said scornfully.

"I didn't say good news. I said news," Nathalie retorted triumphantly, "and in any case I think Mrs. Archer is a godsend after the monotony of the last few days."

Miss Stuart smiled faintly for Nathalie, but echoed her sentiments.

"I think Cliff's mother is a charming woman," interposed Helen. "She is somewhat overbearing and imposing, but I know she does not mean to be disagreeable."

"I like her," maintained Nathalie. "She is so worldly, so thoroughly magnificent."

Jean laughed and meekly took her cup of tea from Helen.

"I have not another word to say. I suppose the truth is that I am mortally afraid of Mrs. Archer. She completely subdues me."

After a moment she spoke again, from the comfortable place she had taken on the divan:

"Do you know, Nathalie, just for one moment I thought it might have been Guy of whom you were speaking."

Helen set the teapot down suddenly, and there was a moment's uncomfortable silence. Miss Stuart let her glance travel slowly from Helen's flushed face to Jean's grave one.

"Are you speaking of Mr. Appleton?" she asked lazily. 134

"Yes," replied Jean, with perfect unconsciousness, "I suppose you met him at the same time you did Helen. I wish it had been he instead of Mrs. Archer."

Miss Stuart shrugged her shoulders, and answered with insolent disregard of Jean's evident affection for Guy:

"A nice enough man in his way, but so deadly uninteresting, so lacking in that knowledge of the world which alone makes a man worth talking to."

Jean's eyes flashed, and her voice trembled with anger.

"Mr. Appleton is a very dear friend of ours, Miss Stuart, and to none of us is it agreeable to hear him spoken ill of."

She looked impulsively across at Helen, feeling sure that her sister would speak some word of vindication of Guy, but the girl's head was bent and she seemed wholly occupied in pushing the tea-cups aimlessly about on the polished surface of the mahogany tea-table. For the first time in her life Jean felt a contempt for her sister, and pressed her lips tightly together to keep down the bitter words that rose to them. Nathalie, who hated a scene above all things, and yet was too thoroughly in sympathy with Jean to feel equal to changing the conversation, sat down at the piano and began to drum.

Miss Stuart looked from one to the other and laughed unpleasantly.

"Mr. Appleton should be proud of such an ardent champion."

Jean made no answer. She finished her tea in silence and then left the room, followed by a sneering glance from Miss Stuart's eyes. 135

That evening Mrs. Andrews and her sister, Mrs. Archer, called at the manor. The young people had taken advantage of the first clear evening since Miss Stuart's arrival and had gone for a walk, so Mrs. Dennis asked her guests up to her room. During the conversation Mrs. Andrews said:

"How badly Helen is looking lately."

Aunt Helen agreed with her and related to Mrs. Archer the facts of Gladys' accident, and dilated upon Helen's untiring devotion to her little sister.

"She is worn out," she sighed in conclusion, "and it is so hard for her to have Miss Stuart here just at present."

"You don't mean Lillian Stuart, that beautiful girl about whom everyone is raving?" exclaimed Mrs. Archer, roused to a degree of interest she rarely felt when in Hetherford.

"I suppose it is the same. She is certainly very beautiful, but somehow," and Aunt Helen's face grew puzzled, "she doesn't seem at all the kind of girl my Helen should care for. However, they are close friends, so I——"

"Oh, she is a great belle," Mrs. Archer interrupted brusquely. "Poor girl! What in the world does she do with herself in this out-of-the-way place?"

Mrs. Andrews replied with some heat:

"She must be very hard to please if she cannot find anything to amuse or interest her here."

A gleam of amusement flashed into Aunt Helen's eyes, but was instantly suppressed. Hetherford was the basis of an old feud between the sisters, and had been the cause of more than one bitter quarrel. Mrs. Archer was a fashionable woman to the tips of her fingers, and for years she had striven to impress her easy-going sister with the importance of society, and to persuade her at least to spend her summers in some resort more frequented by the world of society. Mrs. Andrews, however, stood out against her and stoutly maintained that she and her children were perfectly happy where they were, and Mrs. Archer had to content herself with an occasional visit from her niece Mollie, who was eminently unsatisfactory as a fashionable girl. To crown her displeasure, her only son Clifford, instead of finding pleasure in his charming home at Newport, insisted upon spending the summer at Hetherford Inn, and Mrs. Archer bore a great grudge against this small place. She was a very hospitable woman, and enjoyed keeping open house, but she found it a great drawback to have no young person at home. 136

As she rose to leave, it suddenly occurred to her that it would be very delightful to take two of the girls back to Newport with her. Her choice fell upon Helen, because in that way she could include Miss Stuart in the invitation. Mrs. Dennis met the suggestion with approval, for she knew it would do Helen good to get away from home for a few days, and that so pleasant a change would please Miss Stuart. In the midst of the discussion, the two girls walked into the room.

Mrs. Archer's shrewd, worldly eyes took in every detail of Miss Stuart's beautiful face and faultless gown, and she instantly dropped the somewhat patronizing tone she had used toward Helen, and urged their acceptance with great cordiality. Helen hesitated, for she was loath to leave Gladys again, but Aunt Helen and Miss Stuart overruled all her objections, and it was agreed that they should accompany Mrs. Archer. 137

The quiet that settled down over the manor after their departure was very grateful to Jean, who during the past week had been disturbed and harassed. She knew that she was fast approaching the most serious crisis of her life. All during these joyous summer days she had drifted on so happily, evading self-questionings, living only for the day. Now she realized that the drifting was at an end. On his return Valentine Farr would speak to her, and although she had no doubt as to the answer she would give him, yet she trembled a little and would fain have been alone with her secret. And now, when she would have had her whole mind dominated by this one thought, Miss Stuart's unwelcome presence in the house thrust other and less pleasant thoughts upon her. Up to the time of this last visit Jean's dislike of Miss Stuart had been a vague, passing sentiment,

which had concerned her but little. She had distrusted her always, but even that distrust was purely intuitive, for she had no idea of the part Miss Stuart had played in the severing of Helen's engagement. In that slight controversy about Guy, however, Jean had unwittingly pierced beneath the surface of Miss Stuart's suave manner, and had caught a glimpse of the girl's true nature. She could not understand why this should affect her so strongly. In vain she tried to account for it to herself. Miss Stuart, although so dear a friend of Helen's, occupied a comparatively unimportant position in their home life. In another fortnight she would be gone from among them, and for months they would know nothing of her, save what Helen might choose to communicate from her oft received letters. So Jean argued with herself, battling with a curious sense of apprehension that struggled within her. She longed to talk it all over with Aunt Helen, whose judgment was always to be trusted; but that seemed a kind of disloyalty to Helen, so she smothered the vague doubts and fears which threatened to overwhelm her usual good sense. Her thoughts flew off to Farr, and poised over that strange talk they had had on that last afternoon. She drew from her pocket a letter that had come from him, and read it over slowly, lingering over every sentence. But when she had finished and was folding it into its envelope again, she sighed a little, for even that dear missive could not quite dispel the vision which haunted her of Lillian Stuart's beautiful, cruel face. 138 139

# CHAPTER XII.

# EDDYING CURRENTS.

Monday dawned bright and clear. When Jean awoke the sunlight was flooding the room, and through the open window came the sweet voices of the birds as they merrily chirped and sang. As she sprang out of bed she was filled with a sense of well-being and happiness. She could even find it in her heart to laugh a little scornfully at the fancies that had disturbed her, for they had vanished with the vanishing clouds. She dressed hurriedly and ran down to the dining room with a snatch of song upon her lips. By her plate on the breakfast table lay an envelope addressed in a man's legible handwriting. She flushed as she caught it up, and crossed to the window to read it. Farr had written in great haste to say that the *Vortex* would be in Hetherford Harbor by noon on Monday. When Jean had reached that point in his note she read no further. She stood very still, her hands holding the bit of paper closely, her breath coming hurriedly through her slightly parted lips. For one moment thus—then the maid entered bearing the coffee urn, Larry clattered noisily into the room, and Jean turned back to the ordinary duties of everyday life. But her face was still illumined, and in the depths of her shining eyes lingered the reflection of her soul's great happiness. 140

During the morning a telegram came from Helen saying that she and Miss Stuart would arrive by the afternoon express. Jean had just terminated a long interview with the cook, and was frowning portentously over her unusual duties as housekeeper, when Nathalie brought her the news. She made a grimace and then proceeded to inform Nathalie of the approaching arrival of the *Vortex*, subduing as best she could the tremor of excitement in her voice. Nathalie was jubilant. At last the dull days were at an end, and they would start on a new round of festivities. While she was chattering volubly it suddenly occurred to Jean that it would be a pleasant welcome to Helen and Miss Stuart to ask Mr. Dudley and Farr to dinner. She made the suggestion timidly, for she feared that Nathalie would divine the true motive which prompted her. Her mind was instantly set at rest, for Nathalie, overjoyed at the break in the monotony, gave her a friendly push toward the desk to hasten the writing of the notes. Jean laughingly reminded her that the *Vortex* had not yet arrived, and then they put their two heads together to concoct a dinner which should quite equal one of Helen's ordering.

That afternoon, as they were about starting for the station, Barnes brought back the answer from the *Vortex*. Farr's was of so grateful and rejoicing a nature that Jean laughed light-heartedly as she read it. It came to her suddenly, as they were bowling along the highroad, that in her note to him she had not mentioned the fact that Miss Stuart was with them, nor had she done so in the one letter she had written him during his absence. 141

"It was just an oversight," she said to herself. "A mere chance."

A mere chance, and yet chance sometimes means fate.

Helen met them with so many questions about Gladys, the boys, and Aunt Helen, that Jean had no opportunity to unfold her plan for dinner until Miss Stuart had gone to her room, and she had followed her sister into the nursery. Helen was tired and travel-worn, but she was delighted by Jean's thoughtfulness for Lillian's pleasure, and listened interestedly while her sister anxiously submitted the menu for her approval.

"Everything is perfect, dear," she said, putting Gladys down from her lap and making her way out

into the hall, "but before I go to dress I must tell Lillian that we are to have guests to dinner," and she turned away without noting the shadow that crossed Jean's face at the mention of Miss Stuart's name.

Miss Stuart stood before her dressing-table arranging the silver toilet articles which she had just taken from her trunk. She had thoroughly enjoyed her stay at Newport, and was feeling in a good humor with all the world. She turned a bright glance of inquiry as the door opened to admit Helen, and betrayed a ready interest in her friend's announcement.

"Who are the men?" 142

"Two officers from the Coast Survey schooner that is anchored here, Mr. Dudley and Mr. Farr; Valentine Farr."

The little vinaigrette Miss Stuart held in her hand dropped on the dressing-table. Her face contracted sharply, and she made a quick instinctive movement away from the light.

"Valentine Farr," she repeated slowly, keeping her voice well under control. "It must be the same of course."

"Do you know him?" Helen asked the question absent-mindedly, for she was looking about her critically, to assure herself that everything in the room was as it should be.

"Oh, yes. I have known him for a long while." She had quite recovered from her surprise, and spoke lightly, in her usual tone. "What a small world it is after all."

"Dinner at seven, Lillian," Helen said to her as she closed the door; and then she was alone.

"So Val is here," she murmured. "Val, of all people in the world." She flung back her head with a reckless laugh, and began to pace up and down the room.

A flood of recollections swept over her; recollections which stirred her with a strange emotion. How long ago it seemed since sunny-tempered strong-willed Val Farr had wooed her in so masterful a way. What folly it had been, and yet a sweet folly withal! Miss Stuart paused midway in the room. Her face softened, and her beautiful mouth drooped tenderly. She had craved a 143
splendid future which Val could not give her, so she had thrust his love out of her heart, and filled its place with the admiration and exactions of the gay world in which she moved. Val's misfortunes, his poverty, and his estrangement from his family gave her the opportunity which she sought to jilt him. She frowned with vexation as she recalled the look of scorn that he had cast at her when she had laid bare to him the aims and ambitions to which she had sacrificed their love. And after all, it had been a useless, needless exposure, for Val had come to her to give her her freedom. She told herself that she had acted wisely, she laughed to scorn the sentiment that was so hard to stifle—but no other man had ever taken Val's place.

They had met from time to time in Washington, during the past few years, and at each fresh meeting Farr had found himself more and more disillusioned concerning the woman whom he had once loved. Something of this Lillian Stuart divined, with a bitterness of spirit which she could not quell. His indifference stung her to the quick, and she could not renounce the hope that she might win him back, if only circumstances would give her the opportunity. Miss Stuart's thoughts brought her back to the present. She drew her brows together and stared meditatively before her, with eyes that saw nothing of the room around her:

"I wonder if Val is in love with one of these girls, and if so which one."

Jean Lawrence's face flashed before her. She struck her hands sharply together, and an angry 144
light gleamed in her eyes.

"That would be a curious way of punishing me. I have always detested that sister of Helen's."

She crossed to the mirror, and gazed critically at the picture presented there. A smile, slow and cruel, touched her lips, and with a satisfied air of triumph she turned away and began to dress for dinner.

The hands of the little French clock on the mantel were close upon seven, when a knock came at the door and Helen entered. She started back with a faint gasp of admiration, as Miss Stuart turned from the dressing-table and swept across the room to meet her.

"O Lillian," she cried, "how beautiful you look; but, my dear, you will take away my guests' breath. You know we are thoroughly informal at Hetherford."

Miss Stuart raised her hands to clasp a string of pearls about her throat, with slow deliberation.

"I am very sorry," she said distantly, "that my gown does not meet with your approval. I can easily change it."

"Why Lillian, I find your gown charming, and would not have you change it for the world; I exclaimed simply because I did not expect to see you *en grande toilette*."

"It did not occur to me that I was inappropriately dressed, but of course I am not conversant with your customs here."

The covert sneer was not lost upon Helen, and she flushed painfully at the sharp words. With her usual self-depreciation she felt reproached for what she considered her lack of tact and courtesy. 145

"I don't know how to tell you how sorry I am, Lillian," she murmured, with deep contrition, "for my inadvertent speech. I never knew you to look lovelier. Won't you please believe me when I tell you that?"

The naïveté of the compliment touched Miss Stuart, and she smiled gayly into Helen's troubled eyes.

"I admit that I did not understand you at first. I thought that I was guilty of a social error. However, it is all right now."

Helen put her hand on her shoulder, and turned her gently around.

"I want to really see your gown. It is exquisite. What perfect taste you have, Lillian."

Miss Stuart's gown was of the palest shade of green velvet, made so simply as to be almost severe in its lines. The low-cut bodice was ornamented with some fine cut jet, and a little dagger of the same was thrust through the soft coil of auburn hair which crowned her small and shapely head. Her neck and arms shone dazzlingly fair, and the contour of the firm white throat would have delighted the eyes of an artist. The long straight lines of her gown accentuated her height, which was somewhat above the average, and she carried herself with regal grace.

Helen gazed at her a moment in silent admiration. She absolutely worshiped beauty, and its power over her was very great. Had anyone hinted to her that it was chiefly this in Miss Stuart which so charmed her, she would have indignantly refuted the accusation, and yet in a great measure it was true. Many and many a time she had cause to puzzle over her friend—aye, almost to distrust and fear her; but the power of the girl's great beauty blinded her and left her helpless 146
to condemn one who possessed such infinite attraction.

The silence lasted but a moment, yet Miss Stuart had read Helen's verdict in her transparent face, and her pulses quickened with triumphant hope.

"Well, well," she cried laughingly, at length, "are you spellbound, and have you forgotten your guests?"

Helen cast a hurried glance at the clock.

"Why, it is seven. I must run down at once. Follow me as soon as you can, dear."

Down in the drawing-room, Jean was wandering restlessly about, too excited to keep still for one moment. She wore the simplest of her gowns, but one which Farr had once told her he liked. Jean was almost without vanity, but to-night, as she passed the long mirror over the mantel, she could not refrain from glancing therein. She was counting the slow-footed moments, and at every turn her eyes consulted the old Dutch clock in the corner. At last a carriage drove up the graveled road, there were steps upon the veranda, and the front door opened and closed again. She longed to run out into the hall, but an overwhelming shyness deterred her; and even as she halted, irresolute, the portières were pushed apart, and, as in a dream, she saw Farr coming toward her. Her heart beat so she could not trust her voice to speak him greeting.

He caught both her hands in his, and held them closely.

"Jean, do you know how glad I am to see you again?" he whispered. 147

Slowly she raised her eyes to meet his. The depth of her emotion paled her cheek, and her young face wore a look of awe. Farr's heart bounded with joy, and he would have spoken, but suddenly she flushed crimson and, wrenching her hands from his, started forward to meet Dudley, who stood in the doorway, uncertain whether to advance or beat a retreat. Jean covered her embarrassment as best she could; although Dudley tried valiantly to put her at her ease, there was a merry twinkle in his blue eyes which she found very disconcerting. At that moment Helen and Nathalie made their entrance, and Jean moved a little apart from the others, struggling to regain her self-possession.

Farr had turned to appeal to her for confirmation of some statement when a sudden lull fell upon the buzz of conversation. Miss Stuart stood in the doorway, her brilliant figure strikingly set against the dark background of the dimly lighted hall-way. She surveyed them for a brief instant with apparent nonchalance, but that brief glance told her that it was with Jean that Farr was talking. With slow grace she crossed the room and gained Helen's side.

Farr's eyes followed Jean's, and as they reached Miss Stuart his expression underwent a sudden change. She was looking directly at him, and smiled faintly at the dismay in his face.

"Well, Mr. Farr, is it so great a surprise to you to see such an old friend in Hetherford?"

Farr recovered himself, instantly, and met her challenging glance with an impenetrable smile.

"It is, indeed, an unexpected pleasure, Miss Stuart," he said with grave courtesy, and Miss Stuart 148
was conscious of feeling curiously baffled.

To Jean, watching them with dilating eyes, that apparently meaningless incident seemed fraught with significance. All the haunting doubts and fears, that not twelve hours ago she had scorned as morbid fancies, returned upon her with redoubled force. Love, which makes us strangely blind, makes us also strangely alert; and Jean's eyes had seen the change in Farr's face, and as he spoke those few conventional words, her quick ears had detected an unnatural ring in his voice.

Miss Stuart had called herself an old friend, and yet Farr had never spoken of her. Jean searched her memory to see if it were possible that she had never mentioned Miss Stuart's name to him, and, as she thus pondered, a chance sentence of Nathalie's reached her:

"You go through the shrubbery——"

She heard no more. In an instant the scene was clear before her—the long stretch of lawn beyond the shrubbery, bright in the silver moonlight, the sound of voices from the parsonage, breaking softly upon the evening stillness, through which Farr and she walked slowly side by side. Then she had spoken of Miss Stuart, and he had certainly disclaimed any acquaintance with her. Her heart grew cold as her first doubt of her lover found lodgment there. As if in consummation of her thoughts, she looked up to see Farr offer Miss Stuart his arm. With a sense of foreboding she followed them slowly into the dining room, smiling a little drearily as she remembered with what eagerness she had anticipated this dinner. 149

Farr's place at table was between Miss Stuart and Jean, and as they took their seats, he spoke to the latter in a carefully lowered tone:

"You can't imagine how delightful it is to be here again. I was absolutely homesick for the manor while I was away."

"Indeed? How unhappy you must have been."

"I was," he replied gravely, observing for the first time the girl's air of disdain, and wondering at the cause thereof, "and I shall have a new cause for sorrow if you look at me as you are now doing."

Jean's levity was somewhat forced as she replied:

"I am very sorry you are not pleased. I do not find it easy to change my expression."

"No?" He bent a very direct and earnest gaze upon her. "Why, Miss Jean," he said softly, "I thought we were friends when I went away; and only to-night you seemed glad at my return."

The last spark of resentment died out of Jean's heart. Her distrust of him seemed suddenly both groundless and foolish. Ashamed and contrite, she was about to speak, when Miss Stuart's suave voice broke in upon them:

"Mr. Farr, have you heard anything of the Saunders since you left Washington?"

Farr had no alternative but to reply to so direct a question, and Jean, although annoyed at the unwelcome interruption, waited patiently, confident that he would seize upon the first opportunity to resume his conversation with her. As the moments passed, however, and his undivided attention was still given to Miss Stuart, she was first hurt, and then bitterly angry. A 150
lump rose in her throat, and for one miserable moment she thought she was going to cry; then her pride came to her rescue, and under an almost reckless gayety of speech and manner she hid her momentary weakness. It was unjust and unreasonable to blame Farr, but Jean was in no frame of mind for logical argument. He had turned away from her to speak to Miss Stuart, and although she had given him ample time to take up the broken thread of their discourse, he had failed to do so. As she talked on excitedly with Dudley, her cheeks burning, her eyes dark and restless, she was mentally comparing herself with Miss Stuart, whom she had already almost unconsciously begun to regard as her rival. She had always known that Helen's friend was beautiful, but to-night her newly awakened jealousy caused her to lay great stress on the brilliancy and fascination of their guest. She recalled, with curious distinctness, the image of herself which the mirror had shown her while she awaited Farr's coming, and her heart contracted as she thought how colorless she must appear in contrast with Miss Stuart's rich and vivid beauty.

When at length Farr was once more at liberty to address her, she had worked herself up to such a pitch of miserable jealousy that she would have none of him, and took an almost savage delight in thwarting his every attempt at speech with her. He was too reserved to let her see how deeply he was wounded by her flippancy and incivility, and, in his apparent indifference, Jean found an added proof of his disloyalty and of her own unpardonable folly. She had almost come to the end 151
of her courage, when Helen rose, giving the signal to the ladies to withdraw.

Helen sat down before the open piano, and Nathalie picked up her mandolin from the music stand and began to tune it. When she had finished she spoke in a low tone to her sister:

"Let's play Guy's old favorite, will you, dear?"

Helen complied, but not before she had cast a half-guilty glance across the room to where Miss Stuart was gracefully reclining in a huge armchair, to satisfy herself that the mention of her lover's name had escaped her friend's notice. The piano took up the accompanying strains of a soft *andante*, the mandolin carrying the air with its tremulous and strangely human wail.

Jean leaned her face on her hand as she nestled down among the cushions on the divan. Her good angel was whispering to her in the sweet harmony of the music, and gentler thoughts of her lover were prevailing against the cruel doubts of him which her jealousy had taught her. After all, had not Miss Stuart been chiefly at fault, and had he not honestly striven to make amends?

"It is entirely the result of my morbid dislike of that girl," she said to herself; and when the

officers came out from the dining room, she gave Farr a bright glance of welcome, and when he had joined her, she talked to him until her persistent gentleness had completely melted away the barrier of reserve which had crept between them. Once or twice it was on the tip of her tongue to say, "Why did you never tell me that you knew Miss Stuart?" but the words, held back by a foolish sentiment of pride, never passed her lips. 152

Meanwhile Farr, although touched by the sweet friendliness, was more disheartened than he quite cared to own. He had allowed his hope to grow too quickly, founded on that one honest glance from Jean's eyes, a glance so full of love and trust that he had felt he could not be deceived. Scarcely had he told himself that his happiness was assured when Jean's coldness had denied the love which her eyes had bespoken. No suspicion of the truth had crossed his mind, and as Jean had never been given to moods, he was left to the discouraging conclusion that he had been too hasty and that she was resenting it. She was willing now to treat him with her old-time cordial frankness, for having once clearly defined their relative positions, she was too courteous to continue a course of treatment which she must have seen had greatly pained him. Never until he had reached this unhappy decision had he realized how strong and deep-rooted was his love for Jean. As his eyes rested on her, a longing seized him to take her in his arms, and to bring back to her face that look which had given him such promise of joy.

His unexpected meeting with Miss Stuart had brought back to his memory the foolish impetuosity, the passionate unrest of his boyish love for her, and he thanked God for the wholesome lesson he had learned, and prayed earnestly for the love of this young girl, whose truth and sincerity stirred all the dormant possibilities of his higher nature. With these thoughts in his mind his eyes wandered across the room to where Lillian Stuart sat talking with Dudley. He acknowledged the force and charm of her rare exotic beauty, but it moved him not at all. Her effective pose was studied and artificial. Her face, so perfect in contour, was lacking in any suggestion of tender womanliness, and her glorious eyes, now raised to Dudley's, although full of the power of expression, revealed no depth of soul. 153

It was refreshing to him to turn once more to Jean, to meet the dear laughter-loving eyes, to watch the fleeting changes of expression on her bonny face, to mark the unconscious grace of every movement of her lithe, slender figure. Yet, the secret of Jean's strong hold on his heart lay not in these superficial attractions, nor in her frank simplicity of manner, nor yet in her girlish freshness, which was her greatest claim to beauty, but in the knowledge he had gained of her true nature; a nature so honest, so unfailing in loyalty, so unselfish, so charitable, so responsive in its sympathies, that both respect and reverence were blended with his love for her. And yet he was not wholly blind to her faults. He knew that she was impatient and hot-tempered, and that, in anger, she was often sarcastic and cutting; but he also saw that she made a brave effort to hold herself in check, and that, however she might be worsted, she never ceased to struggle for the mastery. His meditations had carried him far adrift of the conversation, but although Jean had observed his abstraction, she did not resent it. She was living in a day-dream herself, a dream that was all the happier for that miserable hour at the dinner-table. She rose with a regretful sigh when Helen asked her to go up with a message to Aunt Helen. She looked up at Farr as he held back the portière for her to pass, and impulsively put out her hand to him. 154

"We are friends again, are we not?" she asked scarcely above her breath.

Farr gripped the little hand so tightly it almost hurt her.

"Only friends, Jean?" was all he said; but Jean was satisfied.

Aunt Helen detained her for some few moments with questions about the dinner, and when at last she was free Mary called to her to please step into the nursery, for Larry was wakeful and naughty and would not be quiet. Quite a half-hour had passed before she re-entered the drawing-room.

She paused on the threshold, attracted by Farr's voice. He was seated just within the doorway. His back was turned toward her and he faced Miss Stuart, who was leaning slightly forward in her chair.

"You are mistaken," he was saying. "I remember everything about that evening, to the color of the gown you wore."

Before the conclusion of this sentence Miss Stuart had detected Jean, half hidden by the heavy portière.

"Those were pleasant days in Washington, Val," she said, accompanying the words with a faint sigh.

Jean, never dreaming that she had been seen, retreated precipitately to a far corner of the hall, and when she once more entered the room her face was pale, but she held her head well up, and with a low "I beg your pardon," swept by the two, who still maintained their positions. 155

That night Miss Stuart's light burned until a late hour, and in response to Helen's gentle inquiry as to the cause thereof she gave through the closed door, but a curt "Good-night." 156

# CHAPTER XIII.

# AN INVITATION.

Wednesday brought the return of the *Sylph* from her cruise. The men, tanned and burned by exposure to wind and sun, were in great spirits, and declared themselves ready for any sport that might be suggested. The girls rallied forces, and in solemn conclave bade them extend their vacation one more week, that Miss Stuart might be amused and entertained. They drew a pathetic picture of her first week in Hetherford, and maintained that it would be rank disloyalty to allow her to go away with such an impression of the beloved place.

In the confusion of tongues two voices were silent. Emily and Jean each had her own reason for wishing Miss Stuart a thousand miles away, and both looked a little contemptuous at the excitement that was being made over her. However, their lack of interest did not dampen the enthusiasm of the others, and the day was carried. The men did not need a great deal of urging, for they had already met Miss Stuart, and were eloquent in their praises of her. Dick Andrews succumbed at once to the tender passion, much to everybody's amusement, for jolly Dick in the rôle of lovesick swain was a most diverting spectacle.

Andrews did not have it all his own way, however, for Miss Stuart, with an exception in Farr's 157
favor, treated them quite impartially. It was conceded that Farr, as an old friend, had a prior right, and no one marveled that Miss Stuart's manner toward him was particularly gracious and amiable. They were much in each other's society, and so diplomatic was Miss Stuart, that no one discerned that their frequent *tête-à-têtes* were invariably of her planning.

It must be said, however, that Farr made no resistance and appeared eminently at ease with her. He was sorely wounded, and as angry with Jean as it was possible for him to be; and in this dejected and unenviable frame of mind, he took small heed of what he did with his time. Monday night when, at Helen's request, Jean had left the drawing-room, she had distinctly bade him hope. One hour later, she had again veered round and had treated him with a contemptuous indifference which he felt he had in no way deserved. Even then he had tried to believe that his imagination was at fault, but when she had purposely overlooked the hand which he had extended to her in parting, he could no longer deceive himself. Unfortunately, Miss Stuart had seen the slight which Jean had put upon him, and the faint smile of amusement in her eyes when she had said, "good-night" to him but deepened the sting. In a tempest of rage he flung himself out of the house and strode furiously down the avenue, leaving poor Dudley far behind, to wonder what on earth was the matter.

It was not easy for Farr with his nature to forgive a repulse, and on Tuesday he kept to the 158
*Vortex*, nursing his wrongs, and vowing he would take no step to make matters right between them until Jean should show some sign of penitence. By Wednesday this determination was less firm, and during the hours of his work and leisure his heart was pleading for Jean. When evening came he gave up the struggle, and at nine o'clock presented himself at the manor.

The light that streamed out through the open door and windows revealed quite a number of people on the veranda, and he remembered that he had observed the *Sylph* riding at anchor in the harbor. They gave him a hearty welcome, and while Nathalie was rallying him for his unkind desertion of them, he vainly tried to discover Jean's whereabouts. His inability to do so was soon explained.

"Where did Jean go?" Nathalie asked.

Eleanor answered from the corner of the veranda:

"She went in the house a little while ago."

"Send Susie up for her, Nathalie," Helen requested.

Farr took a seat on the railing at a point which commanded a view of the hall; and found himself face to face with Miss Stuart, who was tilting slowly back and forth in a deep rocker. They had interchanged one or two commonplace remarks when a maid tripped across the hall and stood in the doorway.

"Miss Jean begs to be excused," she announced briefly, and disappeared into the darkened dining room beyond.

Farr drew a quick breath, and a frown contracted his brows. He could scarcely believe that he 159
had heard aright. With a characteristic gesture, he pulled his cap down over his eyes and set his teeth. Miss Stuart remembered the trick of old. She watched him furtively, with a curious light in her eyes. Suddenly he recalled her existence, but when he looked at her she had already averted her gaze and was apparently quite unconscious that anything of importance had taken place.

She gave him a few moments in which to recover himself, and then addressed to him some passing observation on a subject quite alien to Hetherford or the Hetherford girls. Farr, animated by a strong desire to hide his pain and disappointment from every eye, braced himself and replied in a vein of lightness which satisfied her that she had been wise in the course which she had adopted. They drifted quite naturally into conventional small-talk, and every moment he

gained more assurance and ease. He was positively grateful for Miss Stuart's presence, for it afforded him a refuge from intercourse with those simple-hearted Hetherford girls, which he felt would, just now, be very disastrous to his self-control. No thought of danger assailed him. He believed Miss Stuart's sentiment for him to be quite dead; and as for himself he had so completely outlived every trace of his boyish passion as to have even lost all feeling of resentment against her. He congratulated himself with true masculine density that he had probed the depths of Miss Stuart's nature, and could never be outwitted by her again. Some day, if things went well with him, he meant to tell Jean all about that affair; in fact, he would have done so Monday evening, had he not felt that it would scarcely be in good taste to discuss the subject with Miss Stuart almost within ear-shot. In the meantime it did not distress him in the least to defer the telling of the story; for Jean, of course, knew nothing whatever of the matter, and it was extremely improbable that Miss Stuart would ever take the pains to enlighten her. In justice to Farr it should be said that he had completely forgotten the incident of the shrubbery which had meant so much to Jean, and he was not aware of the words that she had overheard, and of the construction that she had not unnaturally put upon them. 160

And all this while poor little Jean lay on the sofa, in her darkened room, sobbing as if her heart would break. She had waited so patiently on Tuesday, hoping against hope that he would come and explain everything to her. For, of course, there was something to explain, else why had he so distinctly avoided all mention of Miss Stuart, even when she had asked him if he knew her?

"He has a right to his past," she said to herself, with quivering lips; "but, oh! if they were such old friends, if she calls him Val, if he remembers one evening with her even to the color of her gown, he might—oh! he might have remembered to speak of her to me."

The more she thought it over the greater seemed the proofs of his deception. If he and Miss Stuart had been old friends and nothing more, it would have been his natural impulse to speak of his surprise and pleasure at meeting her at the manor. He had failed to do so, and, with despair in her heart, Jean told herself that he must have had some strong reason for his silence. 161

Tuesday wore away, and still no word had come from him. She determined not to let Miss Stuart see how unhappy she was, so kept about with the others, and entered into all their plans with forced gayety. When half-past nine struck on Wednesday evening, she gave up all hope of seeing him, for they were very informal in Hetherford, and kept early hours. She went up to her room, and as she slipped on her wrapper, she fell to crying, and when Susie knocked and announced Farr, she was too disfigured by her tears to think of going down. The disappointment was very keen.

"Please excuse me, Susie," she called through the closed door. "I am sorry, but I am lying down."

As she heard the maid's retreating step she would fain have recalled her, and sent some other message, but it was too late.

The next day, on the decks of the *Sylph*, Farr and Jean met for the first time since Monday. Jean came aboard fully resolved to tender an apology for having excused herself on the previous evening. She had never lacked self-confidence before, but to-day she could scarcely pluck up courage to speak to him. Timidly she made her first friendly overtures, only to be met with an unmistakable rebuff. Farr answered the questions she put to him, but with a studied indifference which made her cheeks tingle; to make matters worse he presently sauntered off from the group of which Jean made one, and joined Miss Stuart, who was seated a short distance away. Jean's face grew hard as she stifled the sob which rose in her throat, and she registered a vow that never again would she give him an opportunity to treat her so slightingly. It was unmanly and unmannerly, and she had done with him forever. She did not flinch from the path she laid out for herself, and so successfully did she play the part that Dick and Mollie, walking home in the cool of the evening, declared that it was like the good old days to have Jean so jolly and full of fun. 162

Miss Stuart meanwhile was content to keep Farr at her side, despite the fact that he was a most morose and taciturn companion. She knew wherein lay her advantage, and although the knowledge was not flattering to her self-pride, it did not prevent her from making the best of her opportunities. It was galling to her that Jean had the power to make him so miserable, but the trouble between them served her purpose very well for the present. As she talked to him pleasantly, she did not seem to notice that his replies were monosyllabic, and that he watched Jean's every movement with gloomy eyes. She was a clever woman, with a rare gift of conversation, and ere long her tactful efforts were rewarded, and Farr, roused from his abstraction, shook himself out of his ill-humor. In the course of the day he made one or two attempts at a reconciliation with Jean, but as both she and Miss Stuart had concentrated their energies to prevent his accomplishing his purpose, he failed signally.

As day followed day, the breach between Jean and her lover was not healed, and no hand was stretched forth to stay its ever-widening limits. 163

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"Lillian!"

Miss Stuart laid down her book, and looked expectantly up at Helen.

"I have a suggestion to make for this afternoon. How would you like to drive over to Crescent

Beach to call on Mrs. Maynard?"

"I agree to the drive," replied Miss Stuart, stifling a yawn, "but why must we call on that stupid woman? She always bores me to death."

There was a ring of annoyance in Helen's voice as she answered:

"Oh, it is not at all necessary for you to go with me. One of my sisters would be delighted to do so."

"So much the better, my dear," said Miss Stuart indifferently, as she picked up her book and resumed her reading.

"Why are you so down on little Mrs. Maynard?" queried Wendell Churchill, emerging from a recess of the window where he and Nathalie had been whiling away the morning hours with mandolin and banjo.

"I am not down on her in the least, but I think she is uninteresting to a degree."

She paused until the portières had closed on Helen's retreating figure, and then met Churchill's eyes with a meaning smile.

"It is not surprising, is it, that her husband should find Mrs. Desborough a pleasing contrast?"

In her far-away corner hot-tempered Nathalie caught the words and flared up in defense of her friend: 164

"Oh, I think it is a shame to speak so. Mrs. Maynard is unhappy, but no woman ever bore unhappiness with greater dignity. It seems to me incredible that everybody's sympathies are not enlisted on her side."

"I am very unfortunate," returned Miss Stuart with thinly veiled sarcasm. "This is the second time I have erred in this way. I must be more careful in future not to give expression to my opinions."

Churchill saw that some unpleasantness was imminent, and, manlike, rushed in only to make matters worse.

"Don't you think Miss Nathalie looks very much like Mrs. Desborough? I have so often noticed the resemblance."

With blazing eyes, Nathalie started up from the low window-seat.

"From all I know of her, I cannot feel flattered by the compliment," and, with this parting shot, she thrust open the French windows and flew out on the veranda.

"Dear, dear," murmured Miss Stuart in mock dismay, "what a tempest in a teapot. Those girls are terribly spoiled, and it is all Helen's fault. She is unpardonably weak with them."

Churchill was very much embarrassed by the position in which he found himself. He extricated himself by muttering something barely intelligible, to the effect that the Lawrences were so much attached to each other, and then retreated hastily to find Nathalie and reinstate himself in her good graces. 165

When afternoon came Miss Stuart relented and she and Helen, with little Gladys between them, started off in the buckboard for Crescent Beach. It was a beautiful drive. For a short distance the road wound through fragrant meadows and wooded lanes until it came out upon the beach, where for several miles it led straight away over the hardened sands. They bowled swiftly along, the fresh salt wind blowing in their faces, the soothing sound of the ebb and flow of the restless waters breaking softly on their ears.

Miss Stuart, exhilarated by the clear air, the brilliant sunshine and the congenial companionship of this friend whom she really loved, had never appeared to a greater advantage. It was the Lillian Stuart who might have been whose cleverness and glancing wit held Helen's mind enthralled, as they talked of all the subjects dear to women's hearts. All too soon they reached their destination. As they drew up under the *porte-cochère* of the hotel, Helen found herself wishing with all her heart that Lillian might continue in so charming a mood.

Presently Mrs. Maynard joined them in the vast hotel parlor, and as Miss Stuart went forward to greet her with great cordiality, Helen had no fault to find with her manner. They chatted together for some few moments when Miss Stuart recognized some friends of hers in a party of people who had wandered in from the piazza. She excused herself, and as she joined them Mrs. Maynard turned to Helen.

"Don't you want to come up to my room for a few moments, Helen? I am sure that Dorothy would be very glad to see Gladys." 166

The child jumped instantly down from her chair, her chubby face beaming with eager anticipation.

"Gladys has accepted for me," said Helen with an amused smile, and the two made their way upstairs.

"What a lovely view you have!" exclaimed Helen as she dropped into a chair near the open

window.

"It is pretty," Mrs. Maynard assented, pushing open a door which led into the next room.

A beautiful little child sat in the middle of the floor, hugging a big woolly lamb close to her heart.

"Dorothy, will you please come here, and speak to little Gladys Lawrence, who has come to see you?"

At her mother's bidding, Dorothy struggled to her feet, and clutching the lamb tightly in both hands, ran toward the open door. Then she caught sight of Helen, and the big violet eyes were swiftly veiled, and the little head with its tangled mass of golden curls was hidden in the folds of her mother's skirt. Mrs. Maynard smiled in gentle reproof as she lifted the child's face.

"What a baby, darling! Please be a good little girl and say 'how-do-you-do' to Gladys."

Dorothy still hung back, clinging fast to her mother's hand; but Gladys, who was the most friendly little creature in the world, soon succeeded in overcoming her shyness. Presently they were chattering together as happily as possible, and Dorothy went so far as to produce her box of paper dolls and to dress them for Gladys' benefit.

Mrs. Maynard's face lighted up with sympathetic interest as Helen gave her a graphic account of the week's gayeties. She had known Miss Stuart for several years, and could well understand Helen's desire to make her visit enjoyable. Miss Stuart, bored, might be a very difficult companion. 167

"I am so glad for you, Helen, dear, that you have had such pleasant times. I wish you would let me feel that I had contributed in a small way toward helping you to entertain Miss Stuart, and, if you would enjoy it, I would love to have you all come over here for the dance on Saturday evening. I believe they are to have very good music, and we will arrange to have a pleasant little supper together. My husband will be here, and I expect Mr. and Mrs. Endicott, whom you may remember."

"Yes, indeed, I do, and I know that I can accept for all of us. It will be moonlight, so the drive over will be delightful."

On the way home little else was talked of between the girls but the prospective dance. Miss Stuart expressed herself as very much pleased with the idea, and the plan having received the sanction of her approval, Helen forthwith determined that every arrangement should be as perfect as her careful forethought could make it.

When they reached the manor, the girls were having tea on the upper porch. They joined them at once, and the question of the dance was laid before them.

"Glorious!" exclaimed Nathalie, ecstatically, and her verdict was loudly echoed by the others.

Helen drew a chair up close to the tea-table over which Jean was presiding, and pulling off her gloves smoothed them out on her knee with the palm of her hand. 168

"I want to consult you in regard to the drive, Jeanie," she said in a lowered tone.

Jean nodded, and leaned across her, to hand a cup of tea to Miss Stuart.

"Nathalie," said Helen, "please give Lillian some of that hot toast."

"Toast and jam!" exclaimed Nan in accents of scorn, as she helped herself generously to both. "What sordid considerations, when there is a *bona fide* ball in view."

"Leave a slice for me, Nancy," laughed Eleanor. "I must fortify myself if you are going to wax eloquent."

"Stop your nonsense, girls," and Nathalie waved an imperious hand at them. "The question is, how shall we drive over?"

Jean turned to Helen.

"If it is a fine night we might go in the wagonette."

"Why, Jean, it would not begin to hold us all," interposed Emily. "There are fourteen of us, counting the men from the *Vortex*."

"I did not include them," Jean replied quietly.

Miss Stuart stared curiously at her over the edge of her teacup.

"It seems to me that a dance without men is rather a tame affair, and I don't imagine the hotel will yield a very plentiful supply."

Jean lifted her chin defiantly. 169

"I was not speaking of the dance but of the drive over."

"Well, that is perfectly absurd," Emily broke in. "The idea of our going over in one conveyance, and those poor men in another. What are you thinking of, Jean?"

Miss Stuart laughed softly, while Jean vouchsafed never a word.

A glance of intelligence was flashed from Nan to Eleanor, and Nan spoke up in good-natured raillery.

"Em, dear, have you ever heard that 'enough is as good as a feast.' Jean probably remembered that it it is fully twelve miles there and back and felt some qualms for fear her conversational ability would desert her."

The laugh was general, for it was a joke of long standing that Jean could talk to anyone, at any time, and under any circumstances, however trying.

Helen looked from one to the other with puzzled eyes. She had an uncomfortable consciousness that there was something in the air which she did not understand. She put an end to the discussion with quiet decision.

"There will be quite time enough to talk this over later. We must wait and see how the weather turns out. Now, suppose we go downstairs and have some music before we break up."

Later that evening she opened the subject again to Miss Stuart.

"I will tell you what I have decided, Lillian. We will hire the Hetherford stage and all go over in that." 170

And Miss Stuart answered, with a tinge of triumph in her voice:

"That is certainly a most sensible plan, my dear."

So it was settled. Jean accepted the decision without a protest. Deep in her heart she still cherished a strong hope that the misunderstandings between Farr and herself might one day be cleared away. She had acted contrary to her own wishes in excluding him from the drive to Crescent Beach, and she admitted to herself, shamefacedly, that she was glad the matter had been taken out of her hands. 171

# CHAPTER XIV.

# A DANCE AT CRESCENT BEACH.

A very merry party of people assembled at the manor on Saturday evening. Nathalie flitted about among them with dancing feet and shining eyes, and one and all caught the spirit of her contagious enthusiasm.

"Oh, what a lark it is," she cried. "It is full moon to-night, and everything has gone right from beginning to end."

"The end is not yet, Miss Nathalie," Farr said to her with a faint smile.

She shrugged her shoulders and laughed light-heartedly.

"Don't be cynical. It is a bad habit."

"The moon is rising," interposed Jean, turning about from the open doorway. "It is too lovely to stay indoors."

A hush fell upon them as they followed her out upon the veranda. Sentences left unfinished, gay laughter checked on the lips, paid tribute to the impressive beauty of the scene. Far away in the east the moon, with slow and stately grace, lifted its splendor above the dark line of the horizon. Against its flaming glory were sharply defined the somber trunks of sturdy oaks and spreading elms. Seen between their leafy branches lay the Sound, obscured a moment since by an impenetrable veil of darkness, but reflecting now on its rippling surface the golden light of the rising orb. The night air pulsed with the cheery chirp of the cricket, the monotonous chant of the katy-did. Softly the south wind blew rustling among the trees and shrubs. 172

Nathalie was the first to speak. Her quick ear had caught the sound of wheels.

"Here comes the stage at last. Do let us get off right away."

"Is everyone here?" queried Mrs. Andrews, looking around on the bevy of pretty girls with a smile of complacent satisfaction.

"Everyone but Lillian," Helen answered. "We may as well begin to take our places. She will be down in a few moments."

Already the stage had backed up before the door, and Jean was among the first to run lightly down the broad flight of steps. Farr stood at the foot, and as he held out his hand to assist her, she saw that he was regarding her sadly. There was no time for words, the others were flocking down the steps behind them. She turned her eyes to meet his with a plaintive, almost appealing smile. She thought they must have spoken for her, for ere he released her hand he gave it a quick pressure.

It was some few moments before Miss Stuart made her appearance. She descended the steps slowly, with no suggestion of haste. Farr held open the door for her to enter.

"Come up here by me, Lillian," Helen called to her from the other end of the stage, but she did not seem to hear the request, and slipped into a seat near the door. 173

Farr sprang lightly in, but as he would have passed her she laid a detaining hand on his arm.

"There is plenty of room here," she said, indicating the place beside her, and he had no alternative but to take it.

The other men crowded past them, and as the stage lurched forward, Cliff Archer dropped into a seat between Jean and Eleanor.

"A great deal of strength is wasted in undue haste," he observed lazily. "I find that laggards invariably prosper."

"What heresy, Cliff," laughed Eleanor softly, with an expressive glance in Miss Stuart's direction.

Cliff appealed to Jean.

"Can you imagine anything more barefaced than that attempt to extort a compliment. From a sheer sense of duty I feel compelled to disappoint her."

He stopped abruptly, struck by the expression of Jean's face. She had evidently not heard his words, for she was staring straight before her with strained, unseeing eyes. Her mouth was compressed with a look of suffering in the lines. Cliff was very fond of Jean. He knew her better than the other girls, for she and Eleanor were such fast friends. He did not stop to ponder on the cause of her unhappiness, but hastily resolved to shield her if possible. Eleanor leaned forward to speak to her across him, but he brought his slender figure between them.

"You can talk to Jean all day, and every day. It is my turn to-night, my dear, and I intend to monopolize you to my heart's content." 174

When Cliff spoke in that tone Eleanor knew there was no appeal to be made, so she yielded the point at once with very good grace.

As the stage jolted lumberingly on its way, Jean saw nothing of the beauty of the night, heard nothing of the merry laughter, the gay snatches of song which reverberated around her. It was, perhaps, a trifling circumstance that Farr had seated himself quite at the other end of the stage, and at Miss Stuart's side, but to Jean, in her unhappy state of mind, it meant a great deal. To her the interchange of glances a few moments since had been tantamount to a truce between them. She had been so sure that Farr would make an effort to secure a place beside her that she had purposely crowded up in the corner, leaving a space for him between Eleanor and herself. Her humiliation was poignant, complete. The wound to vanity was beneficial in its effect, rousing all her self-respect, and determining her to hide the truth from Farr at all hazards.

"I must be brave," she said to herself resolutely. "I must let him see that I am happy and light-hearted," and she closed her lips firmly to still their quivering. She was quite mistress of herself by the time the hotel was reached.

The Maynards, with their friends the Endicotts, awaited them on the brilliantly lighted veranda, and as they descended from the stage with merry jest and laughter, Maynard left his wife's side and ran down the steps to welcome them. He was a good-looking man, with a particularly charming and cordial manner. He had never given much thought to the Hetherford girls; in his mind he stigmatized them as provincial and uninteresting; but to-night, as Jean, standing in the full glare of the hotel office, unwound the scarf from around her neck, and flung back her wrap, an exclamation of surprise rose to his lips. 175

Jean was, indeed, looking very lovely. There were faint shadows under the deep blue eyes, the sweet mouth drooped slightly, lending new beauty and depth of expression to her face. Maynard hastened to offer her his arm, and they moved slowly down the long hall to the entrance of the ball-room. The music had just begun when Farr's voice fell on Jean's ears. At his first words she turned a startled face toward him:

"Miss Lawrence, I believe this is our dance. Sorry to deprive you, Maynard," and before Jean could recover from her astonishment, Maynard had bowed himself away and Farr was smiling gravely down at her.

"Please don't be angry, Miss Jean. 'Nothing venture nothing have,' you know, and I have had so little lately."

Jean looked up at him helplessly at a loss for an answer.

"I want the waltz very much," he added in a tone of pleading.

She laughed a bit unsteadily.

"Why, of course, I will dance with you, although I must confess your mode of asking me is very strange." 176

"'All is fair in——' Which is it, Jean?" he asked softly as they fell into the measure of the waltz.

She dropped her eyes, glad that at present no reply was required of her. When the last strain had died away, Farr drew her hand through his arm, and they threaded their way among the crowd out into the cool hall-way.

"Is this your wrap?" he queried, selecting one from the number that were thrown across a chair. "Now let us go outside for a little stroll."

They made their way out on to the little veranda, which on this side of the hotel was built on a ledge of rocks, and overhung the waters of Crescent Bay. Avoiding the rank and file of dancers, who were now promenading slowly up and down, they crossed to the railing and stood there gazing silently before them. In the harbor below myriads of boats lay at anchor, all gayly decorated in honor of the occasion. Further out the moon's bright radiance fell softly on the tremulous waves, and across its golden sheen a white-winged yacht sped silently on its way.

By and by, Jean roused herself with a slight effort:

"What Philistinism it is to illuminate the veranda with those ugly lanterns. Their flaring light quite spoils the effect of the moonlight."

Her poor little commonplace attempt to open the conversation met with disastrous failure. Farr muttered inattentively "Yes, indeed," and relapsed into silence again.

In the long pause that ensued the monotonous splash of the waves against the rocks below sounded deliciously cool and refreshing. A rowboat shot out from the pier, skimming the darkened waters under the lea of the shore. 177

Farr drew nearer to Jean and spoke with deep earnestness:

"We cannot take up the thread of the past, Miss Jean, with this constraint between us, but I am not willing to let it go without an attempt at an explanation. Will you not tell me what I have done to have forfeited your friendship?"

Jean's head was bent, her few words of dissent almost inaudible. Farr interrupted her in a voice that was both pained and stern.

"Please don't deny it. I cannot have forfeited the right to your honesty. Did I presume too much on your great kindness to me, Jean?"

"No, oh no!" she cried hastily, with a little break in her voice. "Indeed you must not think that."

A man's step approached them, and stopped at Jean's side.

"Miss Lawrence," Maynard's voice said, "the next waltz is ours. Shall I find you here?"

"Why, certainly," she replied with a forced laugh. "I shall not vanish."

"I wanted to assure myself of the pleasure. One is easily lost among all these people," he answered lightly, as he turned away.

Farr's face darkened.

"What right has Maynard to monopolize you?" he demanded savagely. "He is a married man, and not a man——"

It was an unwise speech, and he broke off abruptly convicted of his folly by the expression in Jean's unflinching eyes. 178

"You forget that Mr. Maynard is our host, Mr. Farr," she said coldly.

After a moment she added more gently:

"I did not want you to say anything that you would regret. I should be sorry to hear you speak ill of a friend. It is not like you."

The simple words touched Farr, and made him feel ashamed of himself.

"I beg your pardon," he said contritely. "I was a brute to speak so. The truth is, I am not myself, and have not been during the whole of this miserable week. I seem never to have the chance to speak with you, and I have tortured myself with the thought that it has been your deliberate purpose to avoid me."

The opening bars of the waltz, and Maynard's approach, cut short his words. Slowly the trio forced their way through the moving crowd until they had gained the entrance to the ball-room. Farr stood listlessly in the doorway as Maynard whirled Jean away from him across the polished floor. Some minutes later, someone touched his elbow and he turned with a start to meet Miss Stuart's eyes:

"Val, let us dance together 'for auld lang syne.'"

"With pleasure," he assented abstractedly, for as she spoke he had caught a glimpse of Jean disappearing through one of the long windows which gave on the veranda. Miss Stuart's glance followed his, and her eyes flashed. The carelessness of his reply hurt her cruelly.

"I will make Jean suffer for this," she vowed, as with throbbing heart she took her place among 179
the dancers.

Later, as they passed through the doorway, they encountered Jean and Maynard re-entering the room. Miss Stuart first caught sight of them. She raised her glorious eyes to her companion's face, and spoke in a voice carefully pitched to reach Jean's ears:

"Yes, indeed, Val, it is pleasant to dance together again. It brings back those bygone happy days so forcibly."

They were abreast of the other couple now, and Farr halted. Miss Stuart's speech had quite escaped him, absorbed as he was in watching Jean, so he was entirely unprepared for her reception of him. As he spoke her name she flashed a light impenetrable smile at him, and then deliberately turned away, and he heard her say gayly to the man at her side:

"Mr. Maynard, that waltz is divine. Don't let us miss another bar of it."

And Maynard answered softly:

"Your wish is my law, Miss Jean."

Then the crowd surged between them, and with a somewhat unreasonable bitterness in his heart Farr blindly followed Miss Stuart to a secluded corner of the veranda. Jean's treatment of him was inexplicable. It seemed so much easier for things to go wrong than right that he felt it was well-nigh useless to struggle against the inevitable. Disappointed and dispirited he paid but small heed to his beautiful companion, who was exerting her rare tact and diplomacy to please and divert him.

In the ensuing hour, Jean, all unsuspecting of the truth, was amply avenged. Never before had it 180
come home to Lillian Stuart, with such convincing force, that against Farr's love for this young girl she was utterly powerless. In vain love taught her a new unselfishness, a womanly gentleness quite strange to her; in vain did she crush down the rising storm of jealousy within her breast. Farr saw none of these things, cared for her not at all. He sought her society because she made so few demands upon him and accepted his varying moods unquestioningly. If he thought on the subject at all he explained her kindness to him by the fact that he was possibly more in touch with her world than anyone else in Hetherford. The subtle charm of her personality which she had ever found so potent was quite lost on this man whose love she had once possessed, and had valued so lightly. Hope was dead in her heart, but one weapon of revenge—Jean's evident jealousy—lay within her grasp, and this she wielded with unerring skill.

The music ceased, and soon the veranda was invaded by a host of flushed and heated dancers, and among their number Jean, with Maynard still at her side. There was a new elasticity in her step, a new light in her eyes, and she was flirting quite openly and markedly with her companion. As the stream bore them past Farr and Miss Stuart she did not apparently observe them, withdrawn as they were into the corner, and falling out of the line of people, selected seats at a short distance from them.

Maynard, to whom a pretty woman was always irresistible, was carried away by the girl's
*insouciance*, and fascination. He was the more delighted because so completely taken by 181
surprise. He had pictured Jean always as a little puritan who would look upon a flirtation as the height of immorality, but to-night the little puritan had suddenly blossomed out in a totally unexpected and charming character. He was not a little flattered by her evident willingness to linger on in this quiet spot with him when the crowd had once more sought the ball-room, and into his manner he infused an added warmth of interest.

Poor Jean, however, was invulnerable. She had never liked Mr. Maynard, although she had been forced to admit that he was charming, and agreeable as an acquaintance. The Hetherford girls were one and all too sincerely fond of Mrs. Maynard to have much patience with the man who could flagrantly neglect so sweet and lovely a wife. It had been an unwritten code of honor among them to treat him with polite indifference, and to promptly snub any attempt on his part to break down the barrier of reserve behind which they had entrenched themselves. Under ordinary circumstances Jean would have despised herself for the course she was now pursuing, but to-night the poor child was too utterly miserably to care what she did, or what became of her. She laughed and flirted recklessly with this man, of whom she strongly disapproved, to quell the ache at her heart, and when the remedy failed she but laughed and flirted the more. It was selfish, unworthy; but Jean was unversed in suffering, and seized upon the means within reach to enable her to cover up her pain and jealousy. Something of the same impulse that influenced Farr
with Miss Stuart prompted her to keep this man at her side. Those old friends knew her too well, 182
had seen too much of her with Farr, not to have their suspicions aroused by her feverish and exaggerated gayety.

At last the evening was over, and they stood in the hotel office, awaiting the arrival of the stage. Jean was somewhat apart from the others, with Maynard bending over her and talking to her in lowered tones.

Her little foot tapped the floor nervously, her cheeks burned hotly, and one unsteady little hand

waved a big fan to and fro. Her courage was rapidly forsaking her, and she rallied all her strength in one last effort to appear naturally gay and at ease. She felt she must not break down now with Farr only a few paces away, for, although she never raised her eyes, yet she knew he was watching her.

As pretty little Mrs. Maynard moved about among her guests, speaking to them in her softly modulated voice, she bent a glance of anxious intentness upon Jean. She was far too inured to her husband's indifference to be deeply hurt by this new flirtation carried on before her very eyes, but this new phase in Jean's character puzzled her. But her own sad experience had quickened her intuition of others' unhappiness, and so it was that in her gentle heart there was more of commiseration than anger.

Her thoughts were interrupted by Dick's announcement that the stage was at the door. When Jean came to bid her good-night she looked into the strained, pathetic eyes with compassionate tenderness, and a sudden impulse made her lean forward and kiss the girl lovingly. 183

Once more the old stage rumbled over the road between Hetherford and Crescent Beach. The wind had veered a point to the east, and blew damp and chill, driving before it a mist of clouds across the sky, obscuring the moon's bright light. The sudden change in the atmosphere was felt by everybody, and the conversation was spasmodic, broken by long intervals of silence. Jean, very white and still now that the tension was relaxed, shrank back into her corner clinging fast to Eleanor's hand. In a further corner Farr sat at Helen's side, silent during the whole of the long drive. 184

# CHAPTER XV.

# HELEN IS PUZZLED.

Miss Stuart's visit was drawing to a close, and Nan was giving a luncheon in her honor. The little parlor of the parsonage was redolent with the fragrance of roses and mignonette, which were massed in every vase and bowl, and the arrangement of the simple, old-fashioned furniture bore evidence of Nan's artistic taste. A few good etchings and a half-dozen rare old prints adorned the walls, and scattered about on the low mantel were several valuable bits of *vertu*.

Nan stood in the center of the room, and received her guests with outstretched hand and beaming face.

"Now, I call this delightful," she said cheerily, as she shook hands with Miss Stuart. "Even father has gone away for the day, so we are a typical Hetherford party—all girls and no men. Em said you would be bored to death," she rattled on in a confidential undertone, "but for once in a way I thought you might find it amusing to have plenty of your own sex. It is no novelty to us, as Em will tell you with a face as long as the moral code."

"I think it is charming," Miss Stuart affirmed, with a greater regard for amiability than for truth.

Nan smiled mischievously.

"Confess it is dull." 185

"Indeed it is not, Miss Nan. The imp of dullness would never dare to show his surly face in your presence."

"Ah, you do not know," and Nan shook her head in laughing protest. "Drop in here any Sunday between church-time and dinner, and you will find us boon companions."

The door into the dining-room was opened, and a grim-visaged woman in a starched calico gown of uncompromising stiffness appeared on the threshold. For a moment she eyed Nan threateningly, and then announced:

"Your lunch is on the table," and added, as she faced about and marched back into the dining room, "and it's getting cold."

Nan, in no wise disconcerted, turned a wry face toward her guests:

"Biddy and I had one of our most deadly affrays just before you arrived, so don't be surprised at anything she may give us for luncheon. I tried, for your sakes, to keep my temper until later in the day, but it wouldn't be kept."

"It never will," sighed Emily ruefully, in the midst of the general laugh.

Nan ushered them into the dining room:

"Miss Stuart, will you sit here on my right? Girls, take any places you want."

"You needn't have worried about luncheon, Nan. These biscuits are simply delicious," observed Helen, consolingly, as Bridget vanished into the kitchen. "Biddy is far too proud of her skill to disgrace you." 186

"Oh, she would not mind me," laughed Nan airily. "Nothing would restrain her but her sense of importance, and her undying jealousy of your cook."

"What a glorious time we had at the dance," Emily remarked irrelevantly. "It was about the most successful thing we have done this summer. It has made such a difference having the *Vortex* here, hasn't it, Jean?"

Jean, thus addressed, changed color rapidly, and then was furious with herself, for she caught Miss Stuart's eyes fixed on her with insolent directness.

"Oh, bother the *Vortex*," cried Mollie petulantly. "Don't let us talk about men. There are dozens of subjects more interesting."

"We will make it 'man,' and talk of Dick. Eh, Mollie?" and Nathalie laughed provokingly.

"We couldn't do better," responded Mollie imperturbably. "Dick is lovely, is he not, Miss Stuart?"

Miss Stuart flung back her head with a merry laugh; no whit embarrassed by the naïve question. Dick had been her shadow for the past week, and was sighing and pining like the most approved of lovers, yet she answered with a nonchalance which Nathalie would have given worlds to acquire.

"He is truly charming, Miss Mollie. I quite share your enthusiasm."

Then she dropped out of the conversation, listening with languid interest to the topics which the others fell to discussing with much animation. Their views of life differed materially from her own; their complete unworldliness called a half-contemptuous smile to her lips, and yet there was 187 awakened within her a shadowy feeling of regret. She had lived a purely pleasure-loving life, without a thought beyond her own advancement along the line of her ambitions. To a certain extent she had been eminently successful. Her marvelous beauty, supplemented by a decided mental ability, had strewn her path with the admiration and adulation which she craved, and faults and failings, which in a less beautiful woman would have received harsh censure, were in her case overlooked and condoned. To-day, for the first time, the thought assailed her that perhaps she was the victim of an erroneous idea; that perhaps these young girls, living their lives so simply, actuated by a desire to act uprightly and to be honest and affectionate in every relationship in life, had found a happiness which had eluded her grasp.

Nathalie, who vainly strove at times to be cynical, made some careless remark, and Miss Stuart listened wonderingly to a gentle remonstrance which Eleanor administered in accents of earnestness.

"Ah! Nat, dear, don't say that, even in fun. Everything makes a difference."

"Indeed, yes," added Helen.

> "No stream from its source flows seaward,
> How lonely soever its course,
> But what some land is gladdened.
> No star ever rose or set
> Without influence somewhere."

She quoted the lines charmingly, despite the little shyness which was so characteristic of her.

"I suppose that is true," said Mollie thoughtfully; "and in the large things in life we know that we 188 can only be in harmony with God's plan by acting absolutely in accordance with our consciences. But it is hard to realize the importance of our decision in regard to the small daily occurrences. They seem almost too insignificant to exert any influence, either for good or evil."

"Influence does not lie only in deeds, Mollie," Eleanor replied, "either small or great. It seems to me that it is what we are, not what we do, that is the essential thing. If one's heart is pure and true, purity and truth will be manifested in one's actions, however trivial. And remember, dear, for I am going to quote now:

> "No life can be strong in its purpose and pure in its strife,
> And all life not be stronger and purer thereby."

Jean gave her friend's hand an affectionate squeeze.

"I do believe you are the best girl living," she whispered softly, with an air of profound conviction.

"You see, girls, what it is to have a friend like Jean."

"You mean like Eleanor," Jean promptly retorted.

"I suppose that is true friendship," mused Mollie.

"Must friendship necessarily be as blind as love?" queried Nan, with a smile at the two girls

which robbed the words of any sting.

"Jean knows nothing of love," declared Emily, with an air of superiority which was eminently amusing. It was common parlance that Emily never saw the general aspect of things quite as clearly as most people. 189

Jean joined somewhat constrainedly in the laugh that greeted these words, and wondered if it could be her imagination that Miss Stuart's smile held a covert sneer.

It was late in the afternoon when Helen reached the manor and made her way up to the nursery. The room was dim, for heavy clouds shortened the summer day. A sharp east wind moaned through the trees outside, and nurse had wisely lighted a wood fire in the wide chimneyplace. Its fitful flickering light fell full on little Gladys kneeling before the hearth, her eyes big with excitement as her chubby hands shaped a wonderful house of blocks; while near her Larry, lying flat on his back, threw out occasional hints and suggestions as to its construction. Willie, curled up in one of the deep window-seats, was making the best of the fast-fading daylight to finish a story which, to judge from his absorbed expression, must have been of thrilling interest. As Helen pushed open the door and advanced toward the cheerful fire, three pairs of eyes looked up to greet her.

"Well, chicks, you all look very happy and comfie."

Gladys thrust out her hands in quick alarm to save her block house from dangerous contact with the skirt of Helen's gown.

"P'ease take care, sister," she lisped. "Don't step on our b'ocks, 'cause Larry an' me is buildin' a big castle."

"Baby, baby, 'Larry an' me is buildin'?'"

Gladys shook her fluffy head impatiently. 190

"I haven't got any time to bovver. I'm velly busy."

Helen laughed, and dropping down upon the floor, began to lend a helping hand. Gladys sank back on her heels with a complacent sigh.

"Build a booful one, sister, big as this," raising her arms high over her head.

Helen nodded, but paused from her task, block in hand, to give a glance at Willie.

"Put down your book, dearie," she said to him. "This is the worst possible light to read in. You will ruin your eyes."

Willie heaved a sigh as he closed the precious book and, stretching himself after his cramped position, rose slowly to his feet, and joined the group before the fire. Flinging himself down near Helen, he laid his head in her lap. She patted his little round face affectionately, and went on with her castle-building.

The setting sun had broken through the clouds, and a flood of yellow light streamed through the western windows. From the huge logs in the fireplace an increasing volume of flames roared up the chimney, its ruddy glow illuminating the eager faces of the children, intent on every movement of their sister's deft hands. The truly wonderful house of blocks was nearing completion when Jean came quietly into the room. For a moment she stood silent in the shadowy doorway contemplating the pretty scene with wistful eyes. As she approached more nearly she unconsciously echoed Helen's words of a few moments past.

"Well, you look very happy, all of you."

Helen laughed softly. 191

"This is an exciting moment, Jeanie, so you must not marvel if we are not very talkative."

Jean leaned against one side of the old-fashioned chimneyplace, and absently watched the placing of the last few blocks.

"Gladys," she whispered, after a moment, "what do you think I saw just now?"

"What, Jeanie?" lifting her flushed face to her sister's.

"Mary on her way upstairs with your supper, and oh, what cookies!"

"Goody!" cried Larry, springing to his feet with a bound which brought the beautiful castle tumbling to the ground.

"You naughty boy!" scolded Gladys crossly. "See what you done!"

Jean took the angry, pouting little face between her hands, and smiled tenderly down into the tearful eyes:

"It is hard luck, baby, but you might as well get used to having your castles demolished."

"It's a shame," grumbled Willie, who was almost as disappointed as his little sister. "Larry's always rough."

"Never mind, dear," interrupted Helen, rising from the floor. "I am sure Larry didn't mean to upset the house, and in any case we could not leave it in Mary's way."

"Bother Mary."

"Hush, Willie, you must not speak so. Now run away and dress for dinner. Larry and Gladys must have their supper." 192

Jean followed her sister out into the hall, and laid a detaining hand on her arm.

"Helen," she said, very low, "are you ever really unhappy?"

"Why yes, Jean, sometimes. But why do you ask? Surely you are always in good spirits."

Jean smiled a little bitterly:

"Oh, of course I am, and I suppose I must go on fulfilling my destiny until the end of the chapter. But even if one has a reputation for unending hilarity, there are times——" She broke off abruptly with a laugh which suggested tears, and rushed away in the direction of her room, leaving Helen sorely puzzled. 193

## CHAPTER XVI.

## "IT WAS ONLY MY IMAGINATION."

"May I come in, Aunt Helen?"

"Certainly, dear." Aunt Helen looked up from the open Bible on her knee, and welcomed Jean with a cheery smile. "Where were you all yesterday? I did not have a glimpse of you."

The girl crossed the room, and dropping down into an easy-chair near the open window, gazed listlessly out across the sunlit lawn.

"Oh, I was just here as usual."

Aunt Helen closed her Bible and laid it carefully down on the table.

"Are you tired already of so much pleasuring, Jeanie?"

"I don't see that we have had a great deal of pleasuring lately," her niece replied perversely. "I think Hetherford is the stupidest place in the world, and I am tired of everything."

Aunt Helen was far too wise to remonstrate just then. After a moment's silence, she opened a subject which had never failed to awaken an interest in Jean.

"I had a nice letter from Mrs. Appleton to-day. They seem to be thoroughly enjoying themselves now, and she says Guy is working splendidly and expects to accomplish great things on his return." 194

"Yes," was Jean's inattentive response, as her eyes marked the circling of a buzzing fly outside the window.

"Miss Stuart is making quite a long visit," ventured Aunt Helen patiently. "I had thought that she would soon tire of Hetherford."

"I am sure I don't see why she doesn't go away. The whole house is turned upside down to provide her with amusement. It is a perfect bore."

"My dear," Aunt Helen objected, "that is surely not the spirit of true hospitality. We do not speak ill of our guests. *Noblesse oblige.*"

"I can't help it," and Jean, now thoroughly aroused, started up from her chair; "I am not going to pretend to like a person when I don't. She is insufferably patronizing, and I hate her."

Aunt Helen looked up at her niece with real distress in her eyes.

"Why, child," and she held out her hand, "come here. I want to speak to you."

Jean stood irresolute, looking half ashamed, and wholly miserable. At that most inopportune moment Nathalie flung open the door.

"Oh, here you are, Jean. I have been looking all over for you. Come on down and have a game of tennis before dinner. Why, what's the matter?"

Jean hastily averted her face.

"Nothing. I don't care to play tennis."

"Oh, please do, I am just in the humor for it."

"You may be, but I am not," Jean returned curtly.

"What in the world has come over you?" asked Nathalie bluntly. "I never knew anyone's disposition to become as uncertain and irritable as yours has lately." 195

"Why don't you let me alone, then? My temper may be growing bad, but yours has never been anything else."

Nathalie shrugged her shoulders, and laughing shortly, went on her way without another word.

When the door had closed on her, Jean slipped down on the floor and, burying her face in Aunt Helen's lap, sobbed convulsively.

"I don't know what is the matter with me," she faltered. "I am so cross and irritable lately. Everything seems to set my nerves on edge. I never used to feel so."

Aunt Helen passed her thin hand soothingly over the girl's bent head.

"Don't worry about it, dearie. Of course you did not mean to speak so. You are tired and unstrung to-day."

By and by Jean's sobs grew less frequent, then ceased altogether. She lifted her head, and, resting her arm on Aunt Helen's knee, dropped her chin in her hand, and stared absently before her. All trace of emotion had left her face, and it now wore an expression of utter weariness and dejection. Her aunt looked thoughtfully down at her. Had it been either Helen or Nathalie who had thus given way it would not have troubled her, but proud little Jean was too reserved and self-contained to break down unless she had been very sorely tried. The silence had lasted some few moments when Aunt Helen again spoke.

"In spite of your denial, Jean, I fear that your playtime has lasted too long. Discontent never fails 196
to creep in among us when we are idle. You see, dear, I am taking it for granted that it is nothing deeper than a feeling of discontent which makes you so unhappy. I know of nothing else unless ——" She paused. Jean stirred uneasily under her direct glance. Aunt Helen instantly averted her eyes, and resumed: "I am sorry that my ill health forces me to lead my life so apart from you all. I am in ignorance of the many currents and eddies which would otherwise be apparent to me, but if ever you need my advice you know how gladly I will give it to you, and there are times when an old head is better than a young one."

Still Jean did not speak. Aunt Helen sighed a little sadly:

"Well, my child, I suppose I am mistaken, and that your trouble is only a surfeit of pleasure."

"I am a great baby, Auntie, but I am glad I came here to you to have my cry out. You always help me so, and make me ashamed of being so impatient," and Jean looked lovingly up into the worn face which was bent above her.

"Thank you, dearie. You must come to me whenever you feel discouraged and unhappy, and remember I always stand ready to give you whatever comfort or counsel lies within my power. But, Jean," and her voice was very grave, "I have learned from my own experience, both of petty annoyance and of great trials, that there is only one true source of strength."

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At a late hour that night Lillian Stuart sat before the low dressing-table in her cozy room, 197
reviewing the events of the past week. The face which the mirror reflected was clouded, the eyes somber and full of fire, for the consciousness of defeat was upon her. As yet, however, no thought of capitulation occurred to her. Farr's indifference, his evident love for another, but deepened her love for him, stinging it into a passion that was well-nigh overmastering her. The difficulties in her path lent new zest to the struggle, rousing within her heart an insatiable desire for conquest. Possession had ever palled upon her. She had loved Farr, but as an accepted lover he had wearied her, and her love for him was not strong enough to drown the voice of worldly wisdom and prudence. To be sure, in those days he was hardly more than a boy, poor and unknown, whereas to-day he was a man well versed in the world's ways, liberally supplied with the world's goods, and with the respect and esteem of his fellow-men, yet preserving the same sweet, magnetic personality which long ago had made such a deep impression on her somewhat fickle heart. These considerations naturally had weight with her, but the secret of her determination lay not in these, but in the obstacles to be surmounted, the flattering assurance that her power could not be foiled. Had she been quite honest with herself she must have acknowledged that once the victory gained the charm would be forever broken. As Farr's wife she would be a thoroughly wretched woman. Knowing full well his hatred of an untruth, his contempt for a deception, his passionate anger at an injustice, did she not dream what a death to his soul a union with her would have been? Alas! she herself had revealed to him the shallowness 198
of her nature, the pettiness of her ambitions, the faithlessness of her heart. The lesson was a bitter one but he had learned it well, and, deep in her soul, Lillian Stuart knew that never again would he give his love unworthily. She hated Jean Lawrence, yet she appreciated her purity and gentleness, the fineness of her nature, the almost exalted bent of her mind. But this appreciation

did not soften her heart, nor weaken her determination. Jean had balked her, and Jean must suffer.

The face in the mirror before her grew hard; there were rigid lines about the mouth, the wonderful eyes gleamed strangely bright.

"I love him. I have always loved him. She shall not have him. It is the one satisfaction that is left me if all else fails."

Sharp upon these thoughts came a tap upon the door, and Helen Lawrence entered. A soft wrapper enveloped her slender frame, and her hair hung loose upon her shoulders.

"I wanted to come in for a little chat, Lillian. Do you mind if I braid my hair here?"

"Why, no, indeed. I am glad to have you. Sit down."

Helen drew a chair up close to the dressing-table, and seating herself, began slowly to plait her long soft hair. She put aside some light topic which Miss Stuart suggested, and spoke at once of the subject which lay nearest her heart.

"I am worried about Jean, Lillian. She does not seem like herself lately, and if it were not absurd, I should begin to think she was unhappy about something." 199

"Indeed." The response was so brief as to be almost an ejaculation. Helen's words accorded strangely with Miss Stuart's thoughts.

"Yes, and you don't know how unusual it is for Jean to be either irritable or moody. She has a very bright, sunny nature, and is particularly sweet-tempered."

"Perhaps there is something troubling her which you have not perceived."

Helen wrinkled her forehead thoughtfully.

"I am afraid there must be."

Miss Stuart darted a swift glance at her.

"Have you ever thought what it might be?"

Helen's attention was caught by a certain tone in her friend's voice. She raised her eyes questioningly:

"No, dear; I wish I had a clew."

"Suppose I should give you one?"

There was genuine surprise in Helen's face. She answered with a tenderness in her voice which gave her companion a pang.

"Why, Lillian, do you know of anything to make Jean unhappy?"

Miss Stuart lifted her head as if to strengthen her purpose, wondering at the sudden weakness in herself which made the words so hard to say:

"Your sister is in love with Mr. Farr."

"Oh!" gasped Helen, staring blankly at her friend.

"I only wonder you have not seen it before," added Miss Stuart coolly. 200

"Don't you think he is in love with her?" blundered Helen, who had not sufficiently recovered from her astonishment to be very wise in Jean's behalf.

The answer was incisive:

"I do not."

The hot tears rushed to Helen's eyes.

"Oh, my poor little Jean!"

Miss Stuart turned away and, to save herself, spoke harshly:

"For Heaven's sake, Helen, don't cry. It is such a weak thing to do."

The sharp words brought Helen suddenly to a realization of what she had done in thus accepting, without demur, Miss Stuart's statement in regard to Jean. Too late she remembered that it was little short of disloyalty to discuss the subject with an outsider; an outsider, moreover, who had never made any pretense of liking her sister. She resolved to retrieve herself if possible, and answered not a little proudly:

"I am sorry I offended you, Lillian. We often differ in our opinions as to what is weak and what is not."

"Not often, but always," Lillian broke in with a disagreeable laugh.

"Where I was weak," continued Helen, ignoring utterly the interruption, "was, in laying too much

stress on your verdict in regard to my sister. I am not authorized to contradict your statement, but I think it is more than probable that your perceptions have been at fault. In regard to Mr. Farr, he has certainly seemed to both like and admire Jean. Once or twice I have even thought him very much concerned about her. Why, at the dance——" 201

"I imagine, my dear, that your perceptions are equally as faulty as my own. It may interest you to learn that Mr. Farr and I were at one time engaged; that he loved me madly, and that my breaking of the engagement was a terrible blow to him. It is possible, however, since in your opinion Mr. Farr has transferred his affections from me to your sister, that he has already confessed this to her." The taunting words were spoken lightly, but Miss Stuart's eyes searched Helen's face. What she saw there must have satisfied her, for she turned aside with an air of relief.

There was a brief pause, which was broken by a question from Helen:

"Does Mr. Farr still care for you, Lillian?"

The clear truthful eyes met Miss Stuart's squarely, and under their steady gaze she moved restively. It was not easy to tell a direct lie to Helen. She bent her head, and a slow flush mounted to her face.

"That is hardly fair, Helen. He certainly has not told me of any change in his feeling toward me." She flung back her head and her lustrous eyes held a challenge. "You have seen him with me. What do you think?"

Her face was alight with power and magnetism; the scarlet lips were slightly parted, as the breath came hurriedly through them; one firm white hand on her breast held together the loose folds of her dressing-gown, which fell about her superb figure in long, graceful lines. At that moment she was regal, majestic. 202

Helen gazed at her steadfastly, and her heart sank.

"Poor little Jean," she thought hopelessly. "What could she do?"

For Helen, as was her wont, laid too much stress upon her friend's great beauty of face and form, and overlooked the deeper beauty of her sister's soul.

As she crept into bed that night she murmured to herself:

"I must warn Jean, gently and lovingly. God grant it may not be too late."

Her opportunity came the very next evening, for directly dinner was finished Nathalie and Miss Stuart started off on a long-planned ride with Churchill and Andrews. Jean stood on the veranda to watch them mount and ride away. Her eyes followed them until their four figures, swaying slightly with the motion of the horses, were no longer silhouetted against the evening sky, then descended the broad flight of steps, and wandered out into the garden. The sun had already set, but the earth was still wrapped in the mystic light of the purple after-glow. Once in the sweet old-fashioned garden Jean paced slowly up and down the trim paths, bordered by rows of fragrant mignonette and carnations, and flanked at the corners by tall hollyhocks and slender poppies, and into her sad heart stole something of the peace and quiet of the tranquil spot.

"It is all so strange and incomprehensible," ran her thoughts, "but I am not going to worry about it. There must be some mistake somewhere. I believed in him so implicitly. I felt so sure of his love—oh, I cannot, I will not believe that he deliberately deceived me. If only he were here now, while she is away, I am sure that everything could be explained. Oh, he might come—he might be honest with me!" 203

The garden gate clicked, and she looked up with startled eyes; but it was only Helen coming down the path to meet her.

"Why did you run away?" her sister asked as she linked her arm in hers.

"I didn't run very fast," smiled Jean. "I sauntered out when the girls started off for their ride. It is so restful here," she added in a lower tone.

"That doesn't sound one bit like you, Jean," said Helen slowly. "I am afraid something must be troubling you, if you feel the need of a restful place where you can be alone."

Jean laughed nervously.

"Why, what an absurd idea, Helen. Why should I be unhappy?"

"That is just what I don't know, dear, but I think you are."

"Well, what if I am?" cried Jean, brought to bay. "One cannot always be perfectly contented and happy; I do not suppose that I am to be any more exempt than other people."

Helen's eyes were bent on the ground, and she spoke with some hesitation.

"Of course that is true enough, but there is usually some definite cause for unhappiness. I don't want to be impertinent, Jean, but is there not some one thing weighing on you at present? Has—" She paused, then went on desperately—"has Mr. Farr anything to do with it?" 204

She felt the violent start that Jean gave, heard the sharp indrawing of her breath, and she did not dare to raise her eyes to her sister's face for fear of reading there still further confirmation of her surmises. She had need of all her courage yet to deal the cruel blow, and without pausing for breath, she hurried on. Her words were confused, incoherent, but they struck a chill as of death to Jean's tender heart.

"It was only a foolish idea of mine, Jeanie. Of course there is no truth in it—there can't be—there must not be. He—that is, I have just discovered that he is deeply in love with Lillian. They have been engaged, and I fear the engagement is about to be renewed. Why, darling, he is not worthy of a thought of yours. Forget him, Jean, darling. It is only your imagination." Her voice choked, and she ended abruptly.

For an instant not a sound broke the stillness, then Jean faced her sister with strained, wide-open eyes, and spoke to her in a voice that was quite steady, but curiously dull and unnatural.

"I am very glad you have told me of this, Helen. Now that I think of it I am not greatly surprised. You need not worry about me. I am all right."

They had ceased from their walking to and fro, and as they stood thus opposite each other Jean swayed a little. Helen flung both arms around her.

"Oh, darling, what is it? Speak to me. It is only Helen. I love you so, dear."

Jean suffered the embrace, but there was no responsive yielding in the slender, rigid figure. When Helen released her she drew away, and started toward the gate. Helen did not stir, and when Jean had gone a few steps she paused and turned her white, stricken face toward her sister. 205

"You need not worry about me," she repeated, "I am all right." And then, with a pathetic outstretching of her hands, she added: "It was only my imagination."

Helen sprang forward, but Jean waved her back, and in another moment the shadows of the gloaming hid the flitting figure from Helen's tearful eyes. 206

## CHAPTER XVII.

## THE "VORTEX" DEPARTS.

"Let fall! Give way!"

Two oars struck the water with a splash, and the dingey shot out from the gang steps of the *Sylph* the steady strokes of two sturdy sailors sending the little craft swiftly on its way. The owner lounged lazily in the cushioned stern, one leg swung over the other, the tiller-ropes held loosely in his hands. They were sweeping under the stern of the *Vortex* when a voice from the schooner's deck hailed them. The sailors held their oars suspended, and Churchill pushed back his cap and looked up, frowning slightly, for the sun was in his eyes.

"Hello, Farr."

"Hello, old man. Going ashore?"

"Yes. Want a lift?"

"Thanks, if you don't mind putting back."

"Not a bit of it."

The orders were given, and the dingey brought up to the gang steps. Farr sprang in and they pushed off, heading once more for land.

Churchill pulled a cigar-case from his pocket and held it out to his companion, and then a brief silence ensued while each procured a light.

"You've been something of a recluse for the last few days, Farr; I haven't seen you about. Been sticking close to your quarters?" 207

"I've been grinding at the charts. Our stay here is about at an end, and Dodd is a little dissatisfied with the progress of our work. Through one cause and another we have been delayed, and the work has dragged."

"That doesn't seem to concern Dudley at all. He's ashore most of the time."

Farr laughed indulgently.

"Oh! Dudley's a lazy Southerner. You can't hustle him. He's the salt of the earth, when you have plenty of time; but you can't impress him with the necessity of haste."

"When do you go, old man?"

Farr took his cigar from between his lips, and watched the cloud of smoke as the breeze bore it far astern.

"I don't know exactly," he answered slowly. "Within the next week or ten days surely."

"You will be very much missed," said Churchill heartily; "yet I suppose it has been slow work for you."

Farr looked contemplatively down at the lighted end of his cigar.

"No. I shall be sorry to go."

After a slight pause he added:

"What has been going on?"

"Nothing much. Andrews has gone up to town. Miss Stuart is still at the manor; but, of course, that is no news to you."

"I imagined she had not left," returned Farr indifferently. "I am going to call there this afternoon." 208

"Suppose, then, you meet me here; say in a couple of hours," suggested Churchill, as he brought the dingey up to the float, "and go out and dine with me aboard the *Sylph*. I am by myself, for Andrews is away, and Archer is engaged."

"Thanks. I will be delighted."

Churchill turned to the sailor who stood erect in the boat, awaiting his orders.

"At six sharp, Petersen, and tell the steward there will be two for dinner."

Then the two men turned on their heels and strode briskly up the sandy road. Presently their paths diverged, and with a friendly nod they separated.

Farr went along in the direction of the manor at a swinging gait. He had not seen Jean since the night of the dance. In the events of that evening his love for her had sustained a severe shock. He could not at once readjust himself to this new and unwelcome development in the nature of her to whom he had given his deepest and most loyal allegiance. Heretofore he had found his love for her intensified by her coldness and indifference, but her flirtation with Maynard was not the sort of thing he had expected from her, and it disappointed him bitterly. The world condoned many of Maynard's offenses because he possessed a certain charm and amiability of manner, but Farr was too clean-minded and upright to look lightly upon the man's selfish disregard of every moral obligation, and he was impatient of his ill-deserved popularity. That Jean should show this man so 209
marked a preference was to him incomprehensible. It was possible that she did not know the full truth in regard to him, but even her innocence and unworldliness could not altogether shield her from blame, for she did know that he was a faithless husband, and, moreover, his wife was her friend. Under any other circumstances Farr would have been jealous, but now the sharpness of his disappointment in Jean outweighed every other consideration. She had been to him the embodiment of sweetness and purity, and as he paced up and down the white decks of the *Vortex*, he inveighed bitterly against this second overthrow of his faith. His anger was short-lived, however, for the tender little Jean of the early summer had twined herself closely about his heart; and now she rose, strong in the power and might of her love, denying valiantly that other self, pleading earnestly for more confidence and trust. So it happened this sunshiny day that, as Farr leaned against the rail, gazing seaward, and pondered on these strange and contradictory events, suddenly the bitterness died out of his heart, and in its place sprang up a passionate longing to see Jean, to hear her sweet voice tell him it was all a mistake, to put an end forever to this intolerable uncertainty. And even as he came to this conclusion, the dingey from the *Sylph* hove in view, and, without pausing to reconsider, he hailed it.

Now he had left the manor gates behind, and striking out across the lawn, increased his pace, for his impatience would not be curbed. The crunching sound of wheels on the gravel brought him to a standstill. On his right a clump of cedars hid the road from sight. He thrust aside the low- 210
growing branches, and as he peered through the aperture a carriage flashed by. Jean was driving, and he had a tantalizing glimpse of her bonny face, as she turned to speak to Eleanor and Cliff, who were on the back seat. An involuntary exclamation escaped him, and he sprang forward, but his voice was unheard, his presence unheeded, and with a heavy heart he gazed after the rapidly retreating vehicle. With a savage little laugh he swung about, and retraced his steps. The joyousness of the summer day was darkened for him, and in his heart was a fierce resentment against Fate.

His eyes were bent upon the ground as he plodded slowly along the road, and so he did not see Miss Stuart, driving alone in Helen's buckboard, until she was within a few yards of him.

Miss Stuart scanned his face furtively as he stood beside the carriage.

"Ah, Val," she said with an assumption of ease, "I suppose you have been at the manor?"

"No, I met them driving."

"How inhospitable of them not to have turned back," she exclaimed, with her eyes still on his face.

Farr was too obtuse to appreciate the drift of her remark.

"I was unfortunate. They did not see me."

Miss Stuart's brows contracted in a frown, and she flicked the long lash of her whip.

"You are not flattering, Val. I was at home."

He looked up at her quickly, a vague surprise in his eyes. 211

"I would not venture to inflict myself on you!" he replied with a careless laugh, and then he stood back a step, and raised his hat.

Miss Stuart's face flushed angrily, but she had no alternative but to drive on. As she gathered up the reins she shot a glance over her shoulder at Farr, but already he had turned away, and was moving rapidly down the road. She cut the horse with the whip, and in her heart was a burning desire to revenge herself on Jean.

As they took their places about the dinner-table at the manor that evening, Nathalie made some casual mention of the *Vortex*, thus giving Miss Stuart the pretext she sought.

"By the way," she said, fixing her eyes on Jean's face, although her words were addressed to Helen, "on my way home this afternoon after I left you, I met Mr. Farr and had such a pleasant chat with him. He was on his way to call on us, but as he met me, I suppose——" She broke off with a charming air of embarrassment.

Jean raised her head proudly, and met Miss Stuart's gaze with unflinching eyes.

"You should have brought Mr. Farr back to tea," she said, so unconcernedly that even Helen was deceived, and Miss Stuart was stirred with a passing feeling of admiration.

But the effort cost Jean a pang, and as she turned her eyes slowly away, there was a great coldness at her heart.

The following afternoon the girls were having tea in the drawing-room, the long French windows were pushed wide open, and the soft west wind moved the curtains gently to and fro. The blinds 212 were drawn, for the sun shone hotly, and the half-darkened room seemed deliciously cool and refreshing, after the sultry atmosphere of the outer world.

Little Gladys danced in from the hall-way, waving a letter in the air.

"I took it away from Susie, sister," she cried, in her clear, childish treble. "I don't know who it's for."

Miss Stuart leaned forward in her chair, and caught the soft dimpled wrist in her firm white hand.

"Let me read the address for you, baby."

Gladys demurred, shaking her fluffy head, her blue eyes full of laughter, but Miss Stuart quietly possessed herself of the letter.

Her face fell as she turned toward the light and read the address. The handwriting, familiar, yet half strange, awakened a host of memories within her; but the written name was not the one she had been wont to see. She read the address aloud, with a tinge of sarcasm in her smooth voice:

"'Miss Jean Lawrence, The Manor House.' For you, Miss Jean."

Jean crossed the room and took the envelope from Miss Stuart's hand. She could not repress a faint start of surprise as her eyes fell upon the superscription, but the scornful smile on Miss Stuart's lips lent her instant self-control. She slipped the letter into her pocket, and resuming her place at Eleanor's side, took up the thread of the conversation where it had been broken off, with apparent ease and facility. But her heart was beating wildly, and the hand that held the dainty 213 teacup was far from steady.

It was almost an hour later when she pushed aside the portières, and entered the music room. She glanced about her anxiously to assure herself that she was alone, then crossing to the further end and ensconsing herself in one of the deep window-seats, pulled the letter from her pocket. For an instant she held it in her hand, her brows drawn together, a wistful, questioning look in her eyes. She was forcing herself to recall every word that Helen had said to her that miserable evening in the garden. In the light of that talk, this letter to her from Valentine Farr both puzzled and troubled her. She looked down at the address, and with a sudden light of determination in her face, broke the seal:

> My Dear Miss Jean:
>
> We have received our orders and leave Hetherford on Thursday. Will you not let me see you before we sail? I started for the manor yesterday, but from a distance saw you driving away. I seem to be most unfortunate, but I cannot turn my back on the place where I have found so

much happiness, without an attempt to see you again, to assure myself, at least, that I carry with me your friendship and good will. You were very good to me in the early days of our sojourn here, Miss Jean, and in memory of those days I venture to ask you if I may call at the manor to-morrow about four o'clock.

Yours,
VALENTINE FARR.

Once, twice Jean read it through, then mechanically folded the bit of paper, and fitted it into the envelope carefully. A tremulous, incredulous joy was dawning on her face. She felt oppressed, and started to her feet. It surprised her to find that she was trembling so she could not stand. 214
She laughed, a little hysterically, as she sank back on the window-seat. Then, suddenly, she flung out her hands, and slipping down on her knees, buried her face in the soft cushions, and a storm of weeping shook the slender figure. In her despair she had been silent, tearless, but in this awakening of hope within her, her pent-up feelings found relief in tears. A wild, almost unreasonable, joy was growing in her heart, and her quivering lips were pressed passionately to her lover's letter. Her faith in him, which Helen's words had so cruelly crushed, was fast springing into life again.

When at length the strength of her emotion had worn itself away, she lifted her head and, rising slowly to her feet, leaned against the casement, and looked thoughtfully out upon the peaceful scene. The sun was setting, and the western horizon was one blaze of golden glory. Jean's grave eyes seemed asking counsel of the far illumined sky. Once a deep sigh trembled through her lips, and the thought that prompted it almost formed itself in words.

"Oh, if only my mother were here! I could not ask advice of anyone else, but I think I could speak to her."

For a long time Jean stood there silent, motionless; and when at last she moved away the crimson light had quite faded, and a soft violet haze lingered in the western sky. She crossed the room, and seated herself at the open desk. For a moment she hesitated, holding her pen poised above 215
the sheet of paper, then bent her head, and wrote rapidly:

MY DEAR MR. FARR:

I shall be at home to-morrow afternoon, and shall be very glad to see you. I am sorry to learn that you are about to leave Hetherford, and somewhat surprised also, as I had no idea that your departure was imminent.

Yours very sincerely,
JEAN LAWRENCE.

The written words looked cold and formal, and with a tender feeling of compunction Jean raised the bit of paper to her lips.

"I would be more kind, dear, if I dared," she murmured softly.

The old Dutch clock in the corner of the hall-way was chiming the hour of three the following afternoon, when Jean opened the door of her room, and started to descend the wide staircase. From below voices floated up to her, and when she reached the landing she paused and, leaning over the banisters, looked down upon the girls who were standing near the open front door. Nathalie caught sight of her, and smiled blithely.

"Don't you want to come with us, Jean? We are going over to the inn for a game of tennis."

Jean shook her head.

"I am going to be thoroughly domestic this afternoon," she announced with a conscious little laugh.

At the sound of her voice Miss Stuart glanced sharply over her shoulder. There flashed into her mind the recollection of Farr's note to Jean the previous day. She closed her lips tightly as she 216
followed Helen and Nathalie out upon the veranda, and was singularly silent as they sauntered leisurely across the lawn. When they were almost at the gates, she turned to Helen, a distressed expression on her lovely face.

"Would you mind very much if I should turn back? I have had a slight headache all day, and the sun seems to make it so much worse."

Helen looked sympathetically around at her.

"Why no, indeed, dear. I was afraid you were not feeling well, you have been so quiet. By all means let us go right back."

But Miss Stuart would not listen to such an arrangement, and declared, with quite the air of a martyr, that she should proceed to the inn, in spite of her headache, unless Helen would do as she desired. When at last she had succeeded in ridding herself of her companions, she drew a deep breath, and turning, walked hurriedly up the avenue. She did not quite see her way clear to prevent an interview between Farr and Jean, but she felt that if she were near at hand, fortune might throw some unlooked-for chance into her path. She had kept them apart so far. Surely she must not fail now at the very end, for the news of the *Vortex's* departure had been spread abroad by Dudley with loud lamentations.

A great stillness lay over the manor this warm August afternoon, and as she ascended the veranda steps she heard clearly Aunt Helen's soft voice calling to Jean from the floor above.

"My dear, will you not come up and read to me for a while? My eyes are troubling me so, I dare not use them any more." 217

Miss Stuart stood still and listened, as Jean came slowly out from the drawing-room.

"Very well, Auntie," the girl responded half-heartedly, and with an impatient sigh started up the stairs.

Miss Stuart waited a moment, then crossed the veranda noiselessly, and entered the house. After a cautious glance about the drawing-room, she stationed herself in one of the front windows which commanded the approach to the manor. The blinds were drawn to shut out the heat and glare, and she turned the slats slightly to afford a view of the driveway. A faint breeze rustled the vines that trailed over the veranda rail and climbed the graceful columns. The moments dragged slowly by. Even Miss Stuart's active mind began at length to yield itself to the drowsy influence of the lifeless atmosphere, the monotonous buzzing of the flies, and the lazy twittering of the birds as they rested idly on the branches of the elms, or sailed languidly through the haze which softly enveloped the earth. She flung one arm above her head, and leaned back in her chair. Her thoughts went back to those far-off happy days in Annapolis, and a faint smile curved the lines of her mouth. Dreamily her memories journeyed on toward the present, and then once more her jealous wrath was awakened. She started up the more effectually to shake off the torpor that was stealing over her, and, rising, took one or two short turns up and down the room, pausing frequently at her post, to peer out through the drawn blinds. Her vigil was a tedious one, the 218
result of it uncertain, but the warring spirit within her was now thoroughly aroused and her patience did not flag.

"What move can I make?" she asked herself again and again. "I can't very well insist on playing an unwelcome third to their *tête-à-tête*. They have been driven, and they would outwit me there. Ah! well, we shall see, we shall see."

Then a sharp exclamation broke from her, for, as she halted at the window, she discovered Valentine Farr's erect figure swinging lightly across the lawn in the direction of the manor. She turned the slats softly and crossed hurriedly to the entrance of the drawing-room, and standing there, her hands holding the portières apart on either side, she tilted her head forward, straining every nerve to catch the faintest sound from the floor above. It was perfectly quiet, and her face cleared a little. Next her anxious eyes swept the half-darkened hall-way, as if in search of some suggestion, but the wide chimney-place with its brass andirons agleam where the light touched them, the old clock in the corner ticking slowly, steadily, offered her no help. The outer door stood ajar, and leaning a little further forward she could see that Farr was within a short distance of the veranda. Ah! what should she do? Her quick ear caught the sound of a heavy footfall ascending from the lower floor and while her eyes were riveted on the spot whence the sound issued, the swinging door in the rear of the hall was pushed open, and a woman toiled laboriously through, bearing in her arms a hamper of clean linen. Miss Stuart's ready mind sprang at once to 219
the solution of the difficulty, and while the thought formed itself, she cleared the distance between them.

Her voice shook a little as she spoke, for her heart was beating high in the hope of victory.

"Please set your hamper right down here, and go to the front door. There is a gentleman just coming in. Say to him that Miss Jean begs to be excused, that she particularly wishes to be excused. Well," imperiously, for the good-natured woman was staring at her stupidly, with gaping mouth and astonished eyes. "Don't you understand me? Put your hamper down at once and do as I tell you."

The woman obeyed her slowly, and wiping her hands on her apron, moved clumsily forward. Farr's foot was already on the step of the veranda, and Miss Stuart had barely time to push open the swinging door and conceal herself behind it, when his clear, quiet voice, addressing the strange servant, broke the stillness.

"Will you please tell Miss Jean Lawrence that Mr. Farr wishes to see her. She is expecting me, I believe."

The woman confused by her hurried orders, and embarrassed by the unusual duty of waiting upon the door, grew very red in the face, as she answered bluntly:

"She says she won't see yer, sir."

Farr stared blankly at her.

"What? Oh, I think you must be mistaken. Just take my message up to Miss Jean, please." 220

In her hiding-place Miss Stuart clutched tightly at the folds of her gown, and a look of desperation burned in her eyes. But her fears were unfounded. The woman's thickset figure barred the doorway, and she stood her ground stolidly.

"It ain't no use, sir. She told me herself she pertick'ly wouldn't see you, sir."

Farr's face went very white, and without another syllable he turned on his heel and strode away.

"Sure I didn't say it just the same way yer told me, Miss," the woman said apologetically, as Miss Stuart opened the backdoor and confronted her, "but I sent him away for yer, well enough, I guess," and grinning broadly, she lifted her hamper, and proceeded heavily up the stairs.

A moment later Miss Stuart quietly followed her, congratulating herself on the wonderful success of her maneuver.

"It was a master-stroke," she said to herself triumphantly, as she closed the door of her room. "Susie will never know that he called, for I don't believe that stupid creature will mention the occurrence. Ah, how fortunate Mrs. Dennis's room is at the rear of the house," and she flung herself down on the lounge and closed her eyes wearily, for the excitement had worn upon her.

At the same moment, Aunt Helen's door softly shut, and Jean, her face full of glad expectancy, ran lightly down the stairs. More than an hour later she crept slowly up again, all the joy gone out of her blanched face, her sensitive lips quivering piteously; despair and misery in her eyes. 221

The following morning the *Vortex* sailed. Captain Dodd and Dudley had called at the manor the evening before, and in the merry little party speculations were rife as to the cause of Farr's desertion, on this his last evening in Hetherford. Jean forced herself to sit quietly by and listen, and her heart grew numb and cold. Outwardly, however, her manner was so natural and self-possessed that Helen drew a deep breath of relief, and persuaded herself that Jean could not be so very unhappy.

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In the morning, at an early hour, Jean is on the upper balcony. She crosses her arms on the rail, and her eyes are fastened on the place where the *Vortex* lies at anchor. Already her sails are set, and in another moment the loud boom of her cannon announces her departure. The girl shivers a little, but does not stir from her position. Now the schooner is sailing gallantly along, the sun shining full on her white sails. Ah, how rapidly she nears the headland. She is rounding it. Now, only the top of her tall masts can be seen above the rocks. Ah, she is gone. Jean's face drops on her crossed arms, and a low cry breaks from her white lips.

Scarcely had the *Vortex* been an hour on her way, when Miss Stuart presented herself in Helen's room, and announced in tones of deepest regret that she would be obliged to leave them on the following day.

"Mother has issued her commands," she said dolefully, and then, as a look of incredulity dawned in Helen's face, she made haste to add, "and there are many reasons why it is much better that I should go." 222

Helen sighed, but did not attempt to alter her friend's decision.

That evening, when the last farewell words had been spoken to the friends from the inn and the parsonage, Miss Stuart went up to her room followed by the three Lawrence girls. Helen and Nathalie went to work over her half-packed trunks, and Jean, leaning against the footboard of the bed, looked on with languid interest. Miss Stuart, who was complacently issuing orders to the two packers, leaned lazily back in an easy-chair, her white hands folded idly in her lap. Jean surveyed her gravely, but without bitterness. This was the woman whom Valentine Farr loved, and much as she had suffered, she was ready to do her full justice. Suddenly Miss Stuart looked up, and their eyes met. Jean moved forward and held out her hand.

"Good-night and good-by, Miss Stuart. I am very tired and I fear I will not be up for the early train in the morning. I hope you have been happy at the manor." She broke off abruptly. She knew that she ought to add, "I am sorry you are going," but the words refused to pass her lips.

Miss Stuart rose and took the outstretched hand, but she could not meet Jean's clear gaze.

It was late when the door closed upon Helen and her kindly offices. Miss Stuart, possessed by an intense restlessness, paced up and down the room. Her thoughts were as accusing angels. What return had she made for the kindness and hospitality of these friends under whose roof she had spent the last three weeks? Her wicked pride and passion had indeed sown the seeds of misery in one heart. Of Jean she had thought with shrinking, but trusting, faithful Helen caused her the keener pang, the sharper suffering. It was not too late, however. With one word she could undo the mischief she had so deliberately wrought. Just for one moment Miss Stuart's better self held sway, softening her hard and jealous nature. Just for one moment—then the impulse died out, and with a reckless laugh she drowned the voice of conscience. 223 224

## CHAPTER XVIII.

# A RIFT IN THE CLOUDS.

September with its bright, warm days and cool nights was at hand. The gayeties of the summer were a thing of the past, and the little colony of girls had settled down into the old routine of life, "exactly as we used to before the *Vortex* came," Mollie Andrews said complacently. No voice was raised in contradiction, and yet, perhaps no heart quite echoed the sentiment.

Jean faced her trouble bravely and without complaint, but the effort told on her as the days passed by, and she grew frail and slender, and an expression of deep sadness lingered in her soft eyes; but the change in her took place so slowly, so gradually, that no one seemed to be aware of it. As the days shortened, they would spend their evenings over the wood fire in the manor drawing-room, reading aloud from some favorite book of poetry or prose. Jean invariably found a place on the divan in the corner, and when someone rallied her on her lazy habit, she only smiled faintly and nestled down among the cushions. One cold, gusty evening, when the rain beat against the windowpanes and the wind howled dismally about the house, Eleanor took up a volume of poems from the table and began to read a poem called "Œnone." Helen's eyes 225
unconsciously sought Jean's face. It was half turned away, and one little hand made shift to shield it, but Helen distinctly saw two great tears steal silently down from under the closed lids.

This set her heart to aching, and alone in her room that night she pondered long what could be done for her poor little sister. In the end she penned a letter, which in the morning she carried herself to the post-office, and anxiously awaited the result.

Before October had well-nigh come around, Jean was really ill; so ill that Aunt Helen, and even thoughtless Nathalie, were seriously concerned. All day long she would lie on the sofa in her room, scarcely speaking save in response to some direct question that was put to her, and all through the long hours of the night her tired eyes never closed.

"I don't think she ever sleeps," Nathalie confided to Helen one day in a troubled voice. "Whenever I speak to her she is always wide-awake, and once or twice I have thought I heard her crying."

Helen shook her head sadly, and watched the mails with an increasing impatience for the answer to her letter. It came at last, and when she had read it through hurriedly, she went at once to Jean's room, and sitting down beside her, took her cold little hands in hers.

"Do you feel so badly to-day, dear?" she said tenderly.

"No, Helen, only very tired."

The sigh with which these words were spoken went right to Helen's heart. 226

"Would you like to go away where you would have a complete change of scene?"

Jean raised herself on her elbow, and turned an eager eye toward her sister.

"Oh, yes. I want to go away. It's the only thing in the world I really want, and oh, I want it so very much. Helen, I—I can't stay here." Her voice dropped to a whisper. "Don't you see how hard it is for me?"

Helen bent down and kissed her.

"Well, darling, I have arranged it for you, and I have only been waiting for this letter to tell you that it was all right. You see, I didn't want to speak to you, dear, until everything was settled. Now, shall I read you what the letter says?"

"Yes."

Helen drew the letter from her pocket and unfolded it:

> "I am so sorry to hear that poor little Jean is not well. It is hard to imagine her otherwise than rosy and smiling. I think with you that probably a change of scene would do her more good than all the medicines in the world, and I see my way clear at once to carry out your proposition. My aunt, Mrs. Fay, crosses in the middle of October to join us here in Paris, and I want you to send Jean over with her. The ocean trip will be the first step toward recovery, and you must trust to our watchful care and the newness of her surroundings to complete the cure."

Helen paused and Jean broke in hurriedly, a faint color rising in her pale cheeks:

"Dear old Guy! how like him, always thoughtful, always tender. O Helen, yes; let me go. I would be so glad to, and I know it would do me good." 227

"Would you be happy with Guy and his mother, Jean?"

Jean's sad eyes met her sister's for a moment, and then were slowly averted.

"I love them both dearly," she answered gently, "and I want above everything to go away from Hetherford. Please help me to do this, Helen. You will gain Auntie's consent."

And with this reply Helen was fain to be content. She had refrained from reading aloud the closing lines of Guy's letter, which, running thus, had made her heart beat strangely:

> Our plans are somewhat indefinite. My aunt does not care to spend more than two months

over here, and it is her intention to return home at Christmas time. If a stay of this duration should effect Jean's cure she might return with her, for there is a chance that she may be homesick so far away from you all. It would be very pleasant to return home at this sweet season. My own thoughts turn that way so often. Helen, can you never hold out any hope to me? Must this season of peace come and go, leaving my heart as lonely as ever? Must I wait forever, in strange lands, for one word from you? Forgive me if I do wrong to write you thus, but your letter has undone me.

Faithfully yours,
GUY APPLETON.

In less than two weeks Jean Lawrence sailed for Europe under the care of Mrs. Fay. A sense of desolation inwrapped the manor. The weather was sharp and cold and the sweet warm summer seemed a dream, and every little thing that recalled it gave the girls a pang. Emily Varian had departed, and both the Hills and Andrews were about to turn their faces cityward. 228

One crisp morning, when the wind blew fresh from the northwest, Eleanor came out from the inn with Cliff Archer at her side and started briskly forth in the direction of the parsonage. Eleanor's face wore an expression of deep dejection, and Cliff, observing this, made comment on it:

"You are down on your luck."

Eleanor smiled somewhat dubiously:

"It is in the air, Cliff. I don't know what is the matter with us all. Our good spirits seem to have deserted us with Jean."

There was a brief silence, broken by Archer. He spoke slowly, as if not quite sure of his ground:

"It was in the air before Jean went away, I think. It strikes me that she was fully under its influence herself."

Eleanor shot a glance at her companion:

"Jean was not well, you know."

"And there was a cause. Come, Eleanor, let us be frank. You may trust my affection for Jean to keep me from prying into her affairs, but some things this summer were quite too patent to be disregarded."

"I don't know what you mean," Eleanor interposed hurriedly.

"Oh, yes, you do. It is natural for you to shield Jean, because from your point of view, she has been badly treated. Well, I don't agree with you in that. If ever a man was honestly in love, that man was Valentine Farr. I don't pretend to know what the trouble was between them, but I have a suspicion, on general principles, that jealousy was at the bottom of it. I don't believe that Jean's was well founded and I wish she had a friend who felt at liberty to tell her so. I have kept silent 229 for a long time, too long perhaps; but now I have set the ball rolling, and shall await results."

They were in the parsonage grounds now, and Eleanor paused and laid her hand lightly on Cliff's arm.

"I would do anything in the world for Jean, as you know, Cliff, but I feel too much in the dark to take any step at present. You may be right; indeed, I think you are; but remember neither you nor I are quite sure of Jean's feeling on the subject, and it is a very delicate matter to meddle with."

"I would risk it," smiled Cliff.

After a moment he spoke again, in a tone of deeper earnestness:

"A very grave trouble can arise from a slight misunderstanding, Eleanor. I wish, dear, that you and I could put that possibility out of reach. I have tried to be patient, but when I see so much sorrow brought about undoubtedly by a lack of frankness and confidence, I tremble for our future. If you do care for me, dear, why will you not tell me so? Surely you cannot doubt the sincerity of my love for you."

Eleanor raised her eyes to her lover's face.

"I think you know, Cliff——" she began, when Nan's voice broke in upon them.

"Hello! Now what are you two doing, philandering in this secluded spot?"

"Talking of subjects quite beyond your ken, my dear," drawled Cliff lazily. 230

"You won't catch your train if you don't come down to mother earth," laughed Nan.

Archer consulted his watch, and then bade the girls a hurried good-by and started off for the station. Nan linked her arm in Eleanor's and they proceeded leisurely to the parsonage, talking as they went. One sentence remained in Nan's mind, awakening there a long train of thought.

"The summer is over, Nan, and we are about to disband. We have, perhaps, had more gayety and less real happiness than in the years gone by. I think you know as well as I the reasons for this. You are the only one, I think, who could set some crooked matters straight. Suppose you see what you can do?"

Enigmatical as the words were, Nan understood their purpose, and when, on the last evening before the Andrews and the Hills were to leave Hetherford, they assembled at the manor, she had quite determined to follow Eleanor's suggestion. It was a custom of long standing for Nan, Mollie, and Eleanor to spend the last night of the season with the Lawrence girls, to talk over the events of the summer and to anticipate the future.

To-night, as they gathered around the wide fireplace in the drawing-room, a certain sadness hovered over them, subduing their voices, breaking the conversation with frequent spaces of silence. Their hearts were full of thoughts that were left unspoken. Jean's absence made itself strongly felt among them, so closely was she associated with every like occasion in the past. 231

"Nothing seems real without her," said Eleanor drearily. "This parting is like no other."

"I hate partings anyway," cried Mollie. "I am always so afraid that we will not come together again quite in the old way!"

> "All things must change
> To something new, to something strange!"

quoted Helen.

"Now, girls, this is nonsense," exclaimed Nathalie, struggling with the lump that would rise in her throat. "Jean is going to have a splendid time, and will come home as strong and well as ever, and at Christmas time you will all come up here and we will have a grand reunion."

No answer to Nathalie's cheerful prediction suggested itself, and Helen made a welcome diversion by announcing that it was bedtime.

"Nan, will you share my room?" she asked as they were on their way upstairs.

"Well, I should think so. I particularly want to have a good talk with you alone."

"That is nice. I am just in the humor for it, too."

When they had donned their wrappers Helen threw herself down on the sofa before the open fire, and Nan knelt down on the hearthstone to stir the logs into a brighter blaze.

"A cheerful fire is always inspiring to me," she said explanatorily. "I can talk so much better when I am thoroughly warm and cozy."

Helen smiled indulgently. 232

"All right, Nan; make yourself comfie, and then talk to me."

The flames were crackling up the chimney now, and Nan settled herself on the hearthrug with a sigh of satisfaction.

"Do you think Jean will be happy so far away from you all?"

"She wanted very much to go," Helen replied evasively.

"Yes, I know that. Helen, Jean was not happy before she went away. Did you not see it?"

Helen did not speak, and after a moment Nan resumed quietly:

"Yes, Jean was unhappy, and yet Mr. Farr loved her dearly."

Helen sat up and looked at her friend in blank astonishment.

"Why, Nan——"

"Dear, I couldn't help guessing it. Indeed, I don't mean to be impertinent, but I believe Mr. Farr was in love with Jean, and I can't bear to see everything going wrong, when a little common sense would set it right."

"I am afraid it would take more than that, Nan. Mr. Farr is in love with Lillian, I think, and probably he meant nothing by his attentions to Jean."

"He may have been in love with Miss Stuart once, but he is not now," declared Nan in a tone of conviction.

"You are mistaken, Nan. I am sure you are."

"I think not," returned Nan stubbornly. "I have had my eyes wide open, and I believe I am right." 233

"Then why did he treat Jean so?" demanded Helen. "Toward the end of his stay here he hardly ever came to the manor, and he went away without even calling to say good-by. In fact I don't think Jean knew the *Vortex* was going."

But Nan's opinion was quite unshaken. She dropped her chin in her hand and stared thoughtfully into the fire.

"I will tell you something," she said impressively. "The afternoon before the *Vortex* left, I was on my way to the inn, when from a distance I saw Mr. Farr turn in at the manor gates. You remember that shortly after Bridget came over for me, and I was so cross at having to leave our game of tennis?"

Helen nodded, and Nan went on:

"Well, on my way over I saw Mr. Farr come out from the manor grounds. His cap was drawn down over his eyes, and so lost was he in his own thoughts that he passed me on the other side of the road, and did not even see me. There was something in his whole figure and bearing expressive of disappointment and unhappiness. Oh, you needn't look incredulous," turning her head to scan Helen's face. "A person's carriage is often most expressive."

"I wasn't looking incredulous, Nan, I was only wondering what point you were going to make out of all this."

"That Mr. Farr did go to the manor to say good-by to Jean. I don't think he could have seen her, for from the time he went in the manor gates until he left them again, he could only have walked to the door and right back again without stopping." 234

"I know he didn't," said Helen quietly, "for Jean told me so." She hesitated a moment, then added: "Lillian was at home that afternoon."

Nan's face grew downcast.

"I don't believe he went to see Miss Stuart," she persisted, somewhat unreasonably. "I believe that there was some great mistake somewhere. I knew," she went on, as Helen did not reply, "that Jean was surprised to find that he and Miss Stuart were old friends. He may not have told her, but that was probably accidental. At any rate that was the beginning of the difficulty, and every incident from there on served to widen the breach. Jean thought she had been willfully deceived, and Miss Stuart was not loath to lend herself to strengthen that conviction."

"I don't see how you can blame Lillian," objected Helen irritably. "It was not her fault that Mr. Farr was in love with her. I think they were once engaged;" this last somewhat fearfully, for she did not know that she was doing right to betray her friend's secret.

Nan shrugged her shoulders:

"That may be, but it is only a greater reason why he is not in love with her now."

This bit of worldly cynicism struck on deaf ears, for Helen was revolving many things in her mind.

"There are, of course, many things that I cannot attempt to explain," Nan continued, "but I still hold to my belief that Mr. Farr cared for Jean. I like him, and I don't believe he would ever have deliberately deceived her."

A brief pause ensued.

"Nan," said Helen, "I wish the *Vortex* had never come to anchor here. Everything has gone wrong since then." 235

"Be fair, Helen. Are you sure the fault lay there? It seems to me that everything went happily until——"

"Until when? Go on, Nan."

"Until Miss Stuart came."

Helen, who had been half-sitting up, with her head propped on her hand, dropped back among the cushions with a heavy sigh.

"I don't know why you should think so. You are prejudiced against Lillian, and harsh in your thoughts of her. I am not at all sure that it is fair."

Nan gained her feet, and looked gravely down at her friend:

"Is it not true, dear? Think, Helen. Have not many things gone wrong since your acquaintance with Miss Stuart? Oh! I am sure of it, quite sure."

Unbroken silence.

"Are you angry with me, Helen?" Nan asked at length.

"No, no."

"May I say something still further, dear?"

"Of course; I know you would never willfully be unkind."

Nan sat down on the sofa:

"Things have gone wrong since the day you met Miss Stuart, and the reason is that you persisted in a friendship of which Guy so strongly disapproved. Tell me, Helen, was it not Miss Stuart who separated you from Guy? Was it not on her account that you quarreled?" 236

"I suppose so; but Guy was very strange and unreasonable, and I liked Lillian; her friendship was very sweet."

"O Helen, you had known Guy all your life; you should have relied on his judgment, you should have trusted him. Do you think that for any light or insufficient reason he would have thwarted

you? Had he not always shown himself thoroughly unselfish in everything that concerned you? You did him a very cruel wrong when you mistrusted him, Helen; and I don't see how you could have been so cold when he loved you so."

For answer, Helen raised her eyes and looked at Nan through her tears.

"I want to help you to see what a mistake you have made," Nan continued gently. "You had grown used to Guy, his devotion was such an old story that you thought you did not love him. Miss Stuart's great beauty fascinated you, and she soon found it easy to bend you to her will. Forgive me, darling, but this once I must speak bluntly. Many and many a time you would have gone back to your allegiance to Guy had she not willed it otherwise, and had he, poor fellow, not taken the worst course for his cause. It was foolish for him to go away, but Guy never could bear half-measures. Since then you have almost learned to know Lillian Stuart for yourself. Yet, even to this day, you blind yourself about her. I sometimes am tempted to think it is simply because she is so beautiful."

Helen started up, her face ablaze.

"Nan, Nan, you are unjust. You despise me because I gave Guy up, but I tell you I realized I did not love him before I ever saw Lillian Stuart. I do love her." 237

"Pshaw," interrupted Nan indignantly. "Guy Appleton is the best and truest man in the world, and you must have loved him if you had not been unduly influenced. There, dear, don't be angry. You know how fond I am of Guy, and how keenly I took his disappointment to heart. He loved you so, Helen, and he was so miserable."

"Please spare me, Nan," murmured Helen brokenly.

"I can't spare you, dear. If your mistakes had simply made you suffer, I would never have said a word, but it is not so. Miss Stuart has crossed Jean's path, and for her sake I have spoken."

"If it is true, if I were sure of it, I would want to die."

"Dying would not do any good. Live, and some day it may be in your power to put an end to all this sorrow."

"Nan, are you sure that Mr. Farr is in love with Jean?"

"Not sure, Helen, but I think so."

"What can I do?"

"Nothing at present. We must wait, and see what happens. Oh! I am very hopeful for the future."

When they were in bed and the lights were out, Nan ventured to ask:

"Don't you think Guy will ever return to Hetherford?" 238

"I don't know, dear," Helen replied, with a sound of tears in her voice.

Nan longed to shake her, to say "You ought to know; it depends solely upon you; why don't you do something about it?" but she felt she had gone far enough for one night, and turning over on her pillow, fell fast asleep.

Nan was only a country-bred lass, and yet not all her separation from the world and from her fellow-creatures could shut her out from an unerring comprehension of human nature. Her wide sympathies taught her to understand Helen's coldness toward a lover whose one fault was that he had demanded too little and yielded too much; and she was too thorough an artist not to fully appreciate the wonderful spell that beauty such as Miss Stuart's casts upon certain natures.

The next day the rain came down in sheets, and nothing drearier could be imagined than the Hetherford station, where Helen and Nathalie awaited the arrival of their friends, who were to depart on the train which was now almost due. Presently the old omnibus backed up to the platform, and from its damp interior the Hills and Andrews slowly emerged, their faces as gloomy as the leaden sky above, as they went through the irksome task of buying tickets and checking trunks. Nan came rushing in upon the scene just as the train drew up at the station. There were a few hurried words of farewell, and then, with a clanging of bells and puffing of steam, the train sped on its way to the far-off city. When the three girls clambered into the Lawrences' great closed rockaway, they felt sorely tempted to give way to tears and lamentations. The horses 239
splashed through the mud, the rain beat against the windowpanes, the east wind wailed and sighed through the trees. Nan got out at the parsonage, and in silence the two sisters drove on to the manor. Nathalie threw off her hat and coat, and seating herself at the big table in the center of the hall-way, began a long letter to Jean. From the fireside Helen watched her for a few moments and then mounted slowly to her room, feeling too dispirited for even Aunt Helen's society.

By and by a soft little voice from without begged for admission, and she opened the door and gladly drew Gladys into the room.

"Baby, you are just the little girlie I wanted. Sister feels very dull and lonely to-day."

"Me too," echoed Gladys, as she climbed into her lap.

"Well, well, that is too bad. We shall have to comfort each other."

"What is comfort, sister?"

"Comfort, Dolly? Why to comfort anyone is to try to make them happy when something is troubling them."

"Auntie says I'se her comfort," Gladys affirmed, with a wise little nod of her head.

"So you are, pet, and not only Auntie's, but mine too."

The child nestled down contentedly in her sister's arms. Her big eyes, wandering about the room, rested at length upon a large folding frame of photographs which stood on the mantel. 240

"I wish Jeanie didn't go 'way," she said in a pathetic little voice.

"What made you think of Jean, dear?"

"'Cause I just was lookin' at her picture."

Helen lifted her eyes to the mantel.

"So you were. We all miss Jean very much, don't we, darling?"

"Who's that, sister?" asked Gladys, pointing to the photograph next to the one of Jean.

"Don't you know?"

"I kind of 'member, but I ain't sure."

"Have you forgotten Mr. Appleton, Gladys—Guy Appleton?" queried Helen in a low tone.

"Oh, now I 'member," cried Gladys gleefully. "Don't you know the little kitty he gave me? Larry harnessed her to my little wed cart, an' she wan up the willow tree with it." And at the recollection, the child burst into a merry peal of laughter.

Helen laughed, too, in sympathy, and then it came back to her how nicely Guy had spoken to the children, telling them that what was fun to them was suffering to poor kitty, and impressing upon them how unkind and cowardly it was to be cruel to any living creature.

They talked on thus, this big and little sister, until twilight had come. Then Helen put the child down from her lap, and sent her off to the nursery for her supper. As she turned back into the room, her eyes could just discern the outline of the frame upon the mantel, but although the photographs within it were quite obscured by the dusk, Guy's face rose before her with startling 241 distinctness. She dropped into a chair, and a dismal little laugh broke from her.

"Oh, dear, I wish Gladys and Nan had both kept still. Now I don't know what I do want."

Week followed week monotonously, with little to mark the flight of time save the arrival of letters from Jean and the Appletons. Jean wrote cheerfully, declaring that she was much better and in excellent spirits, but Mrs. Appleton's reports were much less encouraging.

"Jean never complains," she wrote, "and seems filled with a restless desire to keep constantly on the move, but she still looks very fragile, and I sometimes fear that all at once she will break down completely. However, you must not be anxious, about her, for perhaps I am needlessly so. Mrs. Fay expects to return home at Christmas time, and I imagine that by then Jean will be quite ready to accompany her."

The last week in November Helen went to town to spend Thanksgiving with the Hills.

"It seemed almost selfish to take you away from Nathalie," Eleanor said, as they drove rapidly away from the station through the noisy, crowded streets, "but I was longing for a sight of someone from Hetherford, and I thought it would be such fun to begin to do our Christmas shopping together. A little later the shops are so terribly overcrowded."

The first few days of Helen's visit were passed chiefly in this wise, and partly because her time was so fully occupied, and partly because of a curiously uncomfortable feeling which she could not shake off, she neglected to let Miss Stuart know that she was in town. On the fourth evening 242 after her arrival they dined at a famous restaurant with an uncle and aunt of Eleanor's and two youths of the *jeunesse dorée*. Helen had felt very shy at first, but this was fast wearing off, and she was talking quite naturally and pleasantly with her companion, when a party of two ladies and half a dozen men entered the room, and selecting a table at a short distance from where Eleanor and her friends were seated, grouped themselves about it; their loud talking and easy assurance attracting universal attention. Helen stared at them a little curiously, and then, as one of the ladies drew off her long tan gloves and let her gaze wander slowly around the room, she gave a sudden start. At the same instant the lady's glance met Helen's, and the recognition was mutual. Miss Stuart gracefully inclined her head, a certain surprise in her eyes, and Helen flushed crimson as she returned the bow.

"Why, there is Miss Stuart," exclaimed Eleanor. "I can't imagine why she chooses such a companion as Mrs. Desborough."

"And why should Miss Stuart be so particular?" laughed the man at her side. "It would be the pot calling the kettle black, wouldn't it?"

Eleanor broke in hurriedly, with some totally irrelevant remark, but the words had reached Helen's ears. The color died out of her face, and from that moment her companion found her silent and absent-minded. As they passed out of the restaurant, Miss Stuart bowed smilingly to Eleanor and turned a steady level glance on Helen. 243

"Who were you bowing to?" asked Mrs. Desborough from the other side of the table.

"To Miss Hill and her friend Miss Lawrence," Miss Stuart replied a little stiffly.

"What?" laughed the man at her side, "not that demure little girl who was dining with Miss Hill?"

"The very same. She is a great friend of mine."

"Oh, come now, don't tell me that. You two never hit it off together."

Miss Stuart frowned.

"You will oblige me by not discussing the subject," she returned, in a tone so unlike her usual careless, flippant one that her companion was impressed by it. "I like her infinitely better than any woman I have ever known."

"By Jove, I believe you are in earnest!"

"Don't believe anything," she answered sharply, and turning to the man on her left plunged at once into a reckless flirtation. 244

## CHAPTER XIX.

## A CABLEGRAM.

The following morning a note came for Helen by a messenger. It was from Lillian Stuart and, without a word of upbraiding for having been kept in ignorance of Helen's presence in town, begged for a visit from her prior to her return to Hetherford. Helen was fully alive to the generous spirit thus shown toward her, but it did not alter her determination to decline the invitation. She worded her answer as kindly as possible, while making her meaning quite clear. It hurt her cruelly to take this step, and as she sealed the envelope there were tears in her eyes.

It was Mrs. Hill's day at home, and when, after luncheon, Eleanor reminded Helen of this fact, the girl pleaded to be excused, for she felt far too depressed and out of sorts to meet people and to exert herself to entertain them. Mrs. Hill indulgently granted her request, and so she put on her hat and coat and started out for a walk. She strolled down a beautiful avenue, lined with fine residences, succeeded, as she proceeded, by richly and gayly ornamented shops. A crowd of people were passing up and down, and the street at times was almost blocked with an innumerable throng of equipages. When Helen had reached a point where this avenue is intersected by another, she crossed the street and entered a square, whose patches of grass and 245
bare trees were a rest to her eyes after the rows of stately buildings all about her. Children were playing about on the smooth paths, and as Helen looked at them she found herself longing for a sight of dear little Gladys' round, chubby face. Across the street, on the block below, a swinging sign caught her attention. Its staring characters told her that an art exhibition was being held within, and she turned her steps in that direction. As she approached the showy and over-ornamented doorway, she glanced up at a man who was coming toward her. Something in his gait and general bearing struck her as familiar. As he gained her side he raised his hat, and she saw that he was Valentine Farr.

"Why, Miss Lawrence," he exclaimed, "this is a very great and unexpected pleasure. I had no idea you were in town. How are you?"

"Oh! very well, thank you, but," with a sympathetic glance at his arm, which she saw he carried in a sling, "have you been hurt, Mr. Farr?"

"I had a fall aboard ship on our way to Fort Munroe, and broke my arm. It was badly attended to, so I got leave to come home and have Dr. ——," naming a well-known surgeon, "fix it up for me."

"I am sorry," said Helen, looking at him with friendly eyes.

"Where were you going, Miss Lawrence?" Farr asked, as the surging throng crowded them close to the railing of a near house. 246

"I thought I would go in just above here, and see the pictures."

"Will you let me accompany you? I would deem it a very great favor, I have so many questions I want to ask you. I want to know all about Hetherford and everyone there.

"Indeed, I wish you would, and I will gladly satisfy your curiosity. There is not much to tell of Hetherford save that Jean has gone to Europe."

She tried to mention her sister's name quite naturally, but the color rose to her face, and she could not bring herself to look at her companion.

"To Europe?" he echoed, and could think of nothing further to say.

"I will tell you all about it when we are inside," Helen said to him rather flurriedly.

In a moment more they found themselves in a softly lighted room, the walls of which were lined with paintings. A few people, catalogue in hand, were slowly walking about or standing in groups of two or three before some painting of more than usual merit. Helen gained courage to raise her eyes to her companion's face, and something in its expression made her direct her steps at once toward a huge red ottoman which occupied the center of the room.

"Shall we sit down here and have our talk first?" her voice softly interrogated. "You can show me the pictures afterward."

Farr looked at her gratefully.

"It would be my wish, Miss Helen, but you mustn't let me bore you." 247

For answer, Helen seated herself and motioned him to take the place beside her.

"Jean went to Europe in October. She had not been at all well, and——"

"Not well?" he interrupted her with an anxious face.

"In fact, she was quite ill," Helen went on gravely, "and she had an opportunity to join some friends of ours who were over there, so we sent her in the hope that the change would benefit her."

"And how is she now?"

"Somewhat better, I think, but not very strong yet."

"I am deeply grieved," he answered, in a voice which his best efforts could not keep very steady.

There was a brief silence, during which Farr's eyes were fixed moodily on the carpet.

"I called to see your sister," he began at length, "the day before we left Hetherford, but she excused herself."

"I don't think Jean knew of your visit."

"You are mistaken," he returned bitterly. "The servant who admitted me had received orders that Miss Jean would not see me, and she made that fact patent to me beyond the possibility of any doubt."

"I cannot help that," said Helen, her determination to pursue the subject struggling against a sudden timidity. "I am sure you are wrong. I remember the afternoon perfectly. Nathalie and I had been to the inn, and when we reached home I found Jean on the sofa in her room, and I asked her if anyone had called, and she said 'no.'" 248

A puzzled expression crossed Farr's face.

"It is very strange. Why, Miss Helen, I wrote and asked your sister if she would see me, and she replied that she would be at home at the hour I mentioned in my note."

All at once there flashed through Helen's mind a recollection which suggested a most cruel suspicion. Farr was looking straight at her, his honest eyes demanding an honest answer.

"I cannot explain it, Mr. Farr," she said slowly, "but I feel perfectly safe in answering you that it was all a mistake, and that Jean never knew of your call at the manor."

"And what of the message the servant gave me? Forgive me, Miss Helen, if I seem to press you, but this is no light matter to me."

"I am quite sure that Jean never gave that message, although I can give you no further explanation of the matter."

Farr's face went very white, and, as Helen looked at him, she saw how much the past few months had changed him. There were deep lines about his mouth, and his grave eyes were immeasurably sad. Her heart went out to him in sudden sympathy, and she spoke to him with a touch of tenderness in her voice.

"Jean will be with us again at Christmas time, I hope, and then you must see her and let her explain to you how such a mistake was made."

Farr rested his elbow on his knee and dropped his head in his hand.

"If I only felt sure you were right, Miss Helen." He paused a moment, then resumed with deep earnestness, "I cared so much for your sister that the sudden withdrawal of her friendship was a bitter blow to me." 249

Helen's eyes were downcast, her lips refused to speak. The silence was broken by Farr.

"I think at one time I dreamed she cared for me a little, but my illusion was quickly dispelled."

Another pause of briefer duration, and then he turned to his companion with a question on his lips.

"How was it, Miss Helen? Did I presume too much on your sister's kindness to me? I suppose I must have, although it seems to me that I hardly deserved her excessive coldness and dislike."

Helen, thus put to the test, looked straight up at him, and answered a little tremulously:

"Mr. Farr, Jean always liked you."

He drew a quick sharp breath.

"Why do you think so?" he asked. Then before Helen could reply, he went on in a strained voice, "I loved Jean with all my heart, and was about to ask her to be my wife. I love her now—I shall always love her."

"And Jean cares for you," Helen whispered, so low he had to bend his head to catch the words.

"Cares for me?" he repeated, a sudden light in his eyes, his voice grown very deep and tender.

"Yes, oh yes. There must have been some wretched mistake which can be explained away. I don't know how it was," she went on with a plaintive smile. "Jean's heart was almost broken because of you, and she grew so ill we had to send her away." 250

"Thank God!" he ejaculated solemnly.

Helen broke into a little laugh, which was full of tears.

"That Jean has gone away?" she queried.

Farr lifted his head and drew a deep breath.

"I can't thank you, Miss Helen. I seem to have no words to express to you what you have done for me to-day. Indeed, it seems as if Fate, for once, had chosen to do me a kind turn."

After a little Helen said gently:

"You must come to the manor for Christmas, Mr. Farr. I can think of no greater happiness for Jean than to have you there to welcome her on her return."

"Miss Helen, I—I can't realize it. You——" His voice broke, but after a moment he resumed: "You are not holding out a vain hope to me—you are sure?"

Helen met his eyes steadily, and he was reassured, even before she answered gravely:

"Quite sure, Mr. Farr. Do you think I would have spoken else?"

She turned away her head, and he saw a tear on her cheek.

"I have tried to fill my mother's place to the girls, but I was blinded by personal interests, and did not understand about Jean until too late. I don't think I could have borne it if it had not been put in my power to retrieve my mistake."

Farr looked at her curiously, a thoroughly puzzled expression on his face. He opened his lips to question her, but suddenly changed his mind, and closed them without having spoken. 251

Helen rose from the ottoman.

"We have not seen the pictures, have we?" she asked in a lighter tone.

Farr stood looking down at her with earnest eyes.

"Miss Helen, if God is good to me, if all goes well, is there a welcome for me at the manor?"

She put out her hand to him, and he held it tightly for a moment.

"God bless you."

Some minutes later they descended the wide stairs, and, passing through the outer door, found themselves once more in the crowded thoroughfare. The short November day was drawing to a close, the wind was keen and sharp, and a flurry of snow filled the air.

"Now, Mr. Farr, I want you to put me in an omnibus, please, and you must not come uptown with me."

Then, as he demurred, she added, with a friendly smile:

"My mind is so full of thoughts, I would really rather be alone for a while. You understand, don't you?"

She turned on the steps of the omnibus to say:

"I will let you know about Jean's return, and remember, you are to spend Christmas with us."

"As if I could forget," Farr murmured to himself, as he strode away, his face alight with a great happiness.

As Helen rang the bell of the Hills' cozy apartment, the door was opened from the inside, and she found herself face to face with Lillian Stuart. From the drawing-room came the buzz of tongues, and through the half-open portières she could see quite a number of people standing about. Miss Stuart answered her unspoken thought: 252

"Don't go in there, Helen; take me to your room. I want to speak to you for a moment. I have already made my call on the Hills."

Helen obediently led the way down the hall, but her heart was very heavy, for she had no courage for another scene this afternoon. She knew that the conversation must necessarily be painful, and she made every effort to put off the evil moment; but in vain. Almost before the door was closed Miss Stuart began:

"Now, Helen, will you please explain to me why you must return to Hetherford in such haste? Surely your aunt can spare you to me for a few days. I can't imagine how you could have planned to be in town, and not to be with me for a little visit."

Helen flushed guiltily.

"I am so sorry, dear," she faltered. "Another time, perhaps, but now I must go home."

Miss Stuart started up, loosening her fur boa impatiently.

"That is absolute folly. There is nothing to stand in the way unless——" She broke off abruptly, and her eyes searched Helen's downcast face. "Do you want to put an end to our friendship," she cried sharply. "Is that why you act so strangely?" 253

Helen lifted her hand with an imploring gesture of dissent.

"Answer me, Helen. Am I not right?"

Helen's head was bent still lower, and she made no attempt to speak. Miss Stuart watched her for a moment in silence, and a slight quiver passed over her face. She came a step nearer, and laid her hand on the girl's shoulder:

"Who has influenced you against me, Helen? What has happened?"

"Why, Lillian, what makes you say that? It is not fair, simply because in one instance I am unable to fulfill your wishes."

Miss Stuart withdrew her hand, and her brow darkened.

"Helen, Helen; you disappoint me. Let us have the truth at all hazards. Tell me frankly, would not your answer always be the same now, whenever I might ask you for a visit?"

Helen shivered a little, and she could not bring herself to meet the girl's eyes. Presently Miss Stuart spoke again, the effort to subdue all emotion rendering her voice cold and stern.

"I understand. You have withdrawn your friendship from me. Oh! no doubt you have discovered the depth of my unworthiness, and feel perfectly justified. Content in your own moral superiority, and in that of your friends in general, you have decided that it would be wiser to banish me from the inner circle. Of course," she went on with a bitter laugh, "you have not reached this conclusion alone. Would you mind telling me who has helped you to it?" 254

The taunting question stung Helen into a response:

"You told me an untruth, Lillian. You deliberately deceived me. You caused untold suffering to one who is very dear to me, to what end I cannot imagine. And this was your return for all the love and trust I had given you."

Miss Stuart turned a startled glance on Helen.

"What do you mean?" she asked breathlessly.

"I have seen Mr. Farr to-day, and a good many things that have puzzled me have been made clear. I am not judging you, Lillian. I am completely in the dark as to your motives. I only know that you were not honest with me."

"So you have seen Val Farr," murmured Miss Stuart. She flung back her head defiantly. "Well, what did he tell you of me? I thought he was too much of a man to speak ill of a woman."

"Your name was never mentioned, Lillian. I am not prepared to tell you what Mr. Farr said to me. Suffice it to say, it proved the untruth of what you led me to believe last summer."

Miss Stuart caught her breath.

"I suppose that means that he is in love with your sister?"

"We will not discuss that, please," replied Helen with quiet dignity.

Her companion laughed, but there was no mirth in the sound.

"Well, I could have told you that last summer. I did lie to you about it. The game is played out now, and I have lost, so there is no further reason why I should not tell you the truth. I was jealous of that little sister of yours, and I did everything in my power to keep her and Valentine Farr apart. Placed in the same position, I should undoubtedly repeat the offense." 255

Cruel and unwomanly as the words were, there was something in her friend's voice which stirred Helen with a feeling of pity. She rose and laid a gentle hand on Miss Stuart's arm.

"You must not try to make me think badly of you, dear. I would so much rather believe that you did not realize how much misery you were causing. Let us not speak any more of this, Lillian."

A sudden rush of tears dimmed Miss Stuart's eyes.

"The least I can do is to grant your last request, Helen. One thing more I can do for you, dear—I can go. You need never see me again."

There was just a faint interrogation in the low-spoken words, but Helen remained quite silent. She was waging a bitter fight within herself. Everything pressed her into a renunciation of this friendship which had cost her so dear. Slowly there was awakening within her a deep knowledge of Guy Appleton's character, and with this knowledge came a great longing to win from him the love which she had so lightly sacrificed. While a vestige of this friendship remained Guy would never take her to his heart, and now her choice must be made. Then she thought of Jean and Valentine Farr, and the thought strengthened her conviction that only one path was open to her. 256 Raising her tearstained face, she met Lillian's eyes smiling sadly on her.

"So you find it hard to give me up, Helen? Are you sure it is necessary?"

The critical moment had come, and involuntarily Helen put her hands before her eyes to shut out the beautiful face so close to her own:

"Our paths must lie apart, Lillian, dear; but as long as I live I will remember you and pray for you."

The silence that followed these words became oppressive, and Helen stirred uneasily and stole a timid glance at her friend. Miss Stuart's face was uplifted; her wonderful eyes, filled with unutterable sadness, gazed mournfully into space. If suffering can expiate a sin, in that moment she fully expiated the wrong she had done to Jean. After a while she turned and laid her hands on Helen's shoulders.

"I understand, my dear, and I do not blame you. Good-by!" And stooping, she kissed her gently on the lips.

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Helen stood before the fire in the hall-way of the manor, two letters in hand, a thoughtful expression in her eyes. In four days Jean and Mrs. Fay would sail for home, and Guy had written: "Will you not send for me, Helen? I will never return until you do."

"Oh, dear," her thoughts ran, "why must it be left for me to decide! If Guy would only take it into his own hands and come, I would be so grateful."

Poor weak little woman! It was hard for her to act for herself. How happy she would be to find 257 shelter in some safe harbor, guided there by a stronger hand than her own. With one stroke of a pen she could recall Guy, but the strangest shyness overmastered her. She wandered restlessly about the house, her heart as heavy as lead; and not until daylight was waning, and the long winter evening closing in upon the manor, did she finally start out for the telegraph office, a bit of paper held closely in the hand that was tucked in her muff.

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In a hotel in Paris a party of people was assembled in a small private sitting-room. Against the walls, their lids gaping, were a number of half-filled trunks, and in the paraphernalia that were scattered around was every indication of an imminent departure. Mrs. Fay and Jean bustled busily about, stowing away the many purchases which this city of shops had tempted them to make, stopping now and then to consult Guy as to some detail of the long journey which lay before them. Poor Mrs. Appleton watched them with homesick eyes. She was tired of wandering about in strange lands, hungry for a sight of the little vine-covered cottage which had been empty for so many weary months. Surely no mother had ever given her son a greater love, a more generous sacrifice.

"I am a foolish old woman, my dear," she had said to him a few moments since, when he had looked up suddenly and had seen the tears in her eyes. "I suppose it is not unnatural that I should sometimes dream of spending the last years of my life in 'my own home.'" 258

Guy did not answer then. It was a shock to him to discover how much this exile had cost his patient, uncomplaining mother; and, as he sat at the little table in the center of the room, apparently absorbed in straightening out accounts, he was facing the duty which had suddenly been made clear to him.

"Poor mother!" he thought, with tender compunction, "I have been a selfish brute."

Yet it was not easy for him to depart from the course he had marked out for himself, for, like many another man of strong character, Guy was very obstinate. One glance at his mother's face, however, made him ashamed of his hesitation, and he pushed away his papers and rose to his feet, while he framed the sentence which would determine their return home. Just at that moment there was a knock at the door, and in response to Jean's brisk, "*Entrez*," a servant handed her a cablegram in its blue wrapper, addressed "Appleton, Continental, Paris."

Three simple words the message contained, but to the man who read them they made all the difference between light and darkness, between life and death. The message read:

> Please come home.—HELEN.

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# CHAPTER XX.
# "PEACE ON EARTH—GOOD WILL TO MEN."

On a most delicious day late in December there is an air of unusual bustle and excitement over the manor. Outside the ground is covered with a deep mantle of glistening snow, and overhead the winter's sun shines cold and clear from out a vault of deepest blue. Within the house wood fires are blazing on every hearth, and the atmosphere is filled with the fragrance of fresh flowers which Helen's deft hands have just arranged in every available vase and bowl.

Only yesterday the travelers from the other side arrived; Mrs. Appleton supremely contented to be once more at home; Guy, with the anticipation of his happiness lighting his whole face, and Jean sweet and brave as ever, but with a deep sadness in her eyes, and looking such a frail and slender figure in her close-fitting gown.

Helen and Nathalie had gone to town to meet them, and had brought them to Hetherford; for on the morrow all the old friends were to gather at the manor for Christmas, and the girls wanted one long quiet evening with Jean before the arrival of their guests.

This home-coming was very hard for poor Jean; harder than she had anticipated; and when the first little excitement of her meeting with Aunt Helen and the children was over, it required all her courage to keep her face bright and smiling, her voice gay and cheery. Everything spoke to her of Farr, and she sighed a little wearily, as she realized that all her journeyings had lessened not one whit the pain at her heart. As they gathered before the blazing logs in the drawing-room, just after dinner, to talk over all that had happened since they parted, Helen's loving heart detected the undercurrent of pathos which ran through all Jean's spirited accounts of her travels and adventures; and she was tempted to speak just the few words which alone could bring back the sunny light-hearted expression to Jean's face. She resisted the temptation, however, for she had given Farr her promise that his coming on the morrow should be a complete surprise. He was to come out on an early train, so as to secure a quiet hour with Jean before the manor was invaded by its other guests.

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And now he is almost due, and Helen's heart beats fast, and her eyes watch Jean's every movement as if she feared to let her out of her sight. All the morning they have been dressing the house with Christmas greens, and Jean stands on tip-toe to fasten the last wreath over the fireplace, when a ringing of sleigh-bells breaks the stillness of the snowy winter's day. Then there is a stamping of a man's feet on the veranda, and Helen opens wide the door to admit Valentine Farr. Jean's back is toward him, and there is just a brief instant while she adjusts the last nail to secure the wreath, before she turns.

"What a draught. Why don't you close the——" she begins; then, turning, the hammer she is holding falls to the ground with a crash, and, her hand on her heart, her eyes wide-open and startled, she stands facing Valentine Farr.

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In another instant Helen has closed the door and disappeared into the drawing-room, and Farr has taken Jean's hands in his own, and is speaking to her in a voice grown very deep and tender.

"Jean, my little love, have you no word of welcome for me?"

The blood rushes into her face, then ebbs away, leaving it even paler than before.

"Ah, I have frightened you, sweetheart," Farr cries contritely, "and you are not very strong yet, are you, dear? But I have waited such a weary while; I have been so miserable for a sight of your sweet face; I could not wait to tell you that I love you. Surely you must have known it long ago, darling."

Jean's head droops lower and lower, and she does not speak.

"I want you to be my wife, dear," Farr's tender voice goes on. "Do you love me, Jean?"

Still she is silent, and Farr's face grows very white.

"What is it, Jean? Are you angry with me for speaking to you so abruptly? Oh, my love, my love, don't tell me that you cannot care for me."

Then Jean raises her eyes, and though the tears are shining in them, they are full of a great happiness.

"I do love you, dear, with all my heart and soul," she says very low, but quite steadily.

Farr's face above her is eloquent, and for the moment they have no need of words. Then the tears brim over in Jean's eyes, and with a little tremulous cry she flings herself in his arms: 262

"O Val, I have been so miserable!"

And Farr, bending down, kisses her tenderly.

"Please God, darling, no misery will ever again come to you through me."

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A few hours later they all gather about the long dinner table and, in the pause that follows upon their being seated, old Mr. Birdsall's sweet and tremulous voice asks grace. In simple heartfelt words he thanks God for the safe return of the travelers, and asks his tender blessing for one and all. Every head is reverently bent, and every heart echoes the earnest prayer.

This is a gala occasion, and in its honor Aunt Helen presides at the head of the table, and Willie and Larry and even little Gladys are present. With much ringing laughter and merriment the dinner hour passes. Jean's voice is as joyous as in the old days, and Helen, hearing the sweet sound, is filled with overwhelming gratitude.

"I tell you, girls," Dick cries enthusiastically, "this is a proud day for me. I feel that it is entirely owing to my watchful care of you all that these pleasant things have come to pass. Jean, my child, did I not present Farr to you?"

Jean laughs, and blushes.

"Oh, I don't know, Dick. I am not quite clear about it. If you did I am deeply indebted," and she turns a shy soft glance toward her lover.

"It was your humble servant. Now, there is a most appropriate way in which you may reward me," and Dick holds a sprig of mistletoe high above his head. 263

"No, no. What nonsense," protests Jean.

"You may," smiles Farr.

"But I don't want to," she laughs saucily.

"Poor Dick," exclaims Mollie sorrowfully, and she jumps up from the table to give him a sisterly hug and a kiss. "I declare it is a shame. I shan't see you so neglected."

"Thank you, my dear," returns Dick, with a grin, "that isn't quite the same, but it is very sweet."

"Oh, dear," sighs Nan, as they push back their chairs, and wander into the drawing-room, "how queer it seems to have Helen and Jean engaged. It is all very amusing now, but what will become of us next summer. I am afraid our compact is about at an end."

Cliff, who is standing near Eleanor, bends down to whisper something to her, and then pushes her gently into the middle of the room. She faces the group before her with flaming cheeks, and looks about her helplessly.

"Girls, I suppose I must confess. I, too, am a traitor to our compact."

"O Eleanor," cries Jean, excitedly, and puts a tender arm about her.

Cliff leans against the mantel, as nonchalant and languid as ever; but his eyes rest on Eleanor with infinite pride and content. The girl turns toward the others with a graceful gesture of appeal.

"Am I forgiven?" 264

They crowd about her with eager, loving words of congratulation; and then, when the confusion has subsided, Nan begs their attention for a moment.

"I have some news for you."

"O Nan! don't tell us you are engaged," implores Mollie dolorously.

Nan burst into a merry laugh.

"What an idea! No indeed. But, girls and boys what do you think? Emily is *married*!"

"*Married?*" they cry in one breath.

"Yes, married to a very rich widower, with gray hair, and three big children, and oh, lots of money!" and Nan almost chokes in her haste to enumerate all these virtues.

"Now, Nan, be sensible, and take a long breath, and tell us all about it," says Nathalie.

"Well, he owns a fine place at B——, where Em lives, and he knew her when she was a little bit of a girl. He married and went to England to live. About two years ago his wife died and this fall he returned to B——, renewed his acquaintance with Em, proposed to her, and yesterday they were married."

"What unseemly haste!" Mollie exclaims.

"No, not a bit of it. They didn't mean to be married until spring, but Mr. Hazletine was suddenly recalled to England on important business, which may keep him there several months, and he was so unhappy at leaving Em that she consented to be married at once and go with him."

"To think of it! I suppose now Emily will roll by in her carriage, wear magnificent clothes, and completely dazzle us with her jewels of inestimable value." 265

"So much the better, Mollie," rejoins Helen heartily. "Poor little Em has tasted of poverty all her life. Think what a relief it will be to her to have ample means."

"It is fine," cries Eleanor.

"And what in the world shall we do?" groans Nathalie with a comical glance at Nan and Mollie.

"Laugh at their love-making, and, with the hansom driver, be glad we are not in it."

"O Nan, you rowdy," laughs Jean.

Helen rises, and makes her way to the door, closely followed by Guy.

"I am going to say good-night to Aunt Helen," she whispers, her eyes drooping shyly under the steadfast gaze he bends upon her.

"I will wait for you here, dear," he says, and takes her hand in his, but she blushes so painfully he lets it drop again.

"Foolish little woman," he sighs to himself. "Shall I ever really possess her heart?"

In a few moments she rejoins him, and Guy puts his arm about her, and leads her into the music room. No lamps are lighted, but the window-shades are up, and the moon's soft rays shine through the panes, illumining mysteriously the great empty room. Far away, across the snowclad landscape, the slender spire of St. Andrew's points heavenward, and through the windows of the church shines the red glow of a light within. The scene is one of infinite peace and beauty, and the magic of the hour casts its spell over Helen and her lover, as speechless, motionless, they 266 stand within the recess of the window, gazing out at the marvelous beauty of the night.

By and by, Helen moves a little closer to her companion.

"I have something to tell you, Guy," she murmurs, "and I haven't the courage to say it."

The old doubt, not yet dispelled, pales Guy's face.

"Don't tell me you are going to send me from you again, Helen."

The girl's heart throbs at the pain in his voice:

"No, no, dear. I want to tell you something so different. I love you, Guy," her voice dropping to a whisper. "Please never leave me again."

He holds her to his heart with a love the deeper for all the pain and waiting, finding a heaven in the sweet lips which meet his so frankly. And even as they stand there the bell of St. Andrew's, solemnly tolling the midnight hour, ushers in the glad Christmas tide.

"Helen," says Eleanor's voice from the doorway, "may we all come in? We think it would be so sweet if you would play our Christmas hymn on the organ and let us sing it together."

Helen pushes back the curtain, and steps forward, an expression of perfect rest on her gentle face.

"Yes, indeed, I think it is a lovely idea."

Guy opens the organ. Helen steps into her place, and Cliff brings a lamp from the hall, and places it nearby.

"Val," Jean whispers to her lover, "there is just one sad thought in my heart to-night. I suppose it is the memory of Christ's message of peace and love, which makes me so sorrowful when I think 267 of the bitter feeling between your mother and yourself. Do you think it will ever be in my power to help to overcome it?"

"We will try together, sweetheart, and the great blessing of your love will make all life easier, and better for me."

Then Helen's hands strike the opening chords of the hymn and a hush falls upon the little group,

and with one accord they move nearer the organ, and as the last bell of St. Andrew's dies slowly away, their voices take up the glad refrain:

It came upon the midnight clear,
That glorious song of old,
From angels bending near the earth,
To touch their harps of gold:
"Peace on the earth, good will to men,
From heaven's all-gracious King."
The world in solemn stillness lay,
To hear the angels sing.

FINIS

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