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Author: Arlo Bates

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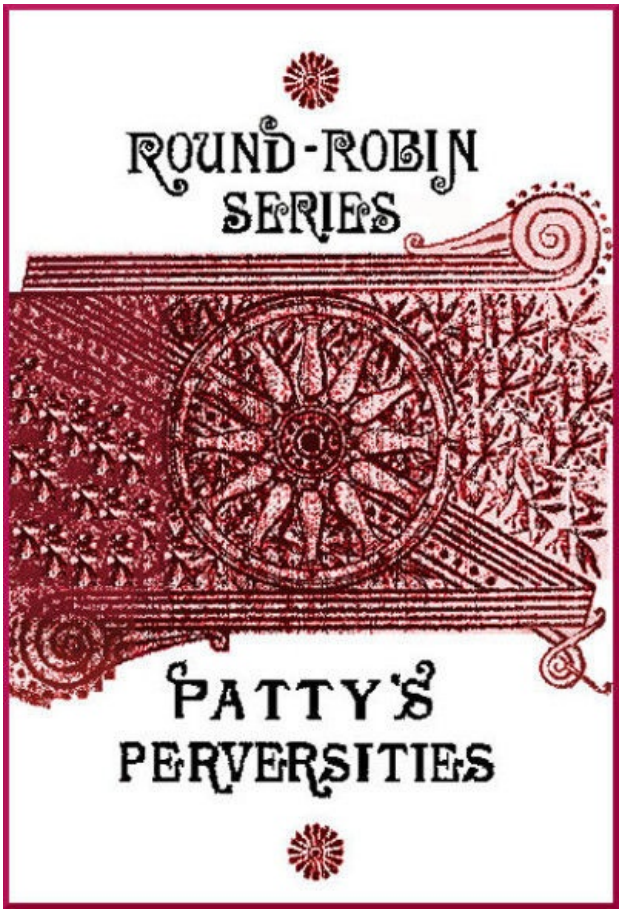

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ROUND-ROBIN SERIES.

Patty's Perversities

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CONTENTS.

PATTY'S PERVERSITIES.

CHAPTER I.

MORNING.

"THERE is one thing sure," mused Patty Sanford, newly awakened by the sun's rays which streamed through her honeysuckle-draped casement; "there is one thing sure,—I shall go to the picnic with whom I like: else why should I go at all? To-day they will come to invite me. Burleigh will come, of course; but it is easy to get rid of him. Then Clarence Toxteth is sure to ask me. How it piques the girls to see me behind his span! Clarence's span is so nice! It is a pity he isn't—I mean I wish I liked him better. But he isn't always saying horrid things, like Tom Putnam. I wonder if Tom will ask me. I do so hope he will, so I can snub him. I'm sure," she continued to herself, in her energy raising herself upon her dimpled elbow,—"I'm sure I don't know anybody who needs snubbing more than he. If he only would come after Clarence has invited me, that would be fun. He'd manage to come out superior, though, in some way. He always does; and [2] that's the worst of him—or the best, I'm not quite certain which. There! Will would say I was 'moonier than the moon.'—Flossy, Floss!"

"Yes," answered a sleepy voice from the next chamber.

"Are you awake?"

"Well," the voice replied with great deliberation, "not as much as some."

"You'd better be, then. There are oceans of things to see to to-day."

At that moment was heard from below the voice of Mrs. Sanford, calling her daughter; and Patty hastily began her toilet for the early breakfast, already being prepared below by Bathalina Clemens, the maid of all work.

The company assembled around the breakfast-table consisted, in addition to Patty, of her father and mother, her brother Will, and a cousin rejoicing in the euphonious title of Flossy Plant.

Dr. Sanford was a tall, thin-faced gentleman, with deep, kindly eyes, and slightly-stooping shoulders. He would have been hen-pecked, but for the fact that he was so fully aware of his wife's peculiarities as to be able to guard himself against them. He smiled at her vagaries and gallinaceous ways with a quiet, inward sense of humor.

"Your aunt is a very amusing woman," he once said to Flossy Plant; and, indeed, it was sometimes difficult for the whole family not to regard Mrs. Sanford as a species of private Punch and Judy intended for their especial entertainment.

This morning the worthy lady was discussing the church picnic, to take place the following day. [3]

"I think," she said impressively, "that picnics are chiefly bugs and critters; but I suppose it is a duty folks owe to religion to go."

"And to ride there with the gentlemen," put in Flossy, seeing the twinkle in her uncle's eye.

"But the buggies are so terrible narrow nowadays," Mrs. Sanford continued, the breadth of her figure giving point to the remark, "that one is squeezed to death. The last time I rode in one I dreamed, the next night, that I was a postage-stamp on a letter; and, of course, that couldn't be a lucky dream."

"Oh, the narrow buggies are the beauty of it!" Flossy retorted: "it brings you and the gentlemen so close and cosey, you know."

"Flossy Plant!" exclaimed Bathalina Clemens, who was bringing in a fresh supply of griddle-cakes, and felt called upon, as she frequently did, to "bear testimony." "Flossy Plant, that is positively indelicate."

"Bathalina Clemens," returned Flossy serenely, "you don't know the very first principles of indelicacy."

In the general laugh that greeted this sally Mrs. Sanford did not join.

"I don't know what you mean," she said; "but I'm sure it isn't proper. Besides," she continued, "I have a foreboding in my mind. I put my left shoe on my right foot this morning, and I doubt something will happen: besides, I know strangers are coming, for my nose itches; and Bathalina dropped the dish-cloth last night; and a fork stuck up straight in the floor this morning." [4]

"I am glad of that," Patty said lightly. "The more people that come to-day, the better Floss and I shall be pleased, if they come to invite us to the picnic."

"Flossy," interrupted Mrs. Sanford, "you have spilled your salt. Throw a pinch over your left shoulder quick. It is strange how careless folks can be; just the day before a picnic too.—And then," she rambled on, "there's the cooking. Patty, you'll have to make the cake, and do all the millinery of the cooking: you ought to have picked over the raisins before breakfast."

"If I do any thing before breakfast," Flossy said, "I have to have my breakfast first."

"So do I," Patty laughed; "but I can make up for lost time afterward."

CHAPTER II.

"A BIRD IN THE BUSH."

[5]

It was while Patty was engaged in doing "the millinery of the cooking," that her first swain arrived. Social etiquette in Montfield was not rigid, and Patty was not at all surprised when the shadow of Burleigh Blood's broad shoulders fell upon the kitchen-floor, and that enamoured youth entered without the formality of knocking.

"Good-morning, Burleigh," she said, her eyes bright with the spark of merriment which always kindled when Mr. Blood appeared. "Can't shake hands with you without getting you all covered with flour."

"I shouldn't mind that much," he answered awkwardly.

"Sit down, please," she said. "I'm just done with these puffs. Isn't it a lovely day?"

"It is good growing weather for the corn."

"And for you," she laughed. "You get bigger and bigger every day."

"Do I?" he said disconsolately, looking from his big hand to the one she was wiping on the long snowy roller. "I am too big now."

"Nonsense—not for a man! I like to see a man big and strong."

[6]

"Do you, though, really," he said, a glow of delight spreading over his honest features. "I—I'm glad of it."

"Come into the other room," Patty said, leading the way: "it's cooler there.—Bathalina, don't let those puffs burn."

The windows of the sitting-room were open, and the blinds unclosed; but so thickly was the piazza overhung with honeysuckle and woodbine, that a cool shade filled the apartment. It was unoccupied, save by Pettitoes, the cat, who had curled himself up luxuriously in Mrs. Sanford's work-basket. Mr. Blood stumbled over a chair or two before he found his way safely into a seat, and then sat, flushed and uncomfortable, trying to make up his mind to do the errand upon which he had come. Patty, who knew perfectly well the state of her guest's mind, played carelessly with Pettitoes, making casual remarks, to which Burleigh replied in monosyllables.

"I hope it will be as good weather as this for the picnic," she said at length. "Of course, you are going?"

"Yes, I thought I should; that is, I may."

"Oh, you must! We are sure to have a splendid time. Everybody is going. I wouldn't miss it for any thing."

"Then you are going?" he asked.

"Of course. I am always ready for a lark," she answered. "And I know you'll go."

"It depends," said he, "whether I can get any one to go with me."

[7]

"Of course you can. There are lots of girls would be delighted. There's Emily Purdy, or Dessie Farnum. You know you can get some one."

"But I mean one particular one," he said, blushing at his own temerity.

"Oh! you mean Flossy," Patty exclaimed, her eyes dancing. "I'm sure she'll be delighted. I'll ask her myself for you this minute. You are so bashful, Burleigh, that you'd never get along in this world, if I didn't help you."

"Wait, Patty," the unfortunate Burleigh began; but his voice stuck in his throat. For days he had been summoning his courage to invite Miss Sanford to ride with him to the picnic; and now it failed him in his extremity. To add to his confusion, his eye at that moment caught sight of a rival advancing from the front-gate towards the cottage in the person of Clarence Toxteth, only child of the richest man in Montfield. A sudden burning sensation seized young Blood at the sight. He was ready to pour out his heart and his passion in the moment that remained to him. But what is love in the heart, albeit never so burning, when the tongue refuses its office? A flippant rogue without a soul may defeat the most deeply loyal silent one, and never a word could Burleigh utter. He was conscious, as if in a dream, that the bell rang, and that Mr. Toxteth, in all the glory of a light summer suit and kid gloves, was ushered into the room. He unconsciously glowered at the new-comer in a way that made it difficult for Patty to preserve her gravity. The entrance of Mrs. Sanford restored him to himself somewhat. He always felt more comfortable for her bustling, homely presence.

[8]

"How do you do, Burleigh?" the worthy lady said. "How do you do, Mr. Toxteth? I knew we should see strangers to-day. You remember, Patty, I said so at breakfast. Bathalina dropped the dish-cloth, and then a fork that stood up in the floor, and I never knew either of those signs to fail. You must be the dish-cloth, Burleigh, and you are the fork, Mr. Toxteth. I always think the dish-cloth don't mean as much of a stranger as the fork does."

Mrs. Sanford had a never-ending procession of signs and omens. "The wisest aunt" could scarcely have extracted more mystical lore from everyday occurrences to other observers the most

commonplace. Every thing with her was lucky or unlucky, related to the past, or foretold the future; and the wisdom she extracted from dreams was little less than miraculous.

What Dr. Sanford was accustomed to term "the religious ceremonies of a call,"—the remarks upon health and the weather,—having been duly accomplished, Mr. Toxteth proceeded directly to the point.

"I called," he said, while Mrs. Sanford was asking his rival about the prospects of the crops, "to beg the honor of your company to-morrow at the picnic."

"How kind of you!" Patty answered with an appearance of sweet frankness; the inward struggle which had been going on ever since his entrance being suddenly decided against him. "I am very sorry, if you will be disappointed; but, you see, Burleigh came before you." [9]

She spoke so softly that her mother did not hear; yet the words reached the ears of her earlier caller, and filled him with triumphant joy. For Patty herself, she was not quite able to understand her own act. She had beforehand fully determined to accept the invitation to ride behind the Toxteth span, should she be favored with it; and she certainly had even now no intention of going with Burleigh Blood. It was partly due, no doubt, to the fact that the dandified air of the young fop offended her honest taste; but she was uncomfortably conscious that there was a stronger reason underlying all others. She had said to herself that it would be charming to reject an invitation from Mr. Putnam after having promised to accompany Clarence Toxteth. Now she had refused the latter upon the mere chance that the former would come. She would gladly have recalled the words, and given a different answer to the rich young swell, with his elegant clothes, and a turnout which was the admiration of all the girls in Montfield. But there was now no help for it; and with a sigh she saw the form of her rich suitor disappear down the walk, and turned to the task in hand. She knew Burleigh had overheard her refusal to Clarence; and, as soon as the latter was gone, she said lightly, "I knew you wouldn't mind my making you an excuse to put him off; and, besides, mother was here, and wouldn't have liked it if I had refused him outright. Here comes Flossy. It is very kind of you to ask her; for she really knows so few people here." [10]

Flossy Plant was a little maiden much afflicted by dyspepsia, and given to making odd remarks. Her father was a Boston merchant, noted for his dinners; and Flossy always maintained that his high living caused her ill-health.

"I am like that text of Scripture," she declared: "'The fathers have eaten sour grapes,—or drank their juice,—and the child's stomach is set on edge.' I don't mind the dyspepsia so much, but oh! think of the good things father has eaten to give it to me."

Her physician had ordered the constant use of pop-corn; and Flossy was accustomed to wander about the house at all times of day and night with a large blue bowl of that dry and aggravating edible tucked comfortably under her arm. Her hair, fine and flaxen, was generally in a state aptly enough described by her name; so that it was not without reason that Will Sanford compared her to a thistle-puff.

"I thought I would wait," Flossy said, as she came into the sitting-room, "until Clarence Toxteth went away. He always looks so soft and juicy that I want to eat him, and it makes me dreadfully hungry to look at him."

Burleigh laughed; but this little pale creature was a mystery to him, and her dryly-uttered drolleries not wholly devoid of a sibylline character, it being a profound wonder to him how one could have such thoughts.

"I don't think he'd be good to eat," he said grimly; "but I guess he'd be soft enough."

"Did he come to invite you to the picnic, Patty?" Flossy asked, munching at her pop-corn. [11]

"What would you give to know?" laughed her cousin. "But Mr. Blood has come to invite you, at least: so you are provided for."

In such a situation what was a bashful man to do, particularly if, like Burleigh, he was not sure that he was offended at the turn affairs had taken? Patty was an old friend, indeed, in Montfield parlance a "flame" of the young man's; yet certainly the stranger cousin exercised over him a peculiar fascination. He left the house as the promised escort of Miss Plant, and went home, wondering whether Patty did not know he came to invite her, and whether he were glad or sorry things had turned out as they had.

The long sunny day wore on, and no third invitation came for Patty. She kept her own counsel so completely that the family thought she had accepted young Toxteth's escort,—an impression which she took pains not to dissipate. But, although outwardly gay, she grew more and more heavy-hearted as the day passed with no sign of Mr. Putnam.

CHAPTER III. [12]

"A BIRD IN THE HAND."

The day of the picnic dawned as fair and sweet as if made for a pure girl's wedding, or a children's holiday.

The gathering was to take place at Mackerel Cove, a little bay jutting inward, amid lovely groves

of beech-trees, from a larger inlet of the Atlantic. A drive of a dozen miles stretched between the cove and Montfield; the picnickers taking their own time for starting, and speed in going, the rendezvous being at the hour fixed for dinner.

Patty saw the family depart one by one. First Will went to call for Ease Apthorpe, the lady-elect of his heart or fancy; then Dr. Sanford drove off with his wife, intending to visit certain patients on the way; and, last of all, Flossy was swung lightly up into his buggy by the mighty arms of Burleigh Blood.

"Don't you mean to go at all?" the latter asked of Patty, who came running after them with Flossy's bowl of pop-corn.

"I never tell my plans," she laughed gayly. "Mother went off predicting that something dreadful was sure to happen. How do you know but I am afraid to go?"

"Pooh! She's going with Clarence Toxteth," Flossy said. [13]

"But"—began her escort.

"There! Drive on, and don't bother about me," said Patty. "I have usually been thought able to take care of my own affairs. A pleasant ride to you."

She turned back toward the lonely house. Bathalina Clemens was at work somewhere in the chambers, counteracting any tendency to too great cheerfulness which the beauty of the day might develop in her mind, by singing the most doleful of minors:—

> "'Hearken, ye sprightly, and attend, ye vain ones;
> Pause in your mirth, adversity consider;
> Learn from a friend's pen sentimental, painful
> Death-bed reflections,'"

she sang, with fearful inflections and quavers. Patty's face fell. A feeling of angry disappointment came over her. This picnic was an event in Montfield. What to the belle of the season would be the loss of its most brilliant ball was this privation to Patty. This is a relative world, wherein the magnitude of an object depends upon the position of the eye which observes it; and for the time being the picnic filled the whole field of mental vision of the young people of the village. Nor did it tend to lessen the girl's annoyance that the fault was her own, although she resolutely persisted in thinking that she thought herself not at all responsible, but had transferred the entire blame upon the shoulders of the cavalier who should have invited her, and had not. She wandered restlessly through the house and garden, at last seating herself upon the piazza with a [14] book, upon which she vainly attempted to fix her attention. From above came the voice of Bathalina chanting,—

> "'Shun my example!'"

"'Shun your example!'" muttered Patty to herself. "I shall shun my own hereafter. I might have known that poky old Tom Putnam wouldn't ask me. It is too mean that I should have to stay at home! He might at least have given me a chance to refuse him, and then I should have known what to count on. He is so intensely aggravating. I don't doubt he took Flora Sturtevant. I've no patience with a man that will let himself be trapped by a flirt like her."

And at that moment, raising her eyes, she saw the object of her animadversions—a tall, slender man of two or three and thirty—coming up the walk. He seemed surprised to find her at home.

"Good-morning," Mr. Putnam said, in a voice which few persons heard with indifference, so rich and pleasing it was. "I supposed you had gone to the picnic."

"You see I haven't."

It required no great penetration to see that Patty was out of spirits. The new-comer looked at her keenly.

"Thank you, I will sit down for a moment," he said, as if she had invited him to do so. "These steps are very comfortable. Don't trouble to get me a chair."

"I had not the faintest intention of doing so," she returned. [15]

"Why have you not gone?" he asked, looking up at her curiously from his seat upon the piazza-steps.

"I chose to stay at home," she answered shortly.

"Conclusive, but impossible. A better reason, please?"

"I do not know that it can make any difference to you why I stay at home."

"But it does, however ignorant you may be on that point."

"Why should it?"

"You have not answered me," he said; "but I will be generous, and tell you why. I was coming yesterday to invite you myself, and heard that you were going with Burleigh Blood."

"Did you?" she asked, brightening visibly. "That was a lie I told, or rather a lie I didn't tell. How did you hear of it?"

"I heard Clarence Toxteth say so. Is your list of questions much longer?"

"If Bathalina doesn't stop singing such hymns," Patty said irrelevantly, "I know I shall murder her sooner or later."

"I would," he answered, looking at his watch. "I came for a book of your father's; but it is no matter to-day. I will have the horse at the gate in fifteen minutes. Can you be ready so soon?"

"Who said I'd go?" she laughed, springing up.

"Who asked you to?" he retorted.

"But I will, if only to plague you," she said.

"Don't feel obliged to," he replied, starting down the walk. "It really won't annoy me enough to [16]
make it worth your trouble."

Patty darted into the house, and up to her chamber, like a swallow. Unconsciously she caught up Bathalina's strain.

> "'Sudden and awful, from the height of pleasure,
> By pain and sickness thrown upon a down-bed,'"

she carolled; and for once the hymn put on a garb of mocking gayety.

"Patience Sanford!" solemnly ejaculated the pious maid-servant, putting her head in at the chamber-door. "It's tempting Providence to sing that hymn that way. No good'll come of it, you may depend."

"Nonsense, Bath! I could dance to the hymns of the cherubim!"

And into the garden she flew to pin a bunch of clove-pinks at her belt.

"Do you know how solemn you looked," Putnam asked as they drove along the smooth road, between unfenced fields green with the starting aftermath, "when I found you on the piazza? Were you thinking of your sins?"

"No: of those of my neighbors."

"Of omission, or commission?" he asked, looking at her closely.

"Both," she returned, flushing a little. "I was lonesome, of course. You wouldn't like to stay at home alone all day."

"On the contrary," he said, "there are few things I like better. It is strange how a woman is never [17]
good company for herself. She can never keep still and think, but must always be rattling away to somebody."

"You think so because you don't know."

"My observation has not been very extensive, perhaps; but it has been all in one direction. Men are content enough to be alone."

"It is all the conceit of the men," she retorted. "You all fancy you are never in so good company as when alone."

"Unless we are favored by some one of your sex."

"Nonsense! You don't think so. What a man finds to say to himself, I cannot imagine; unless, indeed, his mind is one grand vacuum."

"The wisdom of a man's reflections must always be beyond a woman's comprehension," he returned. "Some men have made great mistakes by forgetting this."

"Then, of course, you'll never marry," Patty ventured. "You wouldn't want a companion who couldn't understand you."

"Oh! I may join 'the noble army of martyrs,'" he answered in the same bantering tone he had been using. "Every man will be ruled by some women; and with a wife his resistance would be a trifle less restrained, you see."

"I have heard it said," she answered, "that, as love increased, good manners decreased; but I never made such an application of it."

"Of course," he began, "having a legal mind, I regard a wife as a piece of personal property, and"—

"There!" she interrupted. "It is perfectly maddening to hear you talk in that way about women. I [18]
hate it."

"I'm sure I don't mean any disrespect," he answered soberly. "I should have married long ago, had I been able."

"Whom would you have married?" she demanded. "You speak as if you had only to make your selection, and any girl would be glad of the chance to take you."

"That is because I think so highly of the penetration of your sex," he retorted, with a return to his light manner; adding, with some bitterness, "but, when a man is as poor as a church mouse, he can have as little thought of marrying, and being given in marriage, as the angels in heaven."

"Don't be profane. You have your profession."

"Oh! I earn enough to keep soul and body together, if I don't do too much for either. But this is not a cheerful subject, even if it were in good taste for me to be complaining of poverty. Did you

know my nephews came last night?"

"Yes; and I am so glad! It is always pleasant to have Hazard Breck here. Of course, they'll be at the picnic."

"Yes. Frank, you know, has graduated, and Hazard is a junior. It is two years since I have seen them."

"They probably feel ten years older. We are to have company too. Grandmother is coming."

With such discourse they rolled over the country road towards Mackerel Cove. Under the gay surface of the conversation was a sting for Patty in the lawyer's allusion to his poverty. He was [19] usually very reticent about his affairs; and it may have been for that reason that the gossips of Montfield called him "close." "He's close-mouthed and he's close-fisted," Mrs. Brown was accustomed to say; "and most generally the things go together."

To Patty's thinking few faults could be worse. To an open-handed Sanford, avarice was the most disgusting of vices; and this fatal defect in her companion was like the feet of clay of the image of gold.

CHAPTER IV. [20]

THE PICNIC.

SEATED upon a stone which happened to be clean enough for even her exacting taste, Mrs. Sanford was conversing with Mrs. Brown, a frowsy lady whose house-keeping was a perennial source of offence to her order-loving neighbor. Mrs. Brown was a miracle of tardiness,—the last-comer at every gathering, the last guest to depart. Indeed, so fixed were her friends in the habit of expecting her to be behindhand, that she could have chosen no surer method of throwing into confusion any plan wherein she was concerned than by appearing for once on time; which, to do her justice, she never did. "She is so slow," Will Sanford once said, "that she always looks solemn at a wedding, because the grief of the last funeral has just got into her face. Her smiles appear by the time another funeral comes."

On the present occasion Mrs. Brown had reached Mackerel Cove just as preparations for dinner were being completed. Mrs. Sanford, who had been superintending the making of the coffee, had seated her plump person upon the stone mentioned to rest and get cool, when the late-comer appeared. Mrs. Brown sank languidly upon the fallen trunk of a tree.

"I didn't know as I should ever get here," she said. "My girl's gone mad." [21]

"Gone mad!" ejaculated the doctor's wife. "I knew something dreadful would happen when you found that silver dollar, and kept it: that's always unlucky. Is she really mad? You don't mean Selina?"

"No, not Selina, but the hired girl. She must be mad. She poked all my hair-pins down a crack in the floor. Selina thinks she did it to plague me; but I know she's crazy."

"I declare! The trouble you have with your girls beats every thing I ever heard of. I should think you'd rather do the work yourself than have them about."

"Oh! I must have a girl to shirk things on to," said Mrs. Brown.

"Shirk!" exclaimed Mrs. Sanford. "Lawful sakes! I don't have time to shirk. If I hadn't so much to do, I might find time to plan and contrive to get rid of half my work; but now"—

The words died upon her lips as she caught sight of a buggy coming along the shady wood-road. In it sat her daughter Patty, chatting happily with Tom Putnam. The sight filled her with amazement little mixed with pleasure. The lawyer might be a man after her husband's heart; but he was not after hers. He constantly said things she could not understand; he oppressed her as might an unguessed conundrum; and, moreover, he was a dozen years older than her daughter. Clarence Toxteth filled the measure of Mrs. Sanford's requirements when she considered her [22] daughter's matrimonial prospects, which, thrifty housewife that she was, was not seldom. The young man was rich, good-looking, trimly dressed; and Mrs. Sanford appreciated to the full the advantages of the possession of money. The worthy lady was not without a deeply-seated suspicion that Patty, in the depth of her heart, preferred the lawyer to his more pretentious rival. The girl was like her father, and looked at things in a way wholly unaccountable to her mother, who saw only the other side of the shield. To-day Mrs. Sanford had been at ease in her mind, believing Toxteth to have been the chosen escort. She chanced to be out of the way when he arrived at the picnic-ground, and supposed her daughter to be about somewhere. What, then, was her dismay to perceive her driving up with Mr. Putnam, as boldly and gayly as if she had never deceived her family!

"Is dinner ready, mother?" called the transgressor lightly, as they drove up. "I am as hungry as three polar bears."

"Good-morning, Mrs. Sanford!" the lawyer said. "There is a delightful smell in the air, as if you had been making coffee."

"So I have," she returned, a little mollified by the compliment implied. "You are just in time: they

are blowing the horn now."

And indeed, through the beautiful beech-woods rang the shrill cry of a tin dinner-horn blown by lusty lungs. It sounded harsh enough in the sylvan spaces; but not Pan himself could have piped more enchantingly into the ears of the hungry country people scattered about in the grove. The [23] young folk came flocking towards the spot where table-cloths, spread upon the mossy ground, were heaped with that profusion of cake and other sweetmeats, and scarcity of any thing eatable, by which a picnic-dinner is usually characterized. A pleasant chattering and bustle followed, while the company seated themselves around upon stones, stumps, moss-covered roots, or the green turf itself. Harmless practical jokes were played, clumsy attempts at wit laughed over, clever ruses employed by people who wished their being together to have the appearance of the merest accident; and amid the chatter, the laughter, and the rattle of crockery, the feast began.

Mrs. Sanford had pressed Mr. Putnam into her service to pour the coffee, knowing of old that he was steady-handed and quick-witted, and feeling not unwilling, moreover, to draw him away from Patty's side. That young lady, being thus left to her own devices, curled herself up in a soft mossy nook, between two huge beech-roots, the tree-trunk behind her.

"I have a crow to pluck with you," the voice of Clarence Toxteth said at her elbow.

"Oh, let's not pluck a crow!" she answered, without turning her head. "It isn't pleasant; and nobody feels any better for it."

"But why did you tell me you were coming with Mr. Blood?"

"I beg your pardon," she said, laughing, and turning to flash her dark eyes upon him. "I only said he came before you to ask me, and so he did. You gave up too easily. I knew by that, that you [24] didn't really care whether I came with you or not."

"Care? I did care. I thought you had promised him: so I brought Miss Purdy, and you know I can't endure her."

"I am sure she ought to be obliged to you."

"Well, there was nobody else."

"Was that the reason you came for me?" Patty said saucily. "Flossy, what are you wandering about so for?"

"I am seeking what I may devour," Flossy answered, seating herself at her cousin's feet. "But I do not find it. I'd like a square chunk out of the side of a cow or a chicken. The sight of these deserts of cake makes me sick."

"Make up your mind what you really would like," Clarence said, "and I'll order it of the wood-nymphs. What will you have first,—turtle-soup?"

"Oh, dear, no!" Flossy answered. "I like to know what I am eating, and turtle-soup is all green fat and things. I'll eat a little pop-corn, if you please. So saying I gayly munch and munch like an educated mooly cow. Patty, where did you pick up Mr. Putnam?"

"Nowhere. He came after me."

"You didn't put him off with an evasive answer," Toxteth said in her ear.

"He didn't ask me," she retorted. "He only told me he was coming to take me."

"You girls like to be bullied," the young man muttered crossly.

"Mercy sakes!" cried the shrill voice of Mrs. Brown, behind the tree at whose roots they were [25] seated. "I thought I heard dishes rattling; but I didn't think dinner'd begun."

"Not only begun, but finished," Patty cried, springing up. "Let's go down to the beach, Flossy."

CHAPTER V. [26]

A MISHAP.

Mackerel Cove was surrounded by high banks, the path from the grove above being very steep and difficult. A rude hand-rail had been nailed to the trees to assist the visitor in descending; but the feat was still any thing but an easy one.

As Flossy and her cousin, with young Toxteth following, took the path through the grove to the top of the embankment, they fell in with several of their friends going in the same direction.

Clarence saw, to his intense annoyance, Mr. Putnam take his place at Patty's side; while he himself was forced to drop into step with Miss Purdy. The etiquette of Montfield was rather primitive, and demanded that a gentleman should bestow his attentions exclusively upon the lady whose escort he was for the time being. A picnic was a gathering of couples, not a homogeneous mixture of friends; and the young people trooped along in pairs, with a prim and decorous consciousness of doing the proper thing.

Miss Flora Sturtevant, however, was above any such rustic etiquette. Miss Sturtevant, like Flossy, was a Boston girl; and although at home there stretched between them that fathomless abyss which is supposed to divide the South End from the sacred precincts of the West End, they [27]

met on a common footing at Montfield; and Miss Plant was too good-humored to show the superiority which her residence might give her reason to feel. Flora was a cousin of Mrs. Brown, who had passed several summers in Montfield, pecuniary reasons having forbidden those excursions to more expensive resorts for which her heart yearned. She was rather stylish, and her pursuit of Mr. Putnam was scarcely disguised. She was several years his senior; but nature, having fashioned her face so that she had never looked young, now apportioned to her some compensation by preserving her from looking old. On the present occasion she hovered about the lawyer, asking his help at every obstacle, and so managing, that, when they came to the edge of the embankment, Patty, who had been gathering the red clusters of the bunch-berry and the silvery blossoms of the "wild everlasting," was a few steps behind. Mr. Putnam turned to the latter, and held out his hand.

"O Mr. Putnam!" Flora cried, stepping into the narrow descending path, "do hold me! Oh, I shall fall! I shall fall!"

She clutched his arm, and dragged him forward so violently, that it was with difficulty he retained his foothold, supporting as he did the entire weight of Miss Sturtevant. He caught at the rail with so sudden a wrench, that it was started from its fastenings. He was able, however, to get the young lady to the bottom unhurt, although they rushed down the path in a way scarcely dignified, nearly overturning Burleigh Blood and Flossy, who had just descended. Patty was less [28]
fortunate. She had stepped forward, and extended her hand to take that of her escort, only to see that gentleman seized, and whirled down the precipitous way like an unfortunate sinner in the clutch of fiends, as portrayed in the frescos of the old masters. Thrown from her balance, she sought the hand-rail; but, already loosened, it gave way, and she plunged headlong. Fortunately Putnam had time to turn before she reached him, half falling, half running; and he caught her in his arms.

"What a performance!" she exclaimed, laughing and breathless. "I came down like a falling star. I beg your pardon."

She extricated herself from the arms of the lawyer, and planted her feet on the shingle, beginning to smooth her dress. Suddenly she gave a smothered scream, and for the first time in her life fainted dead away, falling back again into the arms of her escort. She had sprained her ankle badly, but in the excitement had not noticed the mishap, until her weight was thrown upon the injured limb.

"And then and there was hurrying to and fro." Patty's cry was re-enforced by a shriek loud, shrill, and long, from Miss Sturtevant, who, with no apparent provocation, threw her arms about the lawyer's neck, and went into violent hysterics.

"For Heaven's sake, Burleigh," Mr. Putnam cried angrily, "take that girl off!—Spread out that shawl, please, Miss Plant.—Bring some water, Will."

Miss Flora's hysterics were not so violent as to need any stronger restorative than the lawyer's [29]
words, and she left him unhampered. Under the kindly offices of her friends, Patty soon opened her eyes, and sat up upon the shawls which had been hastily spread for her.

"Oh, what a goose I am!" she cried, as the situation dawned upon her. "I never fainted in my life before; but my ankle hurt terribly."

Dr. Sanford was soon on the spot, and proceeded to put a compress upon the injured limb; the girls standing about in a protecting circle. Mrs. Sanford stood upon the bank above, unable to descend, but showering down pathetic remarks.

"I knew something would happen," she said. "I had a foreboding in my mind when I put my left foot on my right shoe—no, I mean my right foot on my left shoe. That isn't what I mean, either. But I told Charles then I doubted something would happen to this picnic.—Does it pain you much, Patty? I can't get down without breaking my neck, and that wouldn't do you any good.—Do you think she's lamed for life, Charles?"

"Father," Patty said, forcing a smile, "I am really very comfortable now, and don't need you: so you can climb up, and quiet mother."

Patty now arranged herself picturesquely upon a pile of shawls as on a divan, and held an impromptu levee. Flora Sturtevant persisted in going down upon her knees, and with a flood of tears begging forgiveness for having caused the accident.

"Don't be a goose, Miss Sturtevant!" the other laughed. "It was my own fault—or it isn't anybody's fault. There is salt water enough here now: so don't shed any more tears." [30]

Patty was a leader among the girls of Montfield; and now they served her like a queen. They brought her various rustic treasures,—red checkerberries, long wreaths of ground-pine, the white, waxy Indian-pipes, and mosses from the grove or from the water. Burleigh Blood sat for half an hour breaking open live mussels; and when at last a pearl rewarded his persistence, he brought it to her as proudly as if it had been already set in a betrothal ring. Dessie Farnum and Emily Purdy came, dragging between them a crooked tree-root, washed ashore by the waves, which was pronounced just the thing for the back of a rustic chair; and Clarence Toxteth undertook that the chair should be manufactured accordingly.

The afternoon sped on happily and brightly. The salt breeze always inspired Tom Putnam; and he was the life of the party. Older than most of them, and passing for a taciturn man, because he talked with few people, the lawyer had yet a vivid fancy, a quick wit, and a dry humor, which made him a charming companion to those who shared his friendship. The day, the lovely scene,

the sea-air, the presence of the girl he worshipped, and her escape from a fall which might have been so much more serious, all tended to render him joyous; and his gladness overflowed to all the company.

Not all the picnickers, however, remained with Patty. Frank Breck wanted to talk with Ease Apthorpe; and Flora Sturtevant longed for the society of Mr. Putnam. Being unable to compass [31] their desires, the two were forced to look to each other for consolation, and went strolling among the rocks in an aimless fashion. Flora had known Frank too well to waste upon him those coquetries which she lavished upon his uncle. They had been neighbors in their young days, and had at various times been useful to each other: they had reached a period of intimacy where many of the fictions which disguise the true purposes of conversation were between them laid aside, although it is doubtful if they were the more honest in consequence.

The two strolled for some distance in comparative silence. Flora stopped at length by a rock which the waves had fashioned into the rude likeness of a seat; and here she seated herself with a deft adjustment of the blue draperies of her yachting dress. "She gets herself up well," her companion mused. "She certainly doesn't look a day older than she did five years ago."

"Frank," the lady said, breaking the silence, "wasn't it the Samoset and Brookfield stock that Montfield people lost so heavily on?"

"Yes," he answered, dropping upon the shingle. "Uncle Tom has a small fortune in the bonds, if they were worth any thing. Half the people in town got bitten on it."

"Then I suppose the bonds could be bought for a song."

"No doubt. Why? Are you going into railroad speculation?"

"I may," she said thoughtfully, looking out over the sea, and letting the quiet of the afternoon [32] envelop them a moment. "If"—She watched a white sail disappear over the horizon's rim, before she completed her sentence. "If I only had a hold over uncle Jacob, I'd make my fortune; but I haven't."

"How?" Breck asked.

"Never mind, I haven't, so *n'importe*. If there's an opening, I'll tell you. What was it you had to tell me, by the way?"

"I want help," he answered; "but I don't see how you can help me. You have had some clever ideas, though, before now."

"Thanks!" she returned, turning the rings upon her white fingers. "Say on."

"It is about that Smithers woman."

"Who is she?"

"Nonsense! Don't bother to pretend you don't know, Flora. You can't expect me to be honest, unless you are."

"Well," Miss Sturtevant smiled, "let us assume that I do know who the Smithers woman is. An old friend of your father, if I remember correctly."

"Bother!" he said impatiently. "Why do you tease so to-day? Do you want me to relate all the details of her disreputable relations with my father?"

"Oh, no! Nothing disreputable," Flora exclaimed with a deprecatory gesture of her small hands. "But what about her now?"

"You've heard how madly fond of her old Mullen became in his last days?"

"Yes: it was as romantic as it was improper." [33]

"Mullen put into her hands papers which related to my father's affairs, and I want them."

"It is strange how that woman held both your father and Mr. Mullen," Miss Sturtevant said reflectively. "I should like to see her."

She seemed to become more and more indifferent as the conversation proceeded; while, in reality, reasons of which Breck could know nothing, made her intensely interested.

"She is at Samoset," Frank said. "You may see her any day."

"And she has these papers?" Flora asked.

"No, she has not."

"Who has?"

"Will you help me get them?"

"If I can, of course I will."

"I'll make it worth your while," he said, taking out his tablets.

He leaned towards her, and wrote a name before her eyes, as if he feared to speak what some unseen listener might overhear. Then, in answer to her puzzled look, he added an explanatory word or two.

The afternoon sun was declining swiftly when the party prepared to leave the beautiful cove. Many of the elder people had gone, Mrs. Sanford among them, the worthy dame having first come to the top of the bank, and poured out a flood of directions to her daughter, to all of which, an impartial historian is compelled to add, Patty gave not the slightest heed.

A rope had been fastened to a tree standing near the head of the path leading up the [34] embankment, and supplied the place of the broken rail. When Patty was ready, a discussion arose how she should be got up the steep. Putnam cut it short by taking her, blushing as a modest maiden should, in his arms, and climbing up with her, she assisting by clinging to the rope.

"You are something of a load," he said, puffing as they reached the top.

"I shall be as heavy as mother some day, I don't doubt," she replied demurely; "but it isn't grateful of you to speak of it, when I pulled you up by the rope."

"You are not the first lady who has pulled a man up by a rope," he replied, tucking her into the carriage with great tenderness; "but they generally do it by means of the hangman."

CHAPTER VI. [35]

CHIT-CHAT.

THREE carriages followed in succession the homeward road; the first contained Patty and Putnam; the second Clarence Toxteth and Miss Purdy; the third, Burleigh Blood and Flossy.

Young Blood found himself unexpectedly at his ease with his companion. The awe he felt for her as a stranger, and because of her quaint speech, had largely worn away. Still he regarded her rather doubtfully, as one looks at something dangerous to handle. Her tiny figure, her quick, nervous motions, reminded him constantly of a humming-bird, and he had a fearful if vague sense of the danger of crushing her by the mere force of his huge presence. The great honest fellow, almost a giant, could have taken her up with one hand, his gentlest movements seeming overpoweringly forcible when exerted in behalf of his *petite* companion; and of this he was unpleasantly conscious.

Burleigh had known Patty Sanford from childhood in the way that everybody in Montfield knew everybody else. They had been companions at school, where Burleigh was only one of a dozen who believed themselves ready to lay down their lives for the doctor's daughter, or—a far greater proof of devotion—to share with her their last apple, or handful of chestnuts. It is true that the [36] social status of the Bloods, so far as such distinctions were marked in Montfield, was below that of the Sanfords; and Miss Mullen of Mullen House, the aristocrat of the village, wondered that Patty could associate with everybody as she did. But Patty, while secretly proud enough of her family, was democratic at least in the treatment of her admirers; and young Blood found as warm a welcome at the doctor's cottage as did Clarence Toxteth. With Patty, Burleigh was less shy than with any girl of his acquaintance, and yet was far from being at his ease, even in her presence. With her cousin, whom he had known only a few weeks, he was at first painfully diffident. Her manner so completely ignored this shyness, however, that it was gradually wearing away.

"I do hope Patty's ankle isn't hurt so that she can't take her part in the theatricals," Flossy said as they rode along.

"Dr. Sanford thought," he returned, "that is, he said, she'd be all right in a week or so, if she'd keep still."

"She never did keep still," answered Flossy. "But I'll do my best to make her now. Did you ever play in amateur theatricals?"

"I? Oh, no! of course not."

"There's no of course about it; only of course you'll play now. This bashful man, you know, is just your part."

"This bashful man?" he repeated doubtfully.

"Oh, yes! In this play, you know. Patty and I both say you'll do it capitally." [37]

In despite of her assurance that he knew, Burleigh was painfully conscious that he did not; and, indeed, her way of designating every thing as "this, you know," or "that other, you know," was sufficiently confusing.

"I have had such fun in theatricals!" Flossy ran on, not noticing his puzzled expression. "We played 'Trying It On,' one Christmas, and I was Mr. Tittlebat. I was so nervous, that I repeated stage-directions and all. And such a time as I had to get a man's suit small enough!"

Her companion involuntarily glanced from his own figure to the tiny maiden by his side. She understood the look, and burst into a gay laugh.

"Oh, dear! I should have been lost in your clothes," she cried. He blushed as red as the big clover she had pinned in his buttonhole, and modestly cast down his eyes.

"In that other, you know," she chattered on, "they wanted me to take the part of Jane. That was after I had been Mr. Tittlebat, and I felt insulted."

"Insulted? Why, because it wasn't a man's part?"

"Oh, dear, no! I don't like to act men's parts. But I hunted and hunted and hunted, and it was forever before I could find it; and then this was all it was. [*Enter* JANE.] Mrs. BROWN.—Jane, bring my bonnet. [*Exit* JANE.] [*Enter* JANE.] Mrs. BROWN.—That will do, Jane. [*Exit* JANE.] Of course I wouldn't take it."

"What was there insulting in that?" asked Burleigh, to whom the brevity of the part would have been a strong recommendation. [38]

"Why, in the first place I couldn't find it; and then, when I did, it was only 'Exit Jane.' You wouldn't want to exit all the time, would you? I wouldn't 'exit Jane' for 'em."

"Well," he answered, laughing at her emphatic speech; "it is just as anybody feels: but I think I'd rather 'exit' than any thing else."

"Did you ever see 'Ruy Blas'?" Flossy asked. "You ought to see that. All the ladies cry; or at least they all take out their handkerchiefs: this man is so cruel, you know. And it's lovely where she says,—she's the queen, you know,—'Ruy Blas, I pity, I forgive, and I love you!' Oh, it's too lovely for any thing."

"Is that the place where the ladies all take out their handkerchiefs?"

"No, that isn't the time *I* cry."

"Why not?" Burleigh asked, his bashfulness forgotten. "Because you have shed all your tears?"

"Oh, no!" she answered. "But I never cry until the music strikes up."

In the carriage before Burleigh's, theatrical matters were also the subject of conversation.

"Of course, Patty can't take her part now," said Emily Purdy.

"Then we shall have to put off our play until she can," Clarence replied, somewhat to the discontent of his companion, who wished to be asked to take the part assigned to Patty.

A theatrical entertainment was to be given for the benefit of the Unitarian Church; that edifice being, so to speak, decidedly out at the elbows; and the young people of the society were all much interested. [39]

"Of course," Miss Purdy said rather spitefully, "every thing must be put off for her. She needn't have been flirting with Mr. Putnam. I wonder if she is engaged to him."

Clarence should have been wise enough to let this pass unanswered; but his annoyance got the better of his prudence. He found it hard to forgive Patty's rejection of his invitation to the picnic; and before he thought he blurted out what he would instantly have been glad to recall.

"Of course not. She told me she thought him an old miser."

"Did she?" his companion cried, her eyes sparkling maliciously. "I didn't think she'd abuse a person behind his back, and then accept his invitations. If you only knew what she said about you!"

But Toxteth, in spite of the slip he had made, was a gentleman, and couldn't be brought to ask what Patty had said about him; so that, as Miss Purdy hardly thought it best to offer the information unsolicited, he remained forever in ignorance of the careless remark about his foppishness, which would have been envenomed by the tongue of the mischief-maker who longed to repeat it.

"I ought not to have told what Patty Sanford said," he remarked. "She didn't mean it. Indeed, I am not sure but I said it, and she only assented. Of course it should never have been repeated. I beg you'll forget it." [40]

"I never forget any thing," laughed Emily; "but I never should mention what was told me in confidence."

In the first carriage of the three, the lawyer and his companion rode for some time in silence. Each was endeavoring to imagine the thoughts of the other, and each at the same time carrying on an earnest train of reflections. With people in love, silence is often no less eloquent than speech, and perhaps is more often truly interpreted.

Mr. Putnam was the first to speak.

"You are twenty-one," he said, with no apparent connection.

"I am twenty-one," she answered, not failing to remark that the words showed that his thoughts had been of her.

"A girl at twenty-one," he continued, "is old enough to know her own mind."

"This girl at twenty-one certainly knows her own mind."

"Humph! I suppose so—or thinks she does."

Another long silence followed, more intense than before. Both were conscious of a secret excitement,—an electric condition of the mental atmosphere. At last Putnam, as if the question of ages was of the most vital interest, spoke again.

"I am thirty-two," he said.

"You are thirty-two," she echoed.

"Do you think that so old?"

"That depends"— [41]

"Well, too old for marrying, say?"

"That depends too," she answered, her color heightening, in spite of her determination not to look conscious.

"To marry," he continued, "say,—for the sake of example merely,—say a girl of twenty-one. You ought to know what a lady of twenty-one would think."

"I know a great deal that I should never think of telling."

"But I am in earnest. You see this is an important question."

"You had better ask the lady herself."

"*The* lady? I said *a* lady. Besides, as I said this morning (pardon my repeating it), 'the little god of love won't turn the spit—spit—spit.'"

"Of course you are not too old," Patty said with a sudden flash of the eyes, "to marry a girl of twenty—if she would accept you."

"I said twenty-one," he returned; "but the difference isn't material. You've evaded the question. What I want to get at is, wouldn't she think I was too old to accept?"

"Not if she loved you."

"But if she didn't?"

"Why, then she wouldn't marry you, if you were young as Hazard, as big as Burleigh, and as gorgeously arrayed as Clarence Toxteth. You had best not let any woman know, however, that you think her love meaner than your own."

"I do not understand." [42]

"A woman, if she loved a man at all, would find it hard to forgive him for believing her unwilling to share his bitter things as well as his sweet."

"Um! But suppose he thought it selfish to ask her to share the bitter things?"

"That is like a man!" Patty said impatiently. "But what nonsense we are talking! Won't it be funny to hear Bathalina condole with me? She'll quote 'Watts and Select' by the quantity, and sing the most doleful minors about the house to cheer me up. For every one of mother's signs she'll have a verse of Scripture, or a hymn."

"There is as much variety in love," Mr. Putnam said, returning to the subject they had been discussing, "there is as much variety in love as in candy."

"And as much difference in taste," she retorted. "For my part, I should hate a love that was half chalk or flour. But I don't wish to talk of love. I hope my friends will come and see me, now I am lame, or I shall die of loneliness."

"I'll send the Breck boys over," the lawyer said. "Hazard is very good company."

"Of course their uncle," she said demurely, "would come to look after them."

"Perhaps," he replied. "But who would look after their uncle?"

CHAPTER VII. [43]

A BUSINESS INTERVIEW.

WHATEVER else Flora Sturtevant might or might not be, she at least was energetic, and what she had to do she did at once and with her might. Although she returned from the picnic at Mackerel Cove very weary, she did not rest until she had written a dainty missive to Jacob Wentworth, the brother of her late step-father. The answer came on the evening of the following day in this telegram:—

> "Will be in Boston Saturday. Come to office at twelve.
>
> "JACOB WENTWORTH."

It was to meet this appointment that Miss Sturtevant passed leisurely down Milk Street about noon Saturday. The signal-ball upon the Equitable Building fell just as she passed the Old South Church; but she seemed not disposed to quicken her steps.

"Uncle Jacob will be cross if he has to wait; but I think I like him best a little cross. I wonder how he'll act. I must make my cards tell: I never shall hold a better hand, and the stake is worth playing for. How tremendously hot it is! How do people live in the city in August! Next summer I'll be at the seashore, if this goes through all straight. I shall be independent of everybody then."

Musing in this agreeable fashion, Miss Flora turned the corner of Congress Street, and walked on until she entered one of those noble buildings which have sprung up since the great fire, making Boston's business streets among the finest in the world. Miss Sturtevant adjusted her dress a [44]

little in the elevator, looked to the buttons of her gloves, and glanced over her general trigness, as might an admiral about to go into action. An inward smile softened her lips without disturbing their firmness, as she entered an office upon the glass of whose door was inscribed her uncle's name.

"Good-morning, uncle Jacob," she said brightly.

A white-haired man, with small, shrewd eyes which twinkled beneath bushy brows, looked up from the letter he was writing. His forehead was high and retreating, his nose suggestive of good dinners; and his whole bearing had that firmness only obtained by the use as a tonic of the elixir of gold. Flora had been from childhood forbidden to address him as uncle, and he understood at once that she felt sure of her ground to-day, or she would not have ventured upon the term. The lawyer paused almost perceptibly before he answered her salutation.

"Good-morning," he said. "Sit down."

"Thanks," answered the visitor, leisurely seating herself. "This office is so much nicer than your old one! I hope you are well, uncle."

"I am well enough," he returned gruffly. "What is this wonderful business which brings you to Boston?"

"You know I always do you a good turn when I can," remarked Miss Sturtevant by way of introduction. [45]

"Yes," he assented. "You find it pays."

"You may or may not remember," she went on with great deliberation, "that you once requested me to discover for you—or for a client, you said—what became of certain papers which you drew up for Mr. Mullen of Montfield."

"I remember," the other said, his eyes twinkling more than ever.

"I had hard work enough," Flora continued, "to trace them as far as I did, and little gratitude I got for my pains."

"You did not discover where the papers were?"

"I found that they had been in the possession of Mrs. Smithers."

"Her name," Mr. Wentworth remarked, pressing softly together the tips of his plump fingers, "is not Mrs. Smithers. She never married. It is best to be exact."

"Miss Clemens, then," said Flora. "I know now where those papers are."

"You do?" the old lawyer cried, at last showing some excitement. "Where are they?"

"That is my secret," she answered, with the faintest smile, and a nod of her head. "When is that directors' meeting?"

"Next Tuesday," replied Mr. Wentworth.

He knew his interlocutor well enough to allow her to take her own way in the conversation, fully aware that she would not idly turn from the subject in hand. [46]

"And you then decide whether to buy the Samoset and Brookfield Branch?"

"Yes," he said. "Do you object to telling me how you discovered that?"

"I have my living to earn," she answered, smiling, "and it is necessary that I keep my eyes and ears open. Could you promise me, if you chose, that the decision should be to buy the Samoset and Brookfield Branch?"

"If I chose, I dare say I could," the lawyer affirmed. "My own vote, and others upon which I can count, will turn the scale."

"Very well. Do you accept my terms?"

"By George!" exclaimed Wentworth, slapping his palm upon his knee. "What a long head you have, Flora! You are like your mother, and she was a devilish smart woman, or she wouldn't have married my brother."

"It would have been to my advantage," Flora said, "if she had taken him for her first husband, instead of her second. Those precious half-sisters of mine would hardly hold their heads so high now, if she had. But do you agree?"

"If I understand," he said, "you offer me your information for my vote."

"For your assurance," she corrected, "that the vote is affirmative."

"What is your game?" demanded the old man. "What assurance have I that your information is correct?"

"Only my word," she said coolly. "I will tell you the name of the person having those papers, and where that person is to be found, the day I have proof that the affirmative vote is passed. You do as you like about accepting my terms." [47]

It is needless to narrate further the conversation between the two: suffice it to say that Miss Flora was in the end triumphant. The wily lawyer determined to find his own account in the purposed vote, by the immediate purchase of Samoset and Brookfield Railroad stocks. One question Miss Sturtevant asked before she left the office.

"Had these papers any relation to Mr. Breck or his property?" she asked.

"No," Mr. Wentworth answered, evidently surprised. "What put that into your head?"

"Nothing," she said. "Good-morning."

And the enterprising woman, going to the bank, drew every dollar she could raise, and then hastened to catch the afternoon train to Montfield.

"Frank Breck," she said to herself, as she rolled along, "you are hardly a match for me, after all."

Within the next few days Miss Flora was very busy. She astonished the business-men of Samoset, a village half a dozen miles west of Montfield, by going about, purchasing the old Samoset and Brookfield stock, which everybody knew to be worthless, and which was to be had for a song. The lady was full of a thousand affectations and kittenish wiles in her leisure hours; but, when attending to business, she showed the hard, shrewd nature which lay beneath this soft exterior. [48] She drove sharp bargains, and when, at last, the vote of the directors of the great Brookfield Valley Railroad to purchase the Branch became known, Miss Sturtevant's name was in every mouth, not always uncoupled with curses. Many a man and woman whose all had been sunk in the Branch found it hard to forgive this woman for the advantage she had taken; and she was accused of a sharpness not to be clearly distinguished from dishonesty; for country people see stock operations in a light very different from that of Wall Street. That Flora was not without consideration for the property of others, however, is proved by the following note, which she wrote the Sunday after her interview with Mr. Wentworth:—

> Dear Mr. Putnam,—My interest in your welfare is too deep for me to stop to consider how you will regard my writing you. I heard in Boston yesterday, that the stock of the Samoset and Brookfield is likely to increase in value very soon. I tell you this *in strictest confidence*, as I have heard it intimated that you own some of the stock.
>
> Very sincerely yours,
> Flora Sturtevant.

CHAPTER VIII. [49]

ON THE PIAZZA.

The life of Bathalina Clemens was one long wail in the past-potential tense. "I might have been" was the refrain of all her days.

"I might ha' been Peter Mixon's wife, if my sinful pride hadn't a made me high-minded," she said continually. "How'd I know he'd give up so easily, 'cause I said I wouldn't let him lick the ground I walked on?"

The nasal melancholy of camp-meeting minors floated after her angular form like the bitter odor from wormwood or tansy. She reproved the levity of those about her with an inner satisfaction at having "borne testimony;" and particularly did she labor with Patty, whose high spirits were a continual thorn to Bathalina.

"It's so like the Amorites and the Hittites and Hivites," she groaned, "to be always singing and laughing and dancing about! How'll you feel when you come to your latter end? Would you dance on your dying-bed?"

"Probably not," Patty answered, laughing more than ever; "but I can't tell."

The spraining of Patty's ankle seemed to Bathalina a direct visitation of Providence in reproof for [50] her vain merry-making.

"I knew some judgment would happen to you," the servant said. "'My sinfulness has been visited upon me.' If you'd only live as you'll wish you had when you come to stand around your dying-bed!"

"Bathalina," Patty said sedately, "I am glad you mention it. I intend to behave until my ankle gets better; and I wanted to ask you if you'd mind taking my place in the theatricals we are getting up."

"You may mock now," retorted Bathalina wrathfully; "but at the last you'll bite like an adder, and sting like a serpent.—Mrs. Sanford, I came to tell you that I am going this afternoon to the funeral of my cousin Sam's first wife's child."

"Is she dead?" asked Mrs. Sanford. "I hadn't heard of it; though, now, I remember I did hear a dog howl night before last."

"I suppose she's dead," the servant answered; "because, when I was over there Saturday, Jane said to me, says she, 'We sha'n't churn till after Emma dies.' And she wouldn't ha' said that if she warn't a-goin' to die soon. And, as that family always has their funerals Wednesday, I thought I better go over."

"But to-night is bread night," Mrs. Sanford objected; while Patty sank back in convulsions of laughter.

"Well'm, I'll mix it up early to-morrow morning."

"No," the housewife said decidedly; "none of your bread raised by daylight in my house. I'll see to it myself to-night. Grandmother Sanford is coming to-day; and she knows what good bread is, if anybody does." [51]

"Mother," Patty asked, as the door closed behind Bathalina, "do you suppose Bath is as crazy as she seems? She talks like a perfect idiot."

"Well," her mother answered meditatively, "sometimes I think that perhaps maybe she isn't; and then, again, I don't know but after all I can't tell but she is."

Later in the forenoon Patty lay upon a light willow lounge which Will had placed for her on the piazza. It was a lovely summer's day. The bees hummed drowsily among the flowers, and Patty had drifted halfway from waking into sleeping. Through an opening in the vines which shaded the piazza, she watched the clouds moving slowly through the far, still spaces of blue ether, one shape insensibly changing into another as they passed.

The girl was thinking of nothing higher or greater than her suitors, perhaps having meditated sufficiently upon graver subjects in the days since her accident, now making almost a week. She was not counting her conquests; yet she had a pleasant consciousness of her power, and recalled with satisfaction the compliments bestowed upon her in words or attentions. The two nephews of Mr. Putnam, Frank and Hazard Breck, had the previous afternoon called upon her; and the younger was of old a devoted worshipper at her shrine. Hazard Breck was a fine, manly fellow a year Patty's junior. He believed himself madly in love with her; and indeed, in the fashion of pure-minded youth, he felt for her that maiden passion which is light and sweetness without the heat and wholesome bitter of a man's love. [52]

As Patty lay watching the clouds, and enjoying the colors brought out by the sunlight as it filtered through the leafy screen, she heard the latch of the gate click. Without turning her head, she tried to guess whose step it was coming up the gravel-walk, and rightly concluded it must be that of Hazard Breck. He crossed the piazza, and came to her side.

"Good-morning," he said, in a tone having something of the richness of his uncle's voice. "Are you asleep, or awake?"

"Asleep," she answered, closing her eyes. "Isn't it a delicious morning to sleep and dream?"

"What do you dream?"

"That you have good news to tell."

"You are no witch to guess that. You knew it from my voice."

"What is it?"

"Now I can torment you," he said, "as you did me last night. Guess."

"One never guesses in sleep."

"Dream it, then."

"I should dream that the sky had fallen, and you had caught larks."

"No, I haven't, worse luck. But you'll never get it."

"Then tell me."

"It is about uncle Tom," he said after some further bantering. "He's had a windfall. The Samoset and Brookfield stock has gone up like a rocket, and made his fortune. Isn't that jolly!" [53]

"I know nothing about stocks," she answered; "but I'm glad he's made his fortune."

"I'm just wild over it!" Hazard said. "It is so opportune!"

"Did he need it so much, then?" Patty asked, with a secret consciousness that she was pumping her guest.

"Uncle Tom is so generous!" Breck answered.

"He has not usually had that reputation," she returned, dropping the words slowly, one by one.

"I know," he said indignantly. "Of course I've no right to tell it, because he has always insisted that I should not. But I'd like you, at least, to know, and it can't do any harm to tell you now. He has supported not only aunt Pamela, but Frank and me; and of course, with two of us in college, it has been a hard pull on him."

"But I should think," she began, "that"—

"That we wouldn't have let him?" Hazard said as she hesitated. "I wonder—I've always wondered that we did. But he insisted, and said we could pay him back when we got our professions; and so we shall, of course."

Patty was silent. She was filled with self-reproach for having misjudged the lawyer. Why, from all her suitors, her heart had chosen this elderly-looking man, his hair already threaded with gray, she could have told as little as any one else. Love as a rule is so illogical, that it is strange the ancients did not give the little god the female sex; though it is true they approximated toward it by representing him eternally blindfold. Something in Patty had instinctively recognized the innate nobility of Mr. Putnam's character, hidden beneath a somewhat cold exterior. Against the fascination which his personality exercised over her, she struggled as a strong will always struggles against the dominion of a stronger. She could not easily yield herself up, and often treated the lawyer with less tenderness, or even courtesy, than the rest of her suitors. At the [54]

revelations of Hazard, however, she was much softened; and had Tom Putnam been at hand—but he was not; and it is idle to speculate upon chances, albeit the whole world is poised upon an IF, as a rocking-stone upon its pivot.

CHAPTER IX. [55]

AN ARRIVAL.

THE silence of the pair upon the piazza was broken by the arrival at the gate of Will, who had been to the station to meet grandmother Sanford. Patty started up as if to run to meet her, but fell back.

"I forget that I am a cripple," she said.

"Mother, how do you do?" exclaimed Mrs. Sanford, appearing in the doorway. "Do come up on to the piazza. I don't want to meet you on the stairs, or I'll have a disappointment."

"Thee art as full of foolish superstitions as ever, daughter Britann," the old lady said, coming slowly up the steps on Will's arm.

"You dear little grandmother!" Patty cried. "How glad I am you've come!"

"I am glad to come," her grandmother answered, "and grieved much to find thee lame. How dost thee do to-day?"

"Oh! I'm nicely. My ankle isn't painful at all. It would have been well if I could have kept still. This is Hazard Breck, grandmother, Mr. Putnam's nephew; you remember him.—And this, Hazard, is the nicest grandmother that ever lived."

"Thee art the nephew of an honest man," the old lady said, "though he is somewhat given to [56] irreverent speech."

"He is the best of uncles, at least," Hazard answered warmly.

"He is a very respectable old gentleman," Mrs. Sanford said patronizingly.

Will laughed meaningly, and glanced at his sister, whose cheeks flushed. Mrs. Sanford's antipathy to the lawyer was no secret.

"Mr. Putnam is the finest man I know," Patty said, a trifle defiantly, "except my father."

"Indeed?" Will said teasingly. "Grandmother," he added, "I think it is all nonsense about Patty's ankle. She only makes believe, so as to have everybody come and see her. She has a regiment of callers about the house all the time."

"Hazard," Patty said, "if mother has no objections, I wish you'd please toss Will into that bed of pinks."

"Objections!" exclaimed Mrs. Sanford. "Of course I've objections. Your own brother and the most thrifty bed of pinks I've got! Patience Sanford, I'm surprised at you!"

"If thee hast no objection, daughter Britann," grandmother Sanford said with her quiet smile, "I'll go in and rest a little."

The old lady was the mother of Dr. Sanford and of Mrs. Plant. She was a woman of strong character, and had adopted the Quaker faith after her marriage, being converted to it by the labors of a woman who had nursed her through a long illness. In her youth, grandmother Sanford [57] had perhaps been somewhat stern, as people of strong wills are apt to be: but age had mellowed her, as it does all sound fruit; and now she was so beloved by her friends and relatives, that they were ready to quarrel for her society to such a degree, that she declared she lived "on the circuit." She had keen perceptions, a quick sense of the ludicrous, and a kindly heart, which endeared her to all. Even Mrs. Sanford, who was undemonstrative in her affection for everybody else, brightened visibly whenever her mother-in-law came, and showed her pleasure in numerous kindly attentions. As for Patty, she worshipped her grandmother, who understood her as no one else but Dr. Sanford did. It was a peculiarity of the girl's to make few confidences; but to her grandmother she would talk of matters which she mentioned to no one else. Nor was the old lady less proud and fond of her grand-daughter; and the love between them was, as is always love between youth and age, a most beautiful thing to see.

Patty and Hazard Breck were scarcely left alone on the piazza, when a new visitor appeared, in the person of Burleigh Blood. The young man had been to the depot to see about the freight of the products of the dairy-farm which he owned in company with his father, and had chosen to improve his opportunity by calling at the Sanford cottage. At sight of him, young Breck said good-by, and betook himself home by a short cut across the garden, much to Patty's disappointment, as she wished to hear further concerning his uncle's good fortune. She, however, sped the parting, [58] and welcomed the coming guest with a smile; and the young farmer sat bashfully on the steps of the piazza before her.

"How big you are, Burleigh!" she said, glancing admiringly over his breadth of shoulder and chest, the strong head, and the firm, large hands.

"You told me that the other day," he said ruefully; "but I can't help it."

"Help it? Of course not. What makes you think I meant any thing but praise?"

"I thought I was so big and clumsy, that you must be making fun of me."

"Oh, no! I was only thinking what a mere morsel Flossy looked beside you at the picnic."

He blushed, and pulled at his hat, after his usual awkward fashion; and at that moment, as if summoned by a call-boy for her part in the play, Flossy herself appeared in the doorway, bowl of pop-corn, and all.

"Good-morning, Mr. Blood," she said. "Can you tell why mutton always tastes catty? As if it were cats, I mean."

"I—I never tasted any cats," he said with the utmost earnestness.

"No? Well, I wouldn't. But why didn't you come to inquire how I felt after the picnic? Montfield manners and bonnets both need to be issued in a revised edition."

"Montfield manners are perfect," Patty said, coming to the rescue of the guest. "They cannot be improved. But you remember, Flossy, what you had to ask Burleigh." [59]

"Of course you understand, Mr. Blood," Flossy said, "that a lady's request is a command."

"Yes, certainly."

"Very well. It is this I spoke to you about the other day, you know."

"I don't remember what you mean."

"You are to be my lover in this play."

"What?"

"You don't look over-charmed at the prospect," Flossy remarked coolly. "You ought to feel honored. So saying, I will eat a few kernels of corn. Have some, Patty?"

"But of course I can't act."

"Of course you can. I'll get the book for you now, so you can be studying your part. We don't have rehearsal until next week."

"You are to be Jonathan Cowboy in the play," Flossy continued, having produced the book. "Will is Mr. Bramble, and Ease Apthorpe his daughter. I'm to be Waitstill Eastman. I chose that because she has things to eat."

"Shall you eat pop-corn?" asked Patty.

"Really, I couldn't think of taking a part," Burleigh said.

"Nobody wants you to think of it," Flossy returned placidly. "It is settled that you are to have it. It is a bashful part, and, if you make any mistakes, people will think it is part of the play."

"'Vanity of vanities,'" said the voice of Bathalina Clemens, who had approached unperceived. "'All is vanity.'" [60]

"So are you," Flossy retorted.

"How came you home so soon?" Patty asked. "Didn't they have the funeral?"

"No," the doleful servant answered. "Emma ain't dead: so they had to put it off. Jane concluded to do her churning, after all; but she says she's in hopes to get through the burying by next Wednesday. And I should think she'd want to; for that'll finish up all the first wife's children. It'll naturally give her more time to look after her own."

"Did you ever hear any thing so atrocious!" exclaimed Patty, as the maid-servant disappeared round the corner of the house. "The way she talks about that funeral is more crazy than her usual speeches, and that is certainly needless."

"Don't names," Flossy asked pensively, "always convey a color to your mind, Mr. Blood?"

"Convey a color?"

"Yes. Like Caroline, you know: that always makes me think of pale yellow, and Susan of red, and Mary of blue."

"What nonsense!" laughed her cousin. "What color would Bathalina suggest?"

"That name," said Flossy, "always calls up a grayish, dirty green, like faded linsey-woolsey."

And at that moment the dinner-bell rang.

CHAPTER X. [61]

A CHANCE MEETING.

THE Putnam mansion, wherein the lawyer's ancestors had lived and died for several generations, stood next to the cottage of Dr. Sanford; or rather the two places were back to back, each facing one of the two principal of the village streets. To reach either house from the more distant thoroughfare, a short cut was taken across the grounds of the other, right-of-way being conceded

by mutual agreement.

People in Montfield retired early; and thus it happened that at ten o'clock of the Friday night following the coming of grandmother Sanford the lights were out in the doctor's cottage, and sleep was supposed to have descended upon all the dwellers therein. Patty had not, however, retired. A thunder-storm was slowly rising out of the west, with golden fringes of lightning about its dark edges; and she sat at her open window to watch its progress. The unusual restraint imposed upon her by her lameness had made her restless; and she longed to steal out of the house, and run races across the orchard as she had done when a child. The sultry closeness of the night made her take a fan, with which she did little but tap impatiently upon the window-ledge. She was not thinking connectedly, but in a vague way unpleasant thoughts and feelings [62]
crowded tumultuously through her brain like the crew of Comus.

Suddenly in the garden below she heard voices. A man was speaking earnestly, but in a tone too low to be audible at the window above. A woman answered him, the pair seeming to discuss something with much emphasis. Her curiosity greatly excited by so unusual a circumstance, Patty leaned out of the window to discover, if possible, who were the speakers.

"Well, it's the Lord's will," she heard the woman's voice say. "And I, for one, ain't a-going to run a muck agin it."

"It is Bathalina!" the listener said to herself. "Who in the world can she be talking to?"

She leaned farther from her window, but by an unlucky movement of her arm sent her fan fluttering down to the gravel walk below. The speakers departed in different directions like phantoms, and Patty was left once again to her own reflections. At first she speculated upon the possible nature of the interview she had interrupted; then her thoughts came back to her fan. It chanced to be one painted by an artist-cousin, and one of which she was fond: a thunder-storm was rapidly approaching, and the fan likely to be ruined. Her ankle was fast recovering, and she was not long in determining to go down into the garden for her property. With the aid of the furniture and the stair-railings she got safely down to the side-door, cautiously unbolted it and slipped out. The fan was only a few steps from the door, but a rolling-stone lay in wait for the [63]
lame ankle, and gave it so severe a turn that Patty sank down a miserable heap upon the ground. She sat there a moment to recover herself, and then crawled back to the door-steps. Seated here, she gazed ruefully at the fan, a white spot upon the dusky walk, and, coddling her aching ankle in her hands, wondered how she was to regain her room.

At that moment brisk steps sounded on the walk, approaching the spot where she sat. A tall form defined itself amid the darkness, pausing before her.

"Good-evening," said the voice of Tom Putnam. "Is it you, Patty?"

"Yes. It is I."

"Would it be polite to ask if you walk in your sleep?"

"I can't walk awake at any rate," she replied, half laughing and half crying, "whatever I may do in my sleep."

"Then, you must have come here for air in your dreams."

"I came after that fan, and I've twisted my foot over again."

He restored the fan, and then seated himself at her feet on the lowest step.

"It is fortunate I took this way home," he said coolly. "I hear that you think I am miserly."

"What?" she exclaimed in surprise.

"I am told that you pronounce me miserly," he repeated. "I am very sorry, for I mean to ask you to be my wife."

Instead of answering this strange declaration, Patty covered her face with her hands and burst [64]
into tears. He laid his fingers lightly upon her hair, smoothing it with a caressing motion. Surprise, physical pain, anger, and love were all oddly mingled in Patty's mind. She knew that she loved this man, and she was bitterly angry with herself for having misjudged him. She was no less angry with him for knowing the latter fact, of which Emily Purdy had taken care that he should not remain ignorant. She had, too, that Amazonian repugnance to the caress of a lover which is often inborn in strong personalities. She shook off the lawyer's touch as if it were fire.

"I misjudged you," she said, by an angry effort controlling her tears, "and I am not too proud to own it. Now forget it."

"Very well," he said, "it is forgotten. But your opinion is every thing to me, for I have loved you these dozen years, Patty. I've watched you growing up, and loved you more and more every year. I've had the words in my mouth a hundred times; but now I am able to marry, and I ask you to be my wife."

However cool these words may seem in black and white, they were intense as Tom Putnam spoke them, his rich voice gathering force as he proceeded. He was moved from that calm which Flossy Plant declared to be an essential law of his existence. The passion he felt was too old, too well defined, to come stammering and broken from his tongue; but his voice trembled, and he bent forward until his hot breath touched her cheek. He did not again attempt to caress her, but she [65]
felt that his eyes were fixed upon her with a keenness that could almost pierce the darkness. Still her mood was a defensive one. That she fought against herself no less than against him, only added strength to her determination not to yield.

"You had little faith in the depth of my love," she said at last, after a silence which seemed to both very long, "if you thought I should be afraid of poverty with you."

"Then you do love me!" he exclaimed, in joyous, vibrating tones.

"I did not say so," she retorted quickly. "I was talking of your feelings, not mine."

"I had no right to ask you to share poverty," he said. "I loved you too well to do it."

"That is because you looked only at your own side," she persisted. "If I loved a man, I should be glad if he were poor. I should delight to show him that I loved him better than any thing money would buy. Oh! I should be proud and glad to work for him if I need—and you thought I wouldn't do it!"

He caught her hand, and kissed it passionately.

"You know it is not that," he said. "I never thought any thing of you but that you were the noblest woman I knew; but I was not worth so much hardship—I couldn't bring it on you. But since you love me, I can wait."

"I never said I loved you! I—I don't."

"I know better," said he, springing up; "but let that go. It is beginning to rain, and sentiment must give place to reason. How shall you get into the house?" [66]

"But you must not go away thinking I love you," she said weakly.

"How can you help it?" he returned. "How shall you get back to your room?"

"If I only could wake Flossy, she'd help me."

"Which is her window?"

"The one over the rosebush."

He took up a handful of pebbles, and threw them lightly against the panes until Flossy came to the window.

"Who's there?" she called timidly.

"It's I," Patty answered. "Come down."

"What on earth!" began Flossy.

"Come quick, and keep quiet."

"She is coming," Putnam said. "Good-night, Patty. If you knew how I love you!"

He kissed her hand again, and was gone just in time to escape Flossy.

"How did you hit my window from the door-step?" the latter asked as the two girls climbed slowly the stairs.

"By sleight of hand," her cousin answered. "Good-night. Thank you very much. I want to get to bed and to sleep before it begins to lighten any worse."

But how could she sleep with those two kisses burning like live coals upon her hand?

CHAPTER XI. [67]

A BUNDLE OF PAPERS.

Patty slept late the following morning, and before she was well awake the sense of something strange and sad was present in her mind. She opened her eyes, and slowly recalled the conversation of the previous night, with the most mingled feelings. That Tom Putnam loved her was a new, keen joy; but bitter indeed was it to remember how she had met the proffer of his heart. It was true he had not accepted her negative; but all the combativeness of the girl's disposition was aroused, and she felt something of the martyr spirit of men determined to die for a cause they know lost or hopeless. She felt that nothing would make her retract her denial; that she could not do so and retain her self-respect. And yet an inner double-consciousness knew that some time she meant to yield, and that she hoped for some fortunate turn of circumstances to bring about the means of graceful submission.

She dressed herself slowly and sadly, until, catching sight of her lugubrious face in the glass, she laughed in spite of herself, and determined to shake off her melancholy.

She descended to breakfast humming a gay air, and trying to appear as if she were no more lame than upon the day previous. No one but grandmother Sanford noticed that her gayety was forced; but the beautiful old Friend with silvery hair and snowy kerchief possessed a shrewd head and a tender heart, quick to detect and to sympathize with pain. [68]

"Grand-daughter," she said after breakfast, when they were alone together, "something troubleth thee."

"Me, grandmother?" Patty began with affected surprise. But there was about the other a candor which enforced frankness in return. "It is nothing that can be helped," Patty said, sighing, "and indeed it is nothing to tell of."

"Thee must have confidence in thy grandmother, Patience, if so be that I can ever serve thee."

"I shall, I do. Grandmother, I"—

The door opened, and admitted Flossy and her aunt.

"I can trust the maid to clean the parlor," Mrs. Sanford was saying impressively; "but the cellar I must see to myself."

"Yes," Flossy returned, "and that reminds me, Aunt Britann: can you tell why a cat's breath always smells fishy?"

"It cleared off in the night," her aunt continued, without taking the slightest notice of the whimsical question, "and so ain't likely to stay pleasant."

"Beech-nuts," Flossy said in the same rambling way, "used to be good to eat in school, they took up so much time. But then they have a sort of apologetic taste, as if they'd be bigger if they could."

"And horse-chestnuts," added her aunt, "are so good for rheumatism." [69]

"Mercy!" cried Patty. "Are you both insane? You talk like two crazy Janes."

"I'd like to be a crazy Jane," Flossy said reflectively. "I wonder what they eat? Grandmother, did you bring those old-fashioned things with you? We are counting on them for our play. So saying, I gracefully fling myself into a chair. I think I could wear your dresses, grandmother."

"I brought them," the old lady answered with a twinkle in her eye. "Though I fear 'tis encouraging thee in vain and frivolous follies."

"If we don't go into vain and frivolous follies until you encourage them," Patty cried, "we may live to grow as solemn as Bathalina herself."

"It seems to me," Flossy put in, "that Mademoiselle Clemens has a dreadful 'hark-from-the-tombs-a-doleful-sound' air this morning."

"Why"—her cousin began, as there flashed through her mind the remembrance of the interview she had interrupted on the previous night. Her own troubles had until now driven it out of her mind.

"Well, what?" Flossy asked.

"Nothing. Let's look at the dresses now. Can't Flossy get them, grandmother?"

The costumes were produced in a hair-covered trunk which Flossy and Mrs. Sanford with some difficulty dragged into the sitting-room. When it was opened, a delightful odor of lavender and camphor and sweet-grass was diffused through the air; which grew more and more pungent as [70] from the trunk were taken delicious old gowns of Canton crape, broidered kerchiefs, caps, and hand-bags.

"That corn-colored crape is just the thing for me," Patty cried. "Isn't it lovely! Oh, you vain old grandmother! you are as gray as a sparrow now, but you used to go arrayed in purple and fine linen."

"I was not weaned from the worldliness of fine dress then," the old lady said, smiling. "And they did say," she added, smoothing her dove-gray dress with innocent complacency, "that I was not uncomely in those days."

"You are the handsomest mother in the State now," said Dr. Sanford, who had entered. "Patty, what is that bundle of papers?"

A packet of papers yellowed by age lay in the bottom of the trunk, and Patty took them up.

"Some of the letters grandmother had in her philandering days, I suppose. Shall I open them, grandmother?"

"Give them to me. Thee art a sad, giddy girl, grand-daughter.—They are old papers of thy father's, Charles. I haven't seen them this forty years for aught I know."

"Let me see them, mother," Dr. Sanford said. "This is father's land-grant for serving in the war of 1812."

"I never knew grandfather was in the war of 1812," said Patty. "Was he wounded?"

"Wounded," repeated grandmother Sanford, laughing. "There came a report that the British were [71] coming to Quinnebasset where he lived, and a company of men was raised. They went down to Edgecomb, and had a camp for four or five weeks, and then came home again."

> "'The king of France, with forty thousand men,
> Marched up a hill, and then marched down again,'"

quoted Dr. Sanford.

"But, grandmother," Flossy said, "you must have been awfully frightened to have him in danger."

"There was no danger. The men camped out, and spent their time in riotous living I fear. At least the British were not within hundreds of miles of them."

"But they might have come. I should have lain awake nights fearing something would happen, if it had been my husband."

"I think I did not lie awake nights much," grandmother answered, smiling. "I was but eight years old, and did not know that there was such a person in the world as William Sanford. It was before my father removed his family to Quinnebasset."

"But, mother," Dr. Sanford said, "you must be entitled to a pension as the widow of a veteran of the war of 1812. I'd forgotten all about father's being mustered in. This land-grant is evidence enough to show that he was."

"O grandmother!" put in Patty. "Now I shall begin to behave, so as to be remembered in your will."

"I am little in favor of receiving money obtained by bloodshed, son Charles, as thee knowest."

"Nonsense, mother. There was no blood shed. The money will be clean of any taint of war according to your own story. The money won't hurt you: you know you are only half Friend, when all's said and done." [72]

And, after much laughter and joking, it was decided that the matter should be put into the hands of Mr. Putnam.

Many were the allusions made to the grandmother's pension, and out of the matter came several odd incidents as will in due time appear.

CHAPTER XII. [73]

AN AFTERNOON RIDE.

THE quiet which falls upon a country village after its noonday meal, brooded over Montfield. Only the great butterflies and the bees were stirring, except for a humming-bird that now and then darted among the flowers. Patty and Flossy were together upon the piazza, lazily discussing matters relating to the theatrical entertainment, when a buggy stopped at the gate, from which descended the huge form of Burleigh Blood.

"Now, Burleigh," Patty cried, as he approached, and before he had time to say more than good-day, "I know you've come to take Flossy to drive, but I want to go myself. It is too lovely for any thing this afternoon, and I am an invalid and must be humored, you know."

"If I could ever see that mushrooms had any taste," Flossy said deliberately, but with no discoverable connection, "I am sure I should be fond of them: so I always eat them, and think what a good time I am having if I only knew it."

"Flossy, you get to be more and more incomprehensible every day. Sit down, Burleigh, please. Of course you'll have to take me to ride."

"That is what I came for," he answered. [74]

He did not, however, tell the truth. He had come intending to ask Flossy; but somehow his invitations always seemed to get crossed at the Sanfords', and he fated to be the sport of adverse fortune. He had reasoned out in his honest head a profound scheme of diplomacy. He would pique Patty by his attentions to her cousin, and thus force her to treat him with more consideration. He was about as well fitted for diplomatic juggleries as a babe in its cradle, and certainly this beginning was sufficiently unpropitious.

"Flossy, get my hat, that's a dear. Now, Burleigh, you'll have to let me lean on you. I'm lame still."

The afternoon was enchanting. It was one of those September days which in some strange way get transposed into August; when the air is full of hazes that soften the distant landscape with tints of purple and smoky blue and topaz; when the breeze is soft and enervating with a pleasing melancholy, like a revery, the sweeter for its sadness. The golden-rod and purple asters seem suddenly to have bloomed by the roadside, and the trees rustle softly with a dry murmur as if already falling into "the sear and yellow leaf." The crickets chirped cheerily in the lichen-covered stone walls and in the fields, while not a bird was to be seen or heard, unless now and then some chatty sparrow gossiping volubly with her neighbor, or an ill-omened crow that flew heavily over a distant field.

Burleigh and Patty chose a road leading out of the village, and lonely as country roads are apt to be. Patty was somewhat absent, sadly recalling the conversation of the previous night; but Burleigh looked so troubled at her pre-occupation that she resolved to throw off her heaviness, and began to chat cheerily. [75]

"It is a lovely afternoon to ride," she said. "It is one of those days when one wants to go somewhere, yet doesn't know quite where."

"I knew where I wanted to go," he answered, "and went."

"Perhaps it is different with men," she continued, ignoring the allusion. "You men can always go and come as you please, and haven't the restrictions to incite you that we girls have."

"Haven't we? I did not know we were so free. We usually end, I think, by doing as you like."

"That is an epigram, Burleigh. Since when did you become so wise?"

"Since you began to knock me about as you chose," he answered boldly. "You do as you like with

me. I went to invite you to the picnic, and you had me take your cousin. This afternoon I went after her, and have you."

"Did you really!" Patty exclaimed. "Honestly, I did not think of such a thing. It was all my vanity. Let's turn round. I didn't mean to cheat Flossy out of a ride."

"We'll keep on now, I guess," he answered. "I can take her another time."

"There is no time like the present," Patty said absently; wondering secretly what was the true nature of Burleigh's feeling toward her cousin.

"Isn't there?" he said, facing her suddenly. "Then I have a question to ask you. I"— [76]

"About Flossy?" she interrupted hastily, warned by the look in his eyes.

"No; about yourself. I"—

"But I want to tell you about Flossy first. You know she"—

"I don't want to talk of Flossy," Burleigh said.

Alas! that he would not be warned or hindered. His excitement swept away every trace of his diffidence, and he had never looked so manly as now. His somewhat florid face was pale, and his great eyes looked straight upon her as if his very soul were in them.

"I love you," he said concisely enough. "I want you to marry me."

"O Burleigh! Oh, don't! Oh, please!" Patty cried, drawing away the hand which he had seized to the neglect of the reins. "I didn't think you could say such things, when we've always been such good friends."

"Is that any reason we should not be better friends?" he demanded.

"But not that way; not"—

Fate came to her assistance, and spared her the necessity of completing the sentence. The horse had been following his own impulses in lack of any direction from his driver; and bringing the wheel too near the edge of the ditch, the carriage lightly careened, depositing its inmates unhurt but badly shaken in the midst of a sand-heap.

The horse was fortunately well trained; and Burleigh had no difficulty in stopping him, which he [77] did with a very angry face. As for Patty, she sat up in the sand, and burst into perfect shouts of laughter. She laughed and laughed, and held her sides and laughed again until the tears streamed from her eyes.

"O Burleigh!" she cried between her bursts of merriment. "Oh, I can't help it! Oh, it's too funny! I shall die, I believe!"

And off she went into fresh peals of laughter, until her companion felt a strong desire to shake her.

"To think you should tip me over, on top of making love to me! O Burleigh! it is too awfully droll for any thing! It is the funniest thing I ever heard of. Oh, dear!"

"I don't see where the fun comes in," he returned, rather crossly. "You always laugh at me."

"Oh, I don't either, but now I can't help it! Don't look so solemn, or you'll kill me!"

Her escort was hurt and angry. He felt that she flouted him and his love, and in this he did her injustice. Chagrin at his rejection, and mortification at the accident, combined to render him morbidly sensitive. Besides, he could not know that this lovely girl before him with flushed cheeks and tumbled hair was laughing as much from nervousness as from fun, and that the words of Tom Putnam on the previous night were as much a motive power in this extravagant cachinnation as his own proposal.

"I will help you into the buggy," he said stiffly.

"Don't be cross," she said, rising with the aid of the hand he extended. "I am sorry I vexed you. I [78] was horrid to laugh so. We are good friends again, and for always, are we not?"

But in that moment of mortification had unconsciously dawned in the mind of Burleigh Blood the knowledge, that, however great might be his friendship for Patty, he did not love her. It is true that it was some time before he appreciated the discovery; but he was inclined to be very silent on the homeward way, although his companion used her utmost endeavors to restore him to good humor.

CHAPTER XIII. [79]

AT REHEARSAL.

"Well, Bathalina," Mrs. Sanford said with despair in her voice, "if you must go, I suppose you must; but this is the third Wednesday you've been to that funeral, and I think that's plenty. It isn't lucky to put off a funeral; and here's all these cucumbers to pickle, and I can't possibly spare you, but I suppose I'll have to."

"Cousin Sam's child don't die every day," the maid retorted; "and of course they couldn't bury her

alive."

"Oh, dear, no!" her mistress assented. "That would be too awful; but I want you to be sure she is really dead before you go to her funeral again."

"Yes, she's dead," was the answer. "Peter Mixon came over last night and told me."

"Peter Mixon had better mind his own business. You told me yourself, Bathalina, that he was going to be married this very month to that West girl."

"Yes, mum, of course. But it's a great cross to him. He asked me first, and if it hadn't been for my sinful pride I'd a had him in the first place."

"Sinful fire-shovels!" Mrs. Sanford exclaimed. "You turned him off because he was after the money you've got in the bank, so don't let me hear any more about him. If you are going to this [80] protracted funeral, go along; and I do hope the remains won't need a great deal more burying. As for Peter Mixon, the less you have to do with him the better."

"I feel confident," Bathalina answered, "that it's the last funeral the child'll ever have; but in the midst of life we are in death."

"You may be," retorted her mistress bustling about; "but *I'm* in the midst of pickling, and can't stop to talk. Go along."

"Mother," Patty asked, appearing in the doorway, "what is the trouble?"

"Bathalina has gone traipsing off to her funeral again; and here are these cucumbers to do, and the kitchen all in heaps. She's got fool in the head worse than ever to-day."

"What awful slang, mother. Never mind, I'll help."

The next visitor to the kitchen was Flossy, who, having searched the rest of the house for her cousin, at length discovered her with sleeves rolled up, engaged in washing dishes.

"Goodness gracious, Patsy!" she exclaimed. "Are you here?"

"Mercy sakes, Flossy!" said her aunt. "Don't say 'goodness gracious,' it sounds so."

"No: I'll say 'mercy sakes,' Aunt Britann," her niece returned saucily. "Patty, what are you washing dishes for?"

"Somebody must do it; and Bathalina, the insane, has gone off."

"You are becoming a very model miss. Have you forgotten they are coming this morning to read [81] this play?"

"I had forgotten all about that. I'm sorry, marmee, but I don't see but I must leave you in the lurch. Here comes somebody now."

The first thing concerning which a country audience is anxious is that it "gets its money's worth;" and in amateur theatricals success depends much upon the duration of the entertainment. Two plays had therefore been chosen; one a melodramatic affair entitled, "The Faithful Jewess," and the other a jolly little comedy called "The Country Wooing." Patty, who was "the favorite local actress," as Will put it, had been cast in both plays. Clarence Toxteth was her Jewish lover, toward a union with whom she struggled hopefully but vainly through the most heart-rending situations. A pretended friend,

> "With falsest heart though fairest seeming,"

endeavored to separate the betrothed, with fatal success. Mr. Putnam had declined to take part; and the *rôle* which had been offered him had been given to the postmaster, one Sol Shankland.

The company assembled this morning in Mrs. Sanford's wide, low sitting-room, numbered about a score; and Babel itself could scarcely have been noisier. The girls talked of their parts, their dresses, their hopes and fears, of this, that, and the other, until the general effect was that of mill-wheels running ever faster and faster, quite beyond the control of any regulator. [82]

"Oh, dear!" exclaimed Will at last. "'I would I were dead and worms had eaten me, but not for love.' If there isn't silence here in three seconds, there will be blood shed!"

By the most energetic measures in the way of pounding and shouting, something like quiet was obtained, and the meeting proceeded to business. The two plays were read, rehearsals appointed, and a great deal said about the necessity of being letter-perfect before the next meeting.

"By Monday," Patty said, "we ought to be able to rehearse without a book."

"Mr. Blackfan is off," Sol Shankland said, "so we shall have nothing to do Sunday but to study our parts."

"How immoral!" exclaimed Miss Sturtevant. "I shall lie in a hammock all day and read."

"I suppose," Will Sanford said, "that I am the most unfortunate man that ever happened. I sent to Uncle Christopher for his grandfather's knee-breeches, and now I can't get into them."

"That is because they are small-clothes," suggested Ease Apthorpe.

"I think we have some at home," Toxteth said: "if you will come over, I'll see."

When rehearsal was over, Clarence and Will accordingly walked off together, accompanying Ease Apthorpe, who lived in the same direction. Frank Breck showed some inclination to join the group as they moved down the walk, but changed his mind, and accompanied Miss Sturtevant towards [83]

Mrs. Brown's.

The Toxteth mansion lay halfway between Dr. Sanford's and Mullen House, as was somewhat fancifully called the home of Ease. Will asked Ease to wait for him, as he was going with her after an extra play-book. Mrs. Toxteth was sitting upon the veranda, and invited Ease to a seat by her side while the young men went into the house.

"It makes me think of old times when theatricals come up," Mrs. Toxteth said. "I have always been extravagantly fond of acting and of masquerades."

"I wish we could have a masquerade," remarked Ease. "We have only had one in three years."

"Why not have one, then?"

"The girls say it is so much trouble to get up costumes. It is a bother, it is so difficult to get things."

"But now when you have your costumes all made for the plays, why not use them? You could arrange to exchange among yourselves."

"The very thing!" Ease exclaimed. "I am so glad you thought of it."

"As a reward," Mrs. Toxteth said, "I claim the privilege of giving the party. But don't speak of it just yet until I've talked with Clarence."

"Will," Ease asked as they walked towards Mullen House, "how long does Flossy mean to stay in Montfield? I am getting so fond of her that I don't like to think of her going back to Boston."

"'It may be for years, and it may be forever,'" he replied. "The case is just this. Flossy's father—you know there's nobody left in the family but these two now—cares for nothing in the world but his dinners and whist, as far as I can make out. I don't know Uncle Christopher very well, but he has the reputation of giving the best dinners of any man in his club. He had one once when I was there; and such a set of red-nosed, blear-eyed, pottle-paunched"— [84]

"Will!"

"I beg your pardon, but the old sinners that came to that dinner were enough to disgust anybody. They were like the people Paul tells about, each carrying his own individual god under his waistcoat. No wonder Flossy doesn't care to stay at home to dine with those ogres."

"It can't be very nice for her."

"No more is it. She likes to stay here, and we certainly like to have her. As for her father, if his soup and his wines are right he is troubled by no concern for the whereabouts of his friends. So, on the whole, I dare say she may remain indefinitely."

"Don't you think she and Burleigh Blood are getting to be very good friends?"

"I hadn't noticed. I thought he was one of Patty's followers."

"He isn't so much so now," Ease answered. "To-day at rehearsal he called her Flossy, and then colored and stammered and begged her pardon. I don't believe he ever did it before."

She was right; for at that very moment Burleigh Blood was walking along a sweet country road, saying softly over and over to his bashful but happy self: "Flossy, Flossy. And she said I was always to call her so. Flossy: what a pretty name it is too!" [85]

CHAPTER XIV. [86]

AN ELOPEMENT.

The problem of "help" was no less perplexing in Montfield than in the majority of New-England villages. Mrs. Sanford often declared that she had rather do the work for the household than "to wait upon the hired girl;" but her husband insisted upon her having a servant, and Bathalina Clemens had accordingly been engaged. The girl was little better than half-witted, but she was honest and faithful. Moreover, Mrs. Sanford could not abide the Irish. So strong was her dislike for the children of Erin, that had she known the wish of Thomas Carlyle, that the Emerald Isle were sunk, she would have indorsed it most heartily. As it was, she vented her feelings in various expletives and wishes, which, if less elegant than Carlyle's Teutonic diction, were certainly more clear and no less forcible.

"The Irish," Mrs. Sanford was wont to affirm, "are part pig, or pigs are part Irish, I don't know which. They tell about pigs living in the house with the Paddies in Ireland, and I make no doubt that many a pig has been brought up as a child of the family and nobody ever the wiser."

So as Mrs. Sanford would have no Irish girl, she had been obliged to endure Bathalina, who was every thing her soul abhorred, except that she was neat. It was her one virtue; and, as people usually do who have but one virtue, she carried it to excess. [87]

"If she was to get into heaven," her mistress declared, waxing eloquent, "I know she'd begin to scour up things, and be down on her knees to wash the golden streets."

Numberless were the freaks which resulted from her morbid mania for cleanliness. She would wash a counterpane if Pettitoes, the most dainty of cats, happened but to set one of his snowy

paws upon it. She washed her sunshade, her hats, her bonnets, boots, any thing and every thing. She was accustomed to prowl about the house, seizing upon any stray article left in sight, and into the tub it went. Flossy's lace shawl was rescued on its way to the suds, Patty's muslin fichu and Will's shooting-jacket were fished out of the washtub together; and for weeks after the advent of Miss Clemens the whole house was pervaded with a damp and discouraging odor, as if in it reigned a perpetual washing-day.

"This must be stopped," Dr. Sanford declared when one night on returning home he found the pear-trees decorated with an old skeleton hoop-skirt, his own high boots, carefully scoured inside, and a miscellaneous assortment of smaller wares. Into the kitchen he walked, and found Bathalina at the washtub chanting as usual a dismal stave.

> "'Tortured in body, and condemned in spirit,
> No sweet composure, to'"—

"Bathalina," interrupted the master of the house sternly, "get into that tub." [88]

"What, sir?"

"Get into that tub instantly."

"But"—

"Get in."

"But my clothes"—

"In with you."

"My shoes!"

He picked her up as lightly as if her bony frame weighed nothing, and deposited her in the midst of the foamy suds. Her screams quickly brought the household to the spot.

"Don't you get out," Dr. Sanford said, "until you have had enough of the washtub to last you for five years."

"But, Charles," remonstrated his wife, "she'll get her death cold."

"She's more likely to get her death hot," he returned, smiling grimly. "Let her soak a while. It won't hurt her. And now let us have supper."

He marched off to the dining-room.

"Come, Britann; come, Patty."

"But you don't mean to leave that poor creature there to die, do you?" Mrs. Sanford pleaded. "I doubt it must be a forerunner of a bad sign to have such things happen in a house."

The doctor made no reply, but sat down to his supper quite as if nothing had happened. After the meal he took his pipe and usual seat on the piazza, but was hardly seated before Patty appeared, half-choked with laughter.

"Oh, dear, father!" she said, "that foolish thing is in the tub still, and says she won't get out till you tell her to!" [89]

"Let her stay there then. She will dry quicker than my boots."

"Soapsuds makes green things grow," put in Will; "and Bathalina is as green as if she had been browsing with Nebuchadnezzar."

"Do come, father," Patty said, taking his arm. "She'll spend the night there if you don't."

Thus urged, Dr. Sanford rose; and the party adjourned to the kitchen, where the maid-servant still squatted amid the half-washed clothing like a very bony mermaid, singing in a defiantly mournful manner:

> "'Broad is the road that leads to death.'"

"Get out of that tub, Bathalina," Dr. Sanford commanded, "and stop that noise."

"I'm going home to my Aunt Jeff's," the mermaid said.

"Nonsense: you'll do nothing of the sort. Get out of the tub and get dry clothing on."

From that day the servant never washed any thing save her own person without an express command from her mistress. Dr. Sanford made her ample amends for the damage done to her attire; and thereafter she spoke of him with the utmost respect, apparently admiring his treatment of her extremely. She held to him as her ideal of manhood, even after she had fallen a victim to the wiles of Peter Mixon, an unscrupulous fellow who had served the Brecks in the days of their father's magnificence. [90]

"I can't think what has become of Bathalina," Mrs. Sanford remarked on the evening of the rehearsal. "She can't have staid at the funeral of that cousin's child's wife all this time. It's half-past ten."

At that moment the door-bell rang violently.

"Some one has come in considerable haste," grandmother Sanford said placidly. "Charles, it is probably some one for thee."

The person ushered into the sitting-room was not wholly a stranger to the family, and indeed by reputation they knew her well. She was an aunt of Bathalina Clemens, and rejoiced in the somewhat remarkable cognomen of Thomas Jefferson Gooch. Her grandfather being in his prime an ardent partisan of that famous statesman, had made a rash vow that his first grandchild should bear Jefferson's name. The first-born grandchild proved to be a girl, but the determined old gentleman, was no more to be restrained from the fulfilment of his vow than was Jephtha. Thomas Jefferson was the infant christened, and as "Aunty Jeff" she was now known to the whole neighborhood. She was a perfect "roly-poly-pudding" of a woman, "her husband's sphere," Will Sanford called her; but her activity was greater than that of her gauntest neighbor, and she walked as briskly as if she'd an electric battery in her back hair to keep her in motion. The corpulent little woman managed herself and her relatives with a determination which there was no evading. She dressed always in rusty black, and went about slipshod, explaining that she was [91] too fat to reach her feet and lace up boots.

To-day, having been to the funeral of the long death-defying Emma, her attire was more striking than usual; her black bonnet being garnished with the largest of red roses, and a magenta bow lighting up the voluminous amplitude of her chins, which, like spice-boxes, came in assorted sizes.

"Good-evenin', Mis' Sanford," Aunty Jeff burst out, plunging porpoise-like at once into the room and the midst of her errand. "That ungrateful Bathaliny Clemens hain't come home, has she? No, of course she hain't; an' I knew it, the miserable hussy! She's been elopin' with that all-fired Peter Mixon."

"Eloping!" her listeners cried in chorus.

"Yes, elopin'. I knew there was some kind of a gum-game up when I seed her an' him comin' in together. The hussy brought him right into the room with the mourners, and he looked at the remains as familiar and easy-like as if he'd been one of the next relations. I tried to catch Bathaliny's eye, but she wouldn't look at me. They couldn't walk to the grave together, 'cause he wasn't called with the mourners. But when we got there, and Parson Jones was a-prayin', I peeked through my fingers, and I seed Peter was a-sneakin' round toward her,—the dispisable, miser'ble wretch! An' when we was a-singin' the last hymn—we sung,

'Why do ye mourn, departed friends?'

to the tune of Chany,—an' I thought the singin' didn't sound so mournful kinder as it had orter,— [92] not nigh so mournful as when we buried Marthy Foster, she was a Harris, you remember, and second cousin to Bathaliny on the father's side: so I looked up to see if Bathaliny was givin' out on the air; for, bein' a near relation, I naturally felt a care for the mournin', and wanted to see Emma buried in decent shape, if she was always a scrawny, pindlin' little thing, an' her mother Ezikel's first wife. An' I'll be blowed if that Bathaliny warn't a-sneakin' off round the thorn-bushes,—you know where they be, close by where Frank Wiswell was buried, his mother bein' a Pettingill,—she was a-skulkin' off, if you'll believe it, round them thorn-bushes with Peter Mixup, or Old Evil One, or whatever he calls himself. I wanted to holler; but, thinks I to myself, I'm a relation of the corpse, if it is only by marriage, and I ain't goin' to spoil the solemnity of this funeral if I never sets eyes on that scandiculous hussy again! An' off they went; an' Tim Bowlin see 'em goin' to Joe Brown's, an' of course they are married long ago, he bein' a justice. An' I says to myself, 'Mis' Sanford ought to know, an' I'll go over an' tell her, bein' as it's one of our family.' It does seem as if her mother's children was bound to bring disgrace on themselves and everybody else. Look at Hannah Clemens! only she ain't to be looked at by an honest woman. The nasty hussy!"

Aunty Jeff's breath failed entirely at this point; and she fell back in her chair, her whole person quivering with excitement and indignation. Dr. Sanford laughed unrestrainedly, and Flossy and [93] Patty were not slow to follow his lead.

"She's Bathaliny Mixon by this time," aunty Jeff burst out afresh. "All he wanted of her was the money she had in the bank. He was bespoke to 'Mandy West too; an' I shouldn't be a mite surprised ef he got his livin' goin' round marryin' girls just that way. To think one of our folks should marry a brigamist," continued the irate lady, unconsciously punning, "and demean herself to take up with a Mixon! He's a dreadful unfacalized critter; an' that's what I've always said, an' what I'll stick to, ef I was to be run through the wringin'-machine the next minute, like that baby's hand over to Samoset—poor thing! He never stuck to nothin' 'thout 'twas Mr. Breck, and them two never got no good out of one 'nother. A dreadful unfacalized critter! An' I'm in as big a hurry as a rat in the wall, Mis' Sanford, but thought you'd want to know, owin' to havin' breakfast to get. The ungrateful hussy!"

The last objurgation was addressed, not to Mrs. Sanford, but to the absent Bathalina; that maiden having evidently defeated the designs of Providence to punish her sinful pride, and wed Peter Mixon in spite of his engagement to Amanda West. The following morning the newly-wed pair came after the possessions of the bride. Bathalina looked a little sheepish, and was disposed to apologize for the step she had taken.

"Being in love," she said to Patty, "I naturally felt like taking him for better or for worse, especially as he said his shirts had give out awfully; and he told no more than the truth, either, as [94] I've see with my own eyes."

"But where's your wedding-cake, Bathalina?" inquired Flossy. "A wedding isn't a wedding without cake."

"It isn't legal without cake," Patty added demurely.

"Ain't it?" demanded Mrs. Mixon, aghast.

"Of course not," answered Flossy. "You are not married unless you've had wedding-cake, and eaten it with your friends."

"But we didn't have no time to get cake."

"Then," pronounced Patty, "you are no more married than I am."

"O Lord! O Lord!" cried the dismayed bride. "That's what my sinful pride has brought me to. O Peter, Peter!" she continued, rushing out to the wagon where he sat waiting: "we ain't married, after all!"

It was with some difficulty that Mrs. Sanford, who appeared at this juncture, persuaded her that her marriage was legal. Bathalina was not really satisfied until Patty had produced a loaf of fruit-cake, and they had all tasted it except Peter, who still sat without, waiting.

"Now I'm married, at any rate," the bride observed, "and I don't suppose it makes so much difference to Peter as it does to me."

A slice of cake was at this hint sent to the bridegroom; and the Mixons drove away, leaving Mrs. Sanford face to face with the tremendous task of finding another servant.

CHAPTER XV.

[95]

A CASTLE IN THE AIR.

GRANDMOTHER SANFORD'S pension had come to be a standing joke. The charming old lady had begun to found upon her expectations the most extensive schemes for benevolence; which, as the pension, if obtained, would be only eight dollars a month, seemed rather premature.

"Charles," she said, "I wish thee'd advance me a small sum on the security of my pension. I desire to send some wine to old Mrs. Utley, and I do not wish to draw for it."

"That pension will be the ruin of you, mother," he said, laughing, as he gave her the money. "You've spent it two or three times over now."

"Thee is mistaken, son," she returned. "There are arrears due, besides that for the future. If friend Putnam would hasten a little, and arrange matters, it would be pleasant."

Mr. Putnam with his nephews had planned a fishing expedition, meaning to leave home Saturday morning, and camp in the woods a few days.

Will Sanford remarked at the breakfast-table Sunday morning, that they did not get away before noon; and some comment was made about their starting so near Sunday.

[96]

"They must be back so soon for rehearsals," Patty remarked. "Hazard said they wanted all the time they could get."

"It is a splendid day," Will continued. "I wish I were with them! There's no meeting to-day, and I think I'll drive over to Samoset to church this afternoon. Want to go, girls?"

"I'll go," answered Flossy. "I want to see what they wear over there."

Her cousin, however, preferred remaining at home, and about the middle of the afternoon might have been seen sauntering leisurely down the garden-path, book in hand, toward the old-fashioned summerhouse.

As has been said, the Putnam place adjoined that of Dr. Sanford. A brook flowed between, crossed by a rustic bridge, and fringed with a tangled thicket of elder, roses, wild clevis, and ground-nut vines, with here and there a tall clump of alders wading knee-deep into the water. Not far from the bridge, in the field behind the Putnam mansion, stood a monster elm in the branches of which Mr. Putnam had had an arbor constructed by the placing of a flooring upon two nearly horizontal branches, and surrounding this with a railing. The arbor was reached by means of ladders, and was so completely hidden by the boughs as to be invisible from below.

The wild asters blooming by the brook attracted Patty's steps; and she stood for some moments leaning upon the railing of the bridge, looking down into the water, or out over the lovely scene about her.

[97]

It was one of those soft days of early September which are like a memory or a dream. The sky was cloudless, the grass and foliage yet untouched by frost, but beginning to show russet tints of ripeness. The only sound which came to the maiden's ears was the soft purling of the brook beneath her feet as it flowed among the sedges and alders. Now and then a dragon-fly flitted like a flash across; and occasionally a minnow, with the gleam of a dark back or red-tipped fin, darted through the dusky water.

Patty was out of sympathy with the peaceful scene. Such a restless mood had seized her as she seldom experienced. She was dissatisfied with every thing, most of all with Tom Putnam. Since the night of the thunder-storm, she had scarcely seen her lover. The day following he had called while she was riding with Burleigh Blood. The next day he had seen her, indeed, but in a room full of people. For a moment they were alone together one morning soon after, but the interview had been unsatisfactory. Women demand from the men they love their utmost. A man having in

some passionate moment shown his capability for utter devotion, his lady feels a vague terror when he falls below this high-wrought mood, as he inevitably must. Perhaps it is the hereditary instinct of a sex that has found men too apt to reach a crisis of passion, only to fall away from it fatally and forever. It is difficult for women to understand a love which flows silently in an underground channel. The lawyer had been too much like his ordinary self, and too little like the [98] ardent lover who had kissed Patty's hand so hotly that August night. He seemed to assume in addressing her that they were betrothed, and she resented this as presumption.

"I am not engaged to you," she said pettishly. "Goodness knows where you got that idea!"

"I dreamed it," he returned; "and the dream was so pleasant, that I chose to believe it."

"It could only have been a nightmare," she retorted.

Immediately after, he had been called from home on business, returning only in time to make arrangements for the fishing expedition; and, as Patty was out when he called, she had not seen him since his return.

"Heigh-ho!" sighed Patty, lifting her eyes from the water to glance toward the Putnam house half-buried in trees. "Heigh-ho! I am getting as stupid as an owl. Now that good fortune has come, I suppose Tom will repair the house. How aunt Pamela will cackle over it! She is always sighing over the departed grandeur of the place."

Aunt Pamela Gilfether was the widowed sister of Tom Putnam's father. She moaned over the fallen fortunes of her race as the autumn wind wails over the departed summer. Her great desire had been that her nephew should marry, and build up the family; and the worthy lady had a standing grievance against Miss Sturtevant for presuming to attempt to insnare Tom by her fascinations. Whenever Miss Sturtevant was mentioned, aunt Pamela was wont to remark contemptuously upon her "blue chany eyes," by which she was understood to indicate that Flora [99] had eyes like those of a china doll.

At the moment Patty's thoughts recurred to aunt Pamela, that lady was seated upon the piazza, talking with Hazard Breck.

"I know he'd have asked Patty long ago," Mrs. Gilfether said, "if only he'd been easy in his affairs. Your father was no kind of a provider, nor no kind of a getting-ahead man, as you know. And what with having you boys on his hands, and me too,—though, to be sure, I'm a Putnam,—it's been a hard pull on Tom."

"I know it, aunt Pamela," Hazard answered in a low tone.

The pain he felt at discovering his uncle's fondness for Patty made him oblivious to the little stings with which aunt Pamela was accustomed to give piquancy to her conversation.

"There he is, up there in that tree now," the lady went on pathetically, "and moping and mooning for that girl, I've no manner of doubt. Not that he ever said a word, or that she's half good enough for him; but he's been crazy over her this ten years, and nothing was just exactly right but what Patience Sanford did."

The idea of his uncle's "moping and mooning" from any cause struck Hazard as ludicrous enough; and he smiled, even while his young heart was full of pain. He rose, and went into the house for his hat, setting out immediately after for a walk.

Whether there was any unconscious influence of the mind of aunt Pamela upon the consciousness [100] of Patty, standing on the bridge, is a question psychologists may consider, if they please. Certain it is, that, while Mrs. Gilfether was commenting upon the love of her nephew for the doctor's daughter, the glance of the maiden was arrested by the ladders leading to Mr. Putnam's Castle in the Air, as he called his elm-tree-arbor; and her thoughts flew in that direction.

"I've a mind to go up there," she said to herself. "The men are all away, and it must be jolly."

She looked about her in all directions, but discerned no one. She hesitated a moment, then crossed the Rubicon by running lightly and rapidly across the field, and began to mount the ladders. At the top of the first ladder she looked about her again, but still discovered no one. She had been a bit of a romp in her younger days, and a feeling of tom-boyish joy came over her. Nimbly as a squirrel she ran up the second ladder. The third was very short, and shut about closely with leaves and branches. As she put her foot upon the lowest rung, the odor of a cigar greeted her nostrils.

"Good-afternoon," said the voice of Tom Putnam above her.

Her short-lived joy vanished in the twinkling of an eye.

"What right has he there?" was her first thought. "I will *not* go back!" was her second. She stepped up the ladder, disregarding the proffered hand of her lover, and stood upon the floor of the arbor.

"Welcome to the Castle in the Air," he said, extending his hand once more. [101]

She took it with a pout.

"I thought you had gone fishing," said she petulantly.

"We started," he answered; "but we broke down between here and Samoset, so we gave it up."

Patty looked about her curiously. The arbor was half a dozen feet across, with wall and ceiling of green boughs. It was a grotto dug in a huge emerald. On one side an opening had been cut in the foliage, so as to afford a view of the river, and the mountains beyond, now blue and purple with

autumn hazes. The castle was securely railed in, and furnished with three or four rustic seats, besides a small table, or rather shelf, supported by a living bough. Upon this lay an open book, in which the lawyer had apparently been reading.

"I trust my cigar does not trouble you," he said: "I'll drop it if it does."

"Not in the least."

Magnetism by induction is a phenomenon no less interesting in the intellectual than in the physical world. The restless mood of Patty, her defensive attitude, began to re-act upon her companion. She unconsciously was defending herself from herself, rather than from him; while he was at once puzzled and offended by her repellence. Patty was more affected by this meeting with her lover than she realized, and her nature instinctively guarded itself against any betrayal of emotion. She affected, as many another has done, to cover her concern by a mask of indifference, and began to banter gayly.

"I would on no account have come here, had I known you were at home," she said. [102]

"Um,"—he returned. "You and truth have one thing in common."

"I am delighted to hear it. What may that be?"

"You are both very coy when sought, and yet will often show your faces unasked."

"Thanks! That is, then, our only resemblance?"

"Oh, no! You both can say extremely disagreeable things."

"And both are very unpleasant generally, I suppose you'd like to add."

"By no means. That would be impolite to my guest."

"I am glad if you keep a semblance even of good manners."

"Manners?" he said reflectively. "I dimly remember having had something of the kind in my youth, but I long since threw them aside. I thought them out of fashion."

"Is that the reason you have not asked me to sit down?"

"I did not know as you would stay long enough to make it an object."

"I can go, of course, if you wish it."

"Don't on my account, I beg," he said coolly. "I am charmed to have you here. I should have invited you, had I supposed you'd accept."

"You have, hundreds of times."

"Have I? We say so many of those things for politeness' sake, and forget them instantly."

She tossed her head, and took up the book he had been reading. [103]

"'Thomas Putnam,'" she read upon the fly-leaf. "What an extremely homely name!" she commented.

"A matter of taste," he replied. "I confess that Patience Putnam would please me better."

"You are very rude!" she said, angry that she needs must blush.

"Am I? You may have an opportunity to polish my manners whenever you choose."

"They need it badly enough; but some materials are so coarse-grained, that they will take no polish. Will you please talk sensibly for a few moments?"

"Certainly. Any thing to please you. Your request is at once too reasonable and too polite to be disregarded. Have you any choice of subject?"

"What have you been reading?"

"Merely a foolish lovelorn ditty."

"Read it to me," she commanded.

"As you please; if you will give me the book. Sir John Suckling is responsible for it."

"'Out of the mouths of babes and sucklings,'" Patty quoted.

The lawyer smiled, and in his rich voice read the following poem:—

TRUE SIGNS OF LOVE.

Honest lover, whosoever,
If in all thy love there ever
Wavering thought was, if thy flame
Were not still even, still the same,
Know this,— [104]
Thou lov'st amiss;
And to love true
Thou must begin again, and love anew.

If, when she appears i' th' room,
Thou dost not quake, and be struck dumb,
And, in striving this to cover,
Dost not speak thy words twice over,

Know this,—
Thou lov'st amiss;
And to love true
Thou must begin again, and love anew.

If fondly thou dost not mistake,
And all defects for graces take,
Persuad'st thyself that jests are broken
When she has little or nothing spoken,
Know this,—
Thou lov'st amiss;
And to love true
Thou must begin again, and love anew.

If, when thou appear'st to be within,
Thou let'st not men ask, and again;
And, when thou answer'st, if it be
To what was asked thee properly;
Know this,—
Thou lov'st amiss;
And to love true
Thou must begin again, and love anew.

If, when thy stomach calls to eat,
Thou cut'st not fingers 'stead of meat,
And, with much gazing on her face,
Dost not rise hungry from the place,
Know this,— [105]
Thou lov'st amiss;
And to love true
Thou must begin again, and love anew.

He read better than he intended, or, indeed, than he knew. His voice had always a remarkable power over Patty,—a fascination which she loved to experience. As he read, she turned away from him, and gazed through the twig-set window toward the softly-outlined hills. As he concluded, she turned her face toward him like a flash of light.

"Do you believe it?" she asked in a voice which proved her melted mood.

But her companion was less facile in his mental changes, and did not respond to this quick transition from banter to sentiment.

"I believe," he replied, "that it is wholly and entirely—poetry. It is not a bad description of Burleigh Blood."

She sprang up impetuously from the seat into which she had sunk, and began to pace restlessly up and down.

"But there is some snap to that sort of love," she said: "one can believe in its earnestness."

"And in its unreasoning exaction," he returned. "It must be very uncomfortable."

"But I'd rather be hated than comfortably loved: it would amount to more. I hate placidity. I think love should be so strong that one surrenders one's whole being to it."

"You are like the rest of your sex," he began. But at that moment a paper fluttered out of the book [106]
whose leaves he had been turning carelessly as they talked. "Very *apropos*," he said, taking it up. "This is the work of a college-friend of mine. I trust you'll pardon my reading it:—

"While daisies swing on their slender stalks,
As when the spring was new;
While golden-rod into bloom has burst,
As summer quite were through;
Then 'tis ah! and alack! and well-a-day!
For the time when dreams were true:
'Tis best to be off with the old love
Before you are on with the new!

"For happy with either,
Is happy with neither,
And love is hard to tame:
The old love's grieving,
The new's believing,
Both feed the treacherous flame.

"Clarissa's sad crying,
Dorinda's sweet sighing,
Alike my comfort fears;
Fain would I ease me
From things that tease me,—

Dorinda's doubting, Clarissa's tears.

"Soon daisies fade from the sloping fields
  They graced when spring was new;
And golden-rod alone on the hills
  Proclaims the summer through;
Then heigh-ho! and alack! and well-a-way!
  Is a second love less true?
Be speedily off with the old love,
  And speedily on with the new!"

"That is simply abominable!" Patty exclaimed. "He had no idea what love is!" [107]

"I understand that to imply that you do," Mr. Putnam said critically.

"Women know that by intuition."

"Oh!"

"Every woman desires the sort of love Suckling describes," she said insistently, standing at the window, with her back toward her companion.

"I beg your pardon," he said. "Taste in love is as different as taste in flavors."

"But every one must desire true love."

"True love is no more palatable to all than is honey."

She turned suddenly, and faced him. He was startled to see how pale she was.

"What is it?" he cried, springing up from his lounging position. "Are you dizzy?"

"Yes, yes," she said.

He made her sit down, and began to fan her with his hat. Every look and motion was full of solicitude, but the girl shrank from him.

"It is nothing. It has passed now," she said; by a strong effort recovering her composure.

"I am very sorry," he began; but she interrupted him.

"It is all passed," she said, laughing nervously. "I am very foolish. What do you think of the weather?"

"The moon last night entertained a select circle with one or two stars in it," he said slowly, while he watched her with keen eyes; "and that seems to promise rain." [108]

"That is unfortunate," she answered, rising. "We have rehearsal in the afternoon at Selina Brown's, and it is so uncomfortable getting about in the rain!"

"You are not going home now?"

"I must. I am deeply grateful to you for your hospitality, and more for your frankness."

"My frankness?"

"Good-by."

"Wait. You will be dizzy on the ladders."

"Nonsense! I never was dizzy in my life."

"Not a moment ago?"

"Oh, yes! But I am clear-headed now. Don't come. I really mean it. I don't want you."

She slipped down the ladder, leaving him alone. He stood a moment looking at the branches which hid her from his sight, and then flung himself down upon a rustic seat in deep thought.

Meanwhile Patty went back towards the brook and her home. She stopped at the bridge as before, but now the vague unrest in her heart was changed to positive pain. It had not been giddiness which had made her white, but a sudden conviction, that, after all, her lover had no passion worth the name. She was very unhappy,—so unhappy, indeed, as to forget to be angry with herself for being so. She saw Hazard Breck coming down the brookside, and looked about for a means of escape from meeting him. At that moment he looked up, and saw her. He involuntarily made a motion, as if half minded to turn back; and instantly a desire arose in Patty [109] to encounter him. Life, like dreams, goes often by contraries; and desires are oftener caught upon the rebound than directly.

"Good-afternoon," Patty called, with a fine assumption of gayety.

"Good-afternoon," he answered, coming up to her side, and leaning upon the railing of the bridge.

"Are you thinking of suicide?" she asked, as he continued to look, not at her, but intently into the water.

"No, indeed!"

"Then don't look so melancholy, please."

"How shall I look?"

"I don't much care; only don't have that dreadful dead-and-gone expression."

"Shall I grin?"

"Of course not!"

"Why may I not look melancholy, then?"

"Because it does not please me to have you," she said.

"Oh!" he retorted. "The trouble is not in me, then, but in your mood."

"I am not given to moods. I am *semper idem*."

"So is a post."

"Thank you!" Patty replied. "You are as complimentary as your uncle."

"Uncle Tom? Where did you see him?"

"At various places in Montfield all my life."

Hazard began to look at her curiously. He had at first noticed nothing strange in her manner, being too much occupied with his own disquietude, having left the house after aunt Pamela had [110] confided to him his uncle's passion. He had been walking along the side of the brook, recalling the thousand signs of this love which he had seen, and yet accounted not at all; and he wondered, man-like, at his own obtuseness to what now seemed so clear. When he met Patty, he was absorbed in counterfeiting indifference; but something in her tone made him perceive at length that she was not her usual self. Perhaps the love in his own heart, whose fruition he had unquestioningly resigned at the words of aunt Pamela, made him clearer sighted. He longed to question her, to tell her of his uncle's love and of his own. His lip trembled with the impetuous words he could not speak, and his eyes were fixed upon her face with an intense gaze which was more than she could bear.

"Good-by," she said hastily, and went her way.

"Don't fail to be at rehearsal," she called, lest he should think her leave-taking abrupt.

But she would not look back, for her eyes were full of tears.

Hazard walked thoughtfully on towards the house, which he reached just as a woman drove to the front entrance. It was the woman who went under the name of Mrs. Smithers, and she had driven over from Samoset after Mr. Putnam.

CHAPTER XVI. [111]

THE CHURCH AT SAMOSET.

THE road to Samoset was up hill and down hill, and altogether uneven; but it lay through a lovely country, just now colored with those soft hues autumn wears before her gorgeous gala dress is ready. Beside the way the squirrels leaped and chattered in the Sunday stillness as our friends drove to church. Flossy had proposed that they call for Ease Apthorpe; and her cousin, who had been secretly wishing her to make this suggestion, assented with alacrity. Ease yielded to the temptation of a ride on so beautiful an afternoon, and abandoned her own for the Unitarian service at Samoset. In spite of Mrs. Sanford's reflections upon the narrowness of modern buggies, the seat of their carriage proved wide enough for the three, perhaps because Ease, like Flossy, was rather small.

Halfway between Montfield and Samoset the country-road crossed a large brook, which was known as Wilk's Run. It was deep and swift, being fed by springs among the hills; and it foamed along its channel, fretting at every bowlder, with a sense of its own importance, little more reasonable than if it had been gifted with human intelligence. The banks of the stream were [112] rough, and broken with miniature coves and shallows, cliffs and caves, where the schoolchildren, picnicking or playing truant, frolicked joyously.

"Do you remember, Will," Ease said, as our friends halted upon the bridge to look up and down the Run, "do you remember the May Day when we hid Sol Shankland's pea-shooter in the hole in the rock?"

"I think I do," he returned, laughing. "He pelted Selina Brown until she threatened to drown herself; and Emily Purdy inquired if we supposed Mrs. Brown would get to the funeral in time to be called with the mourners."

"I wonder if the thing is there now," continued Ease. "That was—why, it was seven years ago: think of it!"

"We might see," Will suggested. "We are early enough."

"It would be such fun!"

"You don't mind staying with the horse, do you, Floss?" Will asked.

"Oh, no! I shall drive on if I do. I know the road to Samoset perfectly."

"Come on, then, Ease: we'll investigate."

Off the pair went, laughing and chatting like two children. Flossy waited until they had

clambered down the rocky path to the water below the bridge, and then shouted to them.

"What is it?" her cousin asked.

"I'll call when I come from church," she screamed in reply.

Then she deliberately drove off. [113]

"By George!" Will exclaimed. "That's just like Floss: I might have known."

"What shall we do?" asked his companion in dismay.

"Do? Make ourselves comfortable. Meeting won't be more than an hour, and we can endure that. It is a great deal pleasanter here than in church."

"Yes," she assented doubtfully.

"And, as we can't help ourselves, it is no use to fret."

They found a cosey nook, and a log for a seat, which Will, with a praiseworthy care for Ease's Sunday raiment, covered with a newspaper he chanced to have in his pocket. They fell to chatting of old times, the theatricals, Will's college-scrapes, and the thousand things which give to life its varied savors. Will in a quiet fashion had been fond of his companion from childhood, but had never thought it necessary to tell her so: indeed, he had never in any serious way considered the fact himself, but, being fond of her companionship, had sought and accepted it as a matter of course. This placid afternoon, with the water at their feet, the trees rustling in the faintest whispers overhead, and the air about them mellow and fragrant, a sensuous, "lotus-fed content" stole over them, and the moments went by unheeded. They were too much at ease for lovers, but they were the best of friends.

Meanwhile, Flossy Plant, filled with a wicked glee, drove onward to Samoset, found an old man to fasten her horse, and walked into church as demurely as the most saintly maiden of them all. The [114] party had set out for the Unitarian church; but Flossy, having taken matters into her own hands, drove to quite another sanctuary. She had often heard her cousins laugh about the quaintness of a church of Scotch Presbyterians which had been established in the earlier days of Samoset, and which still retained much of its antique simplicity.

She had seen the building in driving with Will, and now the whim had seized her to attend the service. She was a little late, and an icy breath of stern theology seemed to meet her when she entered. She slipped into a seat near the door, and half held her breath, lest a precentor should start up from some unsuspected corner, and pounce upon her for disturbing the awful solemnity of the assembly.

The building was plain to ugliness,—a square box, high and bare, with stiff pews, whose uncushioned angles precluded the possibility of any sacred drowsiness. The windows were devoid of shutters, the floor was carpetless, the pulpit as guiltless of cushions as the pews. The congregation had a blue, pinched look, as if their religion were too difficult of digestion to be nourishing, and a moral dyspepsia had been the result of swallowing large portions of it.

The preacher, however, was a noble-looking man, with snowy hair and beard. He was reading and expounding the twenty-second Psalm when Flossy entered; and she could not but be struck with the force of his unaffected diction and the nobility of his thought, colored though it [115] necessarily was by his narrow theology.

But all solemn meditations were suddenly interrupted, when, the exposition ended, the congregation sang the psalm which had been read. No wicked hymns, the invention of men, are allowed in the conservative precincts of orthodox Presbyterianism, but only the old metrical versions of the Psalms of David. The old custom of having the precentor sit in a box before the pulpit was not followed in the church at Samoset, nor were the lines deaconed out; these two concessions having been grudgingly made to the progressive spirit of the age. The precentor sat in the front pew; and, suddenly stepping out before the people, he began in a cracked, nasal tenor to sing the psalm read. The congregation generously allowed him half a line the start, and then one after the other attempted the hopeless task of overtaking him before he completed the stanza. He had a great advantage from the fact that he probably knew what tune he intended to sing; and by skilfully introducing sundry original quavers, runs, and quirks, he succeeded in throwing his pursuers so completely off the scent, that, although at least a dozen different airs were tried by various members of the chorus, no one seemed really to have hit the right one until the precentor had triumphantly completed two stanzas, and got well into the third.

The effect was indescribable. Flossy was at first too amazed to understand what was the matter; and then it required all her energies to keep from laughing aloud. How any human beings could [116] stand up and give vent to such unearthly sounds, and still preserve their gravity, was beyond her comprehension. The volume of noise constantly increased as one after another of the singers, having tried hastily half a dozen or more tunes in various keys, came proudly into the right one, pouring forth a torrent of sound to let the precentor know, that, after all, he was conquered, and his secret wrested from him. That individual, finding himself defeated in his endeavors to conceal the tune under new and more elaborate variations, sulkily abandoned the contest, and tried to sing it correctly, thereby coming so far from the original, that once more the congregation were puzzled, and, concluding him to have changed the air, struck anew into a wild variety of experiments more discordant than before.

The singing was so astonishing, that the words did not at first impress Flossy; but they were sufficiently remarkable when once her attention was fixed on them.

"Like water I'm poured out, my bones
all out of joynt do part.
Amidst my bowels, as the wax,
so melted is my heart.

"My strength is like a pot-sheard dry'd,
my tongue it cleaveth fast
Unto my jaws; and to the dust
of death thou brought me hast."

And so on through innumerable stanzas.

For the remainder of the service Flossy gave her attention chiefly to the book of psalms, and very entertaining she found it. She had a very funny time all alone in the corner of the great bare pew, [117] her golden hair fluffed about her face, and her cheeks flushed with her efforts to restrain her laughter. She grew more and more absorbed until at the lines,—

"Like as the hart for water-brooks
in thirst doth pant and bray,"

she forgot herself entirely, and a little golden trill of laughter rippled through the solemn old church. Then poor Flossy felt, rather than saw, the looks of horror and indignation which were cast in her direction, and her cheeks burned like fire. She relieved her mind by pulling to pieces a ragged psalmody; and, as she grew calmer, the printed paper used in the binding caught her eye. Upon it she read the following notice:—

"Dec. 25, by the Rev. Edward French, William Sanford of Montfield, to Linda, youngest daughter of Ezekiel Thaxter, Esq."

"Grandmother Sanford's wedding," Flossy said to herself, and dreamed over the notice until the service ended.

"Mercy!" she remarked to the horse, looking at her watch as she drove out of Samoset: "how late it is! Do get along faster. What will Ease and Will think has become of me? Get up! Mercy, who's that?"

It was the stalwart form of Burleigh Blood she saw, walking along the grassy edge of the road. He turned his head as she approached, lifting his hat, and blushing diffidently.

"How do you do?" she said, drawing rein beside him. "Will you ride?" [118]

"Thank you," he answered confusedly, "I—I think not."

"Very well," she returned, "get in then."

He laughed and obeyed her, as if he had given the acceptance her words assumed.

"Where have you been?" Flossy asked as they drove on. "How in the world do you happen to be straying about so on Sunday? Have you been to church?"

"Yes: I rode over this morning, and staid all day."

"But you didn't eat your horse for dinner, I hope."

"Oh, no! I had dinner at aunt Phelena's. I lent the horse. Joe Brown and his wife came over to see their cousin. Her husband has disappeared, and nobody knows what has become of him."

"Disappeared?"

"Yes. He went out to his office, and never came back."

"How disgusting for a man to act so!" exclaimed Flossy. "Why, the friends can't tell whether to have a funeral, or be chirky. It must be dreadfully aggravating. It keeps them all at home, and yet they don't know what to expect."

"It is usually safe to expect the worst."

"But that isn't pleasant. One doesn't like to be in the dumps without being obliged to be. And it's not only the immediate family, but other folks,—sort of cousins, and the like. I should be awfully cross if I were a cousin. They can't even have the comfort of the services, or of wearing black, no [119] matter how becoming it is to them. For my part, I think it would be a great deal less selfish to leave word whether there's a funeral or not."

"I don't think people who disappear can always help it," he said, laughing. "But I suppose you'll leave a note saying, 'Farewell—farewell forever;' or something like that."

"Yes, I'll say 'Funeral at such a time, and I'll be ready.' How shockingly I talk! So saying, she folded her lips, and sank into silence. Will you drive, please?"

"This cousin of the Browns," Burleigh remarked, "just went off, or was carried off, or something else: at least, he is gone. The Browns were going home in the mail-team at nine o'clock this morning, but Mrs. Brown didn't get ready until about one this afternoon."

"And you lent them your horse. That was very good of you."

"Oh, no! It was only casting bread upon the waters. I shall want a good turn of him some time, likely enough."

"I never supposed," Flossy returned critically, "that bread cast upon the waters could be worth much when it came back after many days. It most likely would be mouldy, and so water-soaked it wouldn't be fit to eat."

"I don't like to joke about Scripture," he said gravely, flushing at his own boldness. "Of course," he added, "I don't think you meant any harm."

"Of course not. It is a trick I have caught from father: it is part of my inheritance, like dyspepsia and a liver. Though why," she added, "it should be called a liver, I can't see. I think *dier* would be more appropriate." [120]

At that moment Wilk's Run came in sight.

"Dear me!" Flossy exclaimed. "I entirely forgot them, but this man put them all out of my head."

Her companion answered only by a puzzled stare.

"This one that disappeared, you know," she explained lucidly. "And they went to find a popgun, or something, and the service was so very long, you know."

Burleigh, vainly endeavoring to catch some clew to her meaning, said nothing. In another moment they reached the bridge. No person was to be seen.

"I wish you'd shout," Flossy said. "They can't be far off."

"What shall I shout?"

"I don't believe you know a word I've been saying," she remarked, looking into his face. "I want you to call them."

Burleigh was not without a sense of humor, and his bashfulness had yielded in a great degree to the pleasure which Miss Plant's presence gave him. He accepted the command literally, and roared, "Them! them!" so lustily that the rocky banks of the brook re-echoed.

"Mercy!" cried his companion. "You've lungs like organ-bellows. I'll get out and look for them before I'm stone-deaf."

"If 'them' means Will and Ease Apthorpe," Burleigh said, "there they come now."

CHAPTER XVII. [121]

A CONFIDENCE.

The shores of Wilk's Run were as varied as the caprices of a coquette. Here the rocks rose up bold and steep, with broken faces over which trailed green and graceful ferns, and in whose clefts and niches bloomed in spring clusters of the pale-red columbines. Again the groves of birch and poplar, or the copses of walnut-trees, grew quite down to the water's edge, their golden or silver trunks gleaming out of the half-luminous dusk of their leaves. Occasionally a tiny meadow would be planted upon the brook's bank, fringed with rushes and moisture-loving plants; while at another spot the turf, level and verdant, formed a greensward fit for the foot of a princess or a fairy. It was to a nook shut in by a wall of rocks, and carpeted with the softest grass, that Will and Ease came after rambling about for a time. A large golden birch stood near the middle of the open space, its leaves forever quivering, aspen-like, and mingling their murmur with the ripple of the brook, until only the "talking-bird" seemed needed to complete the trio of the garden of the Princess Parizade. Knots of golden-rod, and the purple tassels of the asters, fringed the foot of the rocky wall half enclosing the place; and there, too, the nightshade trailed its rich clusters of [122] claret-hued berries. The leaves of the woodbine, which had climbed up the rocks on one side, contesting every foothold with a wild grape-vine now hanging heavy with purple clusters, had begun to turn crimson with ripeness, and furnished a mass of high color.

The schoolgirls of Montfield, like schoolgirls in general, more sentimental than original, had named this place "Lovers' Retreat;" not, indeed, that tradition or history recorded that any lovers ever did, might, could, would, or should retreat thither, but because the spot and the name had both a gentle fascination for their maiden bosoms.

The popgun for which Will and Ease came to look was not to be found, having, doubtless, long since mouldered into dust. The search for it, however, called up a thousand reminiscences, over which they chatted and laughed like children.

"This is a vast deal better than going to church," Will said, stretching himself comfortably at the feet of his companion, who sat leaning against the trunk of the birch-tree. "I am glad Floss left us. What a queer little thing she is!"

"Do you remember the time we went nutting," said Ease, "and Emily Purdy ran away with the horse, so that we had to walk home?"

"I guess I do! That was the time you turned your ankle, and your aunt Tabitha accused me of having lamed you for life."

"Yes. And Mrs. Brown got along with her infallible lotion the day after I first walked out. She was so astonished when she met me!" [123]

"That's precisely the way she did when Sol Shankland was hit in the eye with 'old Thunderbust.'

You remember the ball we called 'old Thunderbust,' don't you?"

Very good companions had these two always been, but without a thought of love between them. They were too frank, too calmly happy together, for love. The old days, the old memories, cast a soft glow over all their relations with each other,—a light not love, but the rosy hues of a dawn that was yet to be, the luminous foretelling of the sun of passion before the day. They often alluded lightly to the persons they meant to marry,—ideals which unconsciously they made somehow like each other, even when intended most to be different.

"It seems to me," Will remarked this afternoon, in a dispassionate tone, "that Frank Breck goes to see you often enough."

"Doesn't he! I wish he wouldn't. Were ever two brothers more unlike than he and Hazard?"

"They are different. Hazard is a royal fellow, but the less said of Frank the better."

"Yes: only"—

"Only what?"

The temptation of an appreciative listener has elicited many a secret which sharpest tortures could not have wrung from its possessor. Ease had no intention of disclosing to her friend the troubles which buzzed gnat-like about her ears at home; but the time, the place, and, more than [124] all, his interested face and his often-proved sympathy won the tale from her.

"It all came about," she said, "before I understood any thing of it; and now I don't know the whole story. There is something about a will that I've no clew to."

"Really, this is an impressive beginning," Sanford said. "You don't mind if I smoke?"

"No. I noticed that aunt Tabitha acted queerly when Frank Breck's name was mentioned, or rather I remember it now; but it has always seemed as if every thing that happened at Mullen House was strange some way. I've always seemed to be somebody else, and not myself, ever since I came here to live."

"It is strange," Will assented. "It is a sort of ogre's castle, and your aunt, 'savin' yer presince,' is the ogress."

"Aunt Tabitha has always been a puzzle to me," Ease said, "and I never attempt to understand her ways."

"Who does?" he asked.

"Frank kept coming and coming," continued she, "and getting more and more bothersome, and"—

"More what?"

"Bothersome, acting foolish, you know, about me, as if he were—well you understand, of course, what I mean. I don't think I'm vain; but he did act as if he was—why, as if he liked me."

"Made love to you, you mean?"

"Yes: I suppose so." [125]

"The puppy!"

"Why, that wasn't any harm, was it?" she asked naïvely. "Only, of course, I hate to have him about all the time, and I never liked him very well."

"I should hope not," the young man interpolated with emphasis.

"Not that he ever troubled me much, for of course I didn't let him; but he wanted to."

"Look here," Will exclaimed, sitting up. "I've always been like a brother to you, Ease, and now you are in a place where you need a brother more than ever. I think I'd better hint gently to that young donkey that he'd find it safer to let you alone."

"Oh, no, no!" she replied. "You mustn't let anybody know that you know this. Aunt Tabitha told me not to say a word to anybody, and particularly to you. I'm not sure I didn't promise not to tell, but I must talk to somebody. There is something or other they don't tell me about a will; and aunt Tabitha says we shall both be paupers, if I don't do as she wishes."

"Do as she wishes? What does she want you to do?"

"She has promised him that I shall marry him," Ease said earnestly, with cheeks like the petals of a damask rose.

"The devil she has!"

"Hush! You mustn't talk so. Of course she wouldn't make me; but, if she did, what could I do?"

"Do!" he exclaimed hotly. Then suddenly he changed his tone to one of cool impartiality. "If she [126] makes you marry him, of course you'll have to do it."

"But you wouldn't like to be made to marry him," she said, half crying.

"No," he replied with an air of great candor. "I don't fancy I should. Frank Breck," he added vehemently, "is his father over again. I wonder if Putnam knows what he's about."

"Oh, he couldn't!" Ease returned. "I don't understand it myself; only you mustn't let any one know I've told you any thing."

"Look here, Ease," her companion said, flinging his cigar halfway across Wilk's Run, and taking

her hand in his. "I want you to make me a promise—yes, two of them."

"What are they?"

"Will you promise?"

"If I can."

"Of course you can. The first is, that, if you get into any trouble where I can help you, you'll let me know. Do you promise that?"

"Yes, I promise that; and I thank you for being such a dear good brother."

"The second is, that, whatever happens, you won't marry Frank Breck."

"But, Will"—

"No: no buts. Either promise, or don't promise; but don't put in ifs and buts."

"But I must. There is aunt Tabitha."

"Aunt Tabitha be hanged! I beg your pardon; but she has always used you shamefully, bossing you round, and"— [127]

"We agreed long ago," she interrupted, "not to discuss her."

"Very well. Only I wish you'd promise me."

"How can I, when I might not be able to keep my promise?"

"Good heavens, Ease!" he exclaimed, springing up, and pacing excitedly to and fro on the greensward. "It is enough to make a man go mad to hear you talk in that cold-blooded way about marrying Frank Breck. You can't marry him; and, what's more, you sha'n't marry him!"

"Hark!" she said.

They heard the sound of wheels, stopping immediately after upon the bridge, and then the voice of Burleigh Blood.

"It isn't Flossy," Will said.

"It must be," Ease answered. "There, don't you hear her call?"

"What of it? Let her go home. When she finds we are not there, they'll send back for us. I want to talk to you."

"Oh, no, no!" Ease said, hurrying along towards the bridge. "Aunt Tabitha didn't want me to come, anyway, and she'd be wild if she knew we hadn't been to church."

"I should think you were old enough to decide something for yourself," he growled, giving her his hand to help her over the stones.

The buggy would hardly accommodate four: so Burleigh was forced to complete his journey on foot, the others driving merrily away with bantering good-bys. They had driven only a short distance when they encountered a buggy driven violently. [128]

"Why, isn't that Tom Putnam?" exclaimed Will. "What on earth's got him?"

"And this horrid, bold-looking woman with him," Flossy remarked reflectively.

CHAPTER XVIII. [129]

A CHAPTER OF SHREDS AND PATCHES.

MONDAY morning found the young people at the Sanford cottage in rather indifferent spirits. When the sun, after having fought his way through clouds to do so, awoke Patty, the sound which his beams evoked from her lips was not, like that of Memnon, a note of joy, but a sigh. Flossy announced at breakfast a severe attack of her dyspepsia, caused, she declared, by the sermon to which she had listened at Samoset.

"It was a dreadfully hard sermon," she said, "and had more heads than a hydra. I'm not used to such things, and it's no wonder it made me ill."

"I didn't hear it," Will remarked; "but it has given me a headache all the same. It must be because I have so many ideas. I shall lose my wits with the pain some day, I've no doubt."

"If you do," Floss retorted, "you can advertise for them as of no use but to the owner, like private papers."

"What nonsense you two talk!" grandmother Sanford said mildly. "Dost thee think, William, that friend Putnam has secured my pension yet?"

"I will try to find out to-day, grandmother, after I've driven mother over to call on the young and lovely bride, Mrs. Bathalina Peter Clemens Mixon." [130]

From the time of the sudden and romantic departure of Bathalina, the life of Mrs. Sanford had been made a burden by the trial of new servants. She utterly refused to have anybody about her who was Irish; yet the servants she had tried had proved alike a weariness to the flesh and a

vexation to the spirit. They were principally farmers' daughters, who "never thought o' livin' out, but would stop a spell, jes' to 'commodate." In Montfield everybody knew his neighbor's affairs; and the friends of the family had been sending in a continuous stream of candidates, or messages respecting girls they thought might be available, or concerning people who might know of girls to hire, or have heard of somebody who did. Even Mrs. Brown at length became aware of the vacancy in the Sanfords' kitchen, and sent over a girl whom she recommended as being all that the most exacting could desire. It proved to be the same amiable domestic who had dealt such destruction among Mrs. Brown's hairpins; and for various reasons her first morning at the doctor's cottage was also her last.

"What could you expect," Mrs. Sanford said, "of a girl Mrs. Brown recommended? She's no kind of a housekeeper. She'd be sure to have a pig killed on the wane of the moon. And she's like one of her own doughnuts: she's no sort or kind of life nor sconce, but tough as leather to bite, if you are ever hungry enough to want to eat one. I declare I am worn almost to a shadow with trying [131] girls, and not getting one fit to live with."

But at last a ray of light had shone through the clouds. Bathalina Mixon had sent word that her experience of wedded bliss was not, on the whole, satisfactory, and that she was willing to return and be forgiven. So Mrs. Sanford and Will were going to treat with the repentant bride, and if possible arrange for her return.

"She ain't more than half-witted," Mrs. Sanford said; "but I've concluded that's an advantage; and she knows the ways of the house, and is afraid of the doctor."

Few couples were ever more ill-assorted than Dr. Sanford and his wife; but the husband bore with admirable patience the follies which experience had taught him it was idle to hope to eradicate. His keen sense of humor aided him in this forbearance, and a remark of his wife's more than usually grotesque, had no other visible effect upon him than to provoke a quiet smile about the corners of his lips. The doctor was unspeakably fond of his children, and in them found something of the companionship denied him with his wife. Will was to succeed his father in his practice, and was already studying with that in view. For Patty her father could not bear to plan a future, since he could not endure the thought of separation. Her wooers had made little impression upon him, but he frowned decidedly upon Clarence Toxteth.

"I do not like the breed," he said to his wife. "The Toxteth blood doesn't seem to have any brain- [132] making power in it."

"I think anybody must have brains to get money," Mrs. Sanford answered. "They've got that, at any rate, and only one son for it to go to."

"One son of that kind," her husband returned grimly, "is a great plenty."

Towards Mr. Putnam the doctor's attitude was not hostile, but rather that of one who reserved his opinion. He postponed in his mind the consideration of these things, as if by so doing he could delay the inevitable, and retain his favorite child the longer in the home-nest.

But all this has no very intimate connection with the visit which Mrs. Sanford and her son had set out to pay to Mrs. Mixon. They found her in a dilapidated building in the outskirts of Samoset, which had been built as a tenement for the hands in a cotton-mill now burned. Hither Peter had conveyed his bride, when, flushed with eager love, she flew to his arms from the funeral of her cousin's child; and for a week he had treated her with the utmost consideration, having an eye to her money.

"The shekels naturally belong in the husband's hands," he said, "and you'd better let me take care of them. These banks are slippery things, and I've no confidence in those Samoset fellers anyway. I'll get it, and you can call on me for cash when you want it."

Whether her call would be answered was a question the foolish wife unfortunately forgot to consider; and into the rascal's pocket went the savings which Dr. Sanford had taken pains to [133] have Bathalina lay by. Mixon's tenderness decreased in the same proportion as his bride's funds; and, when once he had obtained them all, the amiable Peter was amiable no longer. He began a course of reckless abuse, developing an imaginative ingenuity in the invention of curses and opprobrious epithets, which was wonderful to hear.

"I bore livin' with him as long as I could," Bathalina afterward confided to aunty Jeff; "but one day it was borne in upon me that I was unequally yoked with unbelievers, and I made up my mind, that, as it wasn't much of a marriage anyway, I wouldn't have no more to do with him. So I told him if he'd go over to Montfield, and ask Mis' Sanford would she take me back, I'd get out of his way, and he might marry 'Mandy West for what I cared."

The arrangements for Bathalina's return were easily concluded, and Mrs. Sanford and Will set out towards home once more. They drove rapidly, as the clouds were every moment becoming more threatening. Fate, however, had her purposes in their going, and interposed by breaking beneath the wheels of their carriage a decayed culvert. The buggy was overturned, mother and son being suddenly and unceremoniously tumbled in an undignified heap into the carriage-top. The horse stopped of his own will in spite of the alarming outcry of Mrs. Sanford, who moaned and shrieked, and wailed and lamented, while her son fished her from the wreck.

[134]

> "'What can wringing of the hands do,
> That which is ordained, to alter?'"

he remarked coolly.

"Will," his mother exclaimed, "do stop quoting things till we see if we are alive!"

A consultation ensued, if so it could be called where the lady refused to consult. Mrs. Sanford was far too plump to walk, and could hardly be expected to mount, and ride on horseback. There seemed no alternative but for her to remain where she was while her son went to the nearest farmhouse, a mile away, for a carriage.

When Will returned from his search, which was somewhat prolonged by the necessity of going to several places, his mother had disappeared. The cushions were piled up in the broken carriage; so he concluded that the lady's taking-off had not been violent, and followed the homeward road himself.

His way lay by Mullen House, the home of Ease Apthorpe and her aunt, Miss Tabitha Mullen. The mansion stood at some distance from the street, a stone wall surrounding the grounds. The principal entrance was an imposing gateway, whose iron gates were religiously closed at night, but stood open by day. As Sanford rode near, his eyes were greeted by a strange spectacle. In the gateway he saw Peter Mixon defending the passage against an angry woman, who, half crazed with drink or drugs, was loudly insisting upon entering. The woman's dark hair fell in tangled masses over her shoulders, and her handsome throat was bared by the neglect of her dress.

"I tell you I will go in!" she screamed, just as Will rode within hearing. "I will go in and claim my own, in spite of them! Get out of my way, or I'll kill you!" [135]

She looked equal to the execution of her threat as she ended with a terrible oath, her eyes flashing, her bosom heaving, and her hands clinched. Mixon made some reply inaudible to young Sanford, evidently intended to soothe or cow the woman; but liquor had carried her beyond restraint.

"Putnam!" she vociferated scornfully. "What do I care for him! I'll cut his throat too, if I get hold of him! Get out of my way, or"—

At this instant the sound of Sanford's horse's feet attracted her attention, and she turned towards him. Mixon took advantage of the diversion to seize her by the arm, and hurry her away.

"Come along!" he said, with every appearance of confusion. "Don't you see who is coming?"

The woman stared, evidently not comprehending in the least who the new-comer was; but she allowed herself to be led away, swearing and threatening as she went.

Will at this moment recognized the woman as the one whom he had met driving towards Samoset with Tom Putnam.

CHAPTER XIX. [136]

TOXTETH SEEKS AN ALLY.

Mrs. Sanford was so round, so plump, so rosy, that, as she sat enthroned among the carriage-cushions, she might easily have been mistaken for an unusually fine specimen of Dutch cabbage, by the wand of some new Rübezahl endowed with life. The poor lady was much frightened, not at any thing in particular, but in a general way. She had a vague idea that something astounding and destructive might take place at any moment: she had a misty notion that lions and tigers came out of forests to devour people; and she distinctly recalled the fact that her grandfather had once shot a wolf in the neighborhood, perhaps in these very woods which rustled and murmured so ominously behind her.

An unusual situation, even the most trivial, which delivers shallow minds to reflection, is for them full of uneasiness. To be given up to self is the most frightful of catastrophes to him who finds self an utter stranger. If Mrs. Sanford had no great power of reasoning, she was not without a fancy which fear stirred into activity; and, by the time she had been alone five minutes, her terror had become ludicrously great. A squirrel scampering across the road called from her a scream, which [137] was quickly stifled by the thought that an outcry would be likely to attract beasts of prey. A crow flew overhead; and that presager of evil filled her with terror unutterable. The fact that she was alone on a road much travelled, and but three or four miles from her own home, seems an insufficient cause for such fear; but Mrs. Sanford could hardly have suffered more mental anguish if deposited with Daniel in the den of lions.

Suddenly she heard the sound of approaching wheels, and this sign of human proximity revived her drooping courage. As the moments had seemed hours to her, she thought her son had already returned; but a glimpse of the tossing manes of a span of grays told her that it was the Toxteth equipage which approached. Her mind yielded to an entirely new sensation, as a fluff of thistledown is lightly blown about.

"Mrs. Toxteth shall never see me in such a position as this," she said to herself. "I wouldn't demean myself by letting her know who it is."

So the foolish woman, who had, in common with the ostrich, the feeling, that, if her head was concealed, her entire person must be invisible, spread the corner of her shawl over her face, and sat motionless. The carriage drew nearer, and stopped, a man's voice asking who was there. As the veiled figure returned no answer, Clarence Toxteth, for he it was, jumped out, and

approached the lady.

"Who is it?" he asked. "Do you want help?"

"No," she answered. "Go away!"

"Why, Mrs. Sanford!" he said, recognizing the voice. "What has happened? Are you hurt?" [138]

Being recognized, the lady uncovered her face, and said with acerbity,—

"If I'm not killed, I'm sure it isn't my fault. I am so shaken, I doubt I shall ever get over it."

The young man, being fortunately alone, took the lady into his own carriage and drove on, leaving the wreck of the buggy to Will's care.

"I doubt but it's a forerunner of a bad sign," Mrs. Sanford said as they drove along. "I always heard it was unlucky to break down."

"It was lucky for me, at least," young Toxteth answered gallantly. "I am glad you were not hurt."

"But the shock to my mind, I being as fleshy as I am," she returned rather illogically, "was dreadful."

They drove smoothly along, Clarence secretly considering how he might best broach a subject of which his mind was full.

"I've wanted to see you for a long time," he began.

"Those that want to see me," Mrs. Sanford retorted, in a tone which showed that her temper had been a little shaken by her mishap, "usually come where I am."

"Oh, yes!" he said, somewhat confused. "But I wanted to see you without its being known."

"You don't mean to leave me anywhere on the road, do you?" she demanded in alarm. "I don't know as it'll hurt your reputation if folks do know you've seen me."

"Oh, dear, no! You misunderstand me entirely." [139]

"Then, I wish you'd speak plainer."

"Why," he said, driven abruptly to the point, "it was about Patty I wanted to speak."

"Oh!"

Merely writing the interjection indicates but feebly the emotions filling the breast of Mrs. Sanford when she gave it utterance. Like Lady Geraldine's answer,—

> "It lies there on the paper,
> A mere word without her accent."

Surprise, gratification, triumph, were commingled in her voice. She laid her plump hands together complacently. The doctor's wife loved her son best, as such women necessarily do; but she was proud of Patty, and particularly anxious that she should marry advantageously. Here, was a bridegroom who could deck her daughter in purple and scarlet, and fine-twined linen. Already in fancy the ladybug mother saw herself riding behind this handsome span of dappled grays, not as a stranger, but with all the rights of a mother-in-law. Hers was one of those vulgar natures which instinctively regarded marriage as a contract wherein a woman brought her charms to market to be disposed of to the highest bidder. She unconsciously rustled and plumed herself like a pigeon in the sun.

"I am well enough able to marry," Clarence said; "and my wife would have all her heart would wish."

Nature endows weak and sensuous minds with a species of protective instinct, which sometimes serves them as well as the acutest reason. Young Toxteth used the argument which was best [140] calculated to touch the fancy of Mrs. Sanford; and it was so good a choice as to be almost shrewdness, that he had selected that lady as his confidante. In her he found an eager listener, whereas no other member of Dr. Sanford's family would have heard him through his first purseproud remark.

"I have been fond of her for a long time," Toxteth continued. "I didn't pay her particular attentions until I was sure of myself, of course."

"Very honorable, I'm sure," chirruped Mrs. Sanford,—"very honorable, indeed."

"I think she likes me," the suitor continued, the admiring attitude of his listener betraying him into more and more frankness. "She's never said so; but I'm sure I don't see why she shouldn't like me, and she naturally wouldn't speak until I did."

"Oh, dear me, no!" acquiesced the gratified mother. "Naturally not."

"But girls are so queer," he said, hesitating a little, now that the real purpose of the interview was reached. "She doesn't consider how she hurts my feelings, and she might say she didn't care for me when she really did, you know. And if you would—why, if you would speak to her, and—and prepare her a little, you know, so that it shall not be so unexpected to her."

"I trust I know my duty," replied his companion, nodding her head with great complacency; "and you may certainly count on me. Patty can't help seeing the great advantages of being your wife, and it's very good of you to ask her. Though, to be sure, she may pick and choose of the best in [141] Montfield, and doesn't have to go begging for a husband, as some girls do. It isn't every man I'd

say yes to, by any manner of means."

And at this moment the carriage stopped at the gate of the Sanford cottage.

A rehearsal was held that evening at Dessie Farnum's. Will's headache prevented his attendance; but his part was read, and things went as smoothly as is usual on such occasions. Flossy showed a desire to recite the whole of the scenes in which she took part; but as they chanced to be principally between herself and Burleigh Blood, who knew few of his lines, this was rather a help.

"If you were only a ventriloquist, Flossy," Patty said, "Burleigh need do nothing but act bashful, and you could do all the talking."

"I wonder if I couldn't learn," Flossy returned, beginning to repeat Burleigh's part in a deep voice, which made them all laugh.

"I'm afraid I shall have to learn myself," Blood said, "unless you can do better than that."

"Better than that! What base ingratitude!"

"Are these plates old-fashioned enough?" Dessie asked. "They were my grandmother's."

"Do!" exclaimed Flossy. "They are rapturous! Oh the things we shall have to eat off them!"

"What will you have? Brown-bread and beans, I suppose."

"Oh, dear, no! Chicken-salad and Charlotte-Russes. I am glad I'm going to be Waitstill Eastman. I couldn't have stood it to see anybody else eating, and I left out. It must certainly be salad and Charlottes." [142]

"Salads and Charlotte-Russes for an old-fashioned supper!" retorted Patty. "Indeed, miss, you'll have nothing of the kind. Pumpkin-pies and nut-cakes are the best you'll get."

"It is no matter," Flossy answered. "It is a great deal better to talk about things than it is to eat them, after all."

"Flossy never really eats much of any thing but pop-corn," her cousin explained. "You'd think, to hear her talk, that her life was one long feast."

"Oh, yes, I do! I eat enormously; but I don't think it is so good as reading about nice things. Now, I like to read Dickens's books, because they're always having something to eat or to drink in them. Think of the cold punch now, the lovely cold punch!"

"Flossy, I'm ashamed of you!" exclaimed Patty. "I do believe you are tipsy, just thinking about it; and you make me too thirsty for any thing."

"Your reproof convicts yourself," put in Frank Breck. "I am sorry you can't hear punch mentioned without being thirsty."

"I am glad if you can," she retorted.

The hit was a palpable one, for the young man had the reputation of walking in ways far removed from the paths of sobriety.

When the rehearsal was concluded, the rain fell in torrents. Burleigh, who had his buggy, offered to take Patty and Flossy home. The former declined the invitation, although insisting that her cousin should ride. For herself, Patty delighted in the rain. The excitement of the storm exhilarated her, filling her with a delightful animal joy in living. She was fond of taking long walks in rainy weather, greatly to the disturbance of her mother, who had neither sympathy nor patience with this side of her daughter's nature. Even grandmother, who usually found whatever Patty did perfect, felt called upon to remonstrate against these escapades. But to the girl the struggle with the storm was delightful: it was a keen pleasure to feel the rain beat upon her face, and her young blood tingled under the cold touch. So to-night she chose to walk home, and meant to escape alone. She was prevented by Hazard Breck, who forestalled young Toxteth in seeking the honor of escorting her. As they left the house, Patty's quick ear caught a word or two between Ease Apthorpe and Frank Breck. [143]

"Thank you," she heard Ease say. "I will not trouble you."

"Your aunt charged me to see you safe home," he answered. "I shouldn't want to disobey her."

And as usual Ease yielded.

CHAPTER XX. [144]

AN OUTBURST.

"HAZARD," Patty asked, as they went splashing through the puddles, "is Frank in earnest with Ease? Does he really care for her?"

"I do not know," he answered slowly. "He never makes a confidant of me."

"He persecutes her," Patty continued. "I wish he'd let her alone. She's too meek to stand out

against him. I ought not to say this to you, but it makes me angry. Why are you so sober lately? You are as solemn as Bathalina."

"Am I? I wasn't aware of it."

"But of course you know what is troubling you."

"It does little good to talk over such things," he said.

"Such things as what?" she asked.

"As—as being solemn."

"You've some sort of a deadly secret preying upon your mind, Hazard. That I am sure of. Now, I insist upon knowing what it is."

"I haven't any secret now," he answered rather mournfully.

Hazard was, after all, only a boy, though a very noble and manly one. He adored Patty with all the ardor of a pure boy's first passion; a light which, if extinguished, leaves the very blackness of [145] despair in the boyish heart; a dream from which the waking is very bitter. The lad whose first love is ill-starred refuses to believe that he can ever love again, that any sun will rise after this brilliant meteor-flash has faded.

Hazard had not for a moment entertained the possibility of contesting his uncle's right to Patty. He was too loyal, too devoted to the man who had unostentatiously made so many sacrifices to him and his. In the lonely walk he had taken Sunday afternoon, when aunt Pamela had spoken of Putnam's love, the young man had fought with himself, and conquered. When he met Patty on the bridge, she was to him as belonging to another. There was in the lad a high chivalry, which caused him to regard things in a noble if somewhat overstrained temper. Mr. Putnam to him was not merely the uncle to whom he was warmly attached, but also the generous benefactor who had not spared himself to save the name and the welfare of his nephews. Hazard was not ignorant, that, but for Putnam, his father might have been publicly branded as the felon he was; and he knew, too, that sacrifices made to shield him had crippled his uncle's fortune. That this had prevented Tom's seeking from Patty the love which his nephew felt to be richly his due, was an added reason why in this, most of all things, no obstacle should come between Mr. Putnam and his desire. The boy's self-renunciation was a little Quixotic; but who more sadly noble than the crazy knight of La Mancha?

There are, however, limits to all human endurance. To suffer and be strong is possible to many: [146] to suffer and be silent is within the power of but few. Hazard had resolved never to speak of his love; but no one can judge the strength of a resolution until it has been tried by opportunity. There suddenly rushed over him a wave of boyish despair. One who voluntarily renounces pursuit, generally believes that he might have won; and to Hazard his act seemed the renunciation of a prize surely his.

"Life is so hard!" he burst out suddenly, with all the hopelessness of despairing twenty.

"Oh, no!" Patty returned lightly. "As Flossy says, 'life would be very pleasant, if it were not so much trouble to live.'"

"But to live is so much trouble," he answered. "See what a life I've had! I wasn't asked if I wanted it; and, when I had been made to live, I didn't have my choice about it, in any way. You know that my father was a constant trouble to us,—everybody knew that,—and we all had to endure to be pitied; and pity is always half contempt."

"O Hazard!"

"Of course I don't mean from you," he said illogically enough; "but it is the truth. Then, mother was just worn into her grave by grief and poverty; and we boys had to stand by helpless, and see it."

Patty was at a loss how to answer him, and wisely said little. Hazard was usually so bright, and seemed of so happy a disposition, that this outburst was the more bewildering. Ignorant of the cause which had worked his old pains to the surface, Patty's only thought was of how deep must [147] have been the sorrow of his boyhood to have left so much bitterness behind. She knew in a vague way that Mr. Breck had been a dissipated, unprincipled man, who had ill-treated his family, and been a scandal to the neighborhood until he moved out of it to take up his residence in Boston. She had no means of knowing how sad a childhood had been that of Hazard,—a life so shaded, that only an unusually fine temperament, and the noble disposition inherited from his mother, had prevented his becoming morbidly gloomy. Partly because she knew not what to say, and partly from an instinctive feeling that talking would relieve Hazard's overwrought mood, she let him continue.

"I have never had any good from life for myself," he went on with increasing vehemence, "and I am sure I have never helped my friends to any. I've been a dead weight on those I wanted most to help; and, if I am ever fond of anybody, we are either separated, or something happens to spoil our friendship. Frank and I never had any thing in common; and now he is all the time plaguing Ease Apthorpe, or travelling about with that vile Mixon."

"Who is Mixon?" asked Patty. "Not Bathalina's husband?"

"Yes: that's the one. The old scoundrel!"

"What has Frank to do with him?"

"I don't know. Sometimes I think it's only fondness for low company, and then at others fancy he

has some sort of a secret of Frank's. He was one of father's dogs; sometimes hostler, sometimes waiter, or footman, or whatever happened. Father had a strange liking for his company, and Mixon could manage him when nobody else could come near him. Why, I've seen father lay his pistols on the table, and dare one of us to stir, and then go on drinking, and flinging the dishes at one or another of us, till Peter heard the racket, and came, and took the revolvers away. Nobody else in the house dared dispute any thing father did. It is a pleasant childhood to remember, isn't it? And it is pleasant to think that Mixon may know some secret which would disgrace us all if it were told." [148]

"Now, Hazard," Patty said soothingly, "you shouldn't talk of these things. You make them worse than they ever were, and at worst they are passed now. Then you have always your uncle to help you and to advise with."

"Uncle Tom? There's where it hurts worse than all. We have always been a drag on him. If it were not for us, he might have been married long ago."

"Oh, no!" his companion returned hastily, with a pang in her heart. "You don't know what you are saying."

"But I do. Even aunt Pamela sees it, and spoke to me of it."

"But"—

"But what?" he broke in fiercely, his passion and pain sweeping away all his reserve. "Oh, I know what you would say! You think you might have a voice in the matter. I tell you, Patty Sanford, if you trifled with uncle Tom, I should hate you as much as I love you now." [149]

"Hazard Breck, you are crazy!"

"I know I am crazy. I've been crazy all summer. I was crazy thinking I was coming to Montfield because I should see you; and since I came I've been wild night and day because you were alive in the same town, because"—

"Oh, hush! For pity's sake, hush!" she cried.

Then she laid her other hand upon his arm, which she already held.

"I have completely forgotten every word we have spoken to-night," she said.

The tone, the words, affected him like a sudden dash of ice-cold water. He strode on through the rain in silence, suddenly feeling now how his heart beat, and his blood rushed tingling through his veins. They had nearly reached Dr. Sanford's cottage when he spoke again.

"I beg your pardon," he said. "You were always too good to me. I think I have been out of my head to-night."

"Why shouldn't I be good to you?" she returned. "You have always been good to me. So old friends as we are don't need to apologize to each other. I dare say we all say foolish things sometimes."

He winced a little, but did not dissent. As they went up the path together between the dripping shrubs which glimmered in the light from the windows, they heard Will's voice.

"There is Will singing," Patty said. "He always sings when he has a headache. He insists that dying swans sing on account of the pain in their heads." [150]

"That has been the trouble with me," Hazard answered, smiling faintly. "I've had my swan-song—unless you call it a hiss. But my pain was not in my head. Good-night."

"Ah!" Patty said to herself, looking after him, "the pain in your heart isn't sharper than in mine."

CHAPTER XXI. [151]

THE PRODIGAL'S RETURN.

"THIS must be the liner," Mrs. Sanford declared upon the following morning, looking out at the pouring rain. "I doubt Bathalina will not come to-day."

The event proved her mistaken; for Mrs. Mixon walked over from Samoset, despite the storm, her bundles hanging about her until she looked like one of the seven wives of the man met upon the road to St. Ives. Flossy saw her coming up the walk which led to the kitchen-door, the water streaming from every fold and end of her garments and belongings.

"Behold a water-nymph!" she said. "She's so fond of washing, I suppose she feels as if she were in her native element."

"She looks a good deal like an angel dragged through a brush-fence into a world of bitterness and woe," commented Will.

"There are marriages of convenience," Patty said; "but Bathalina certainly made a marriage of inconvenience."

"Let's go and see her," proposed Flossy.

To the kitchen they all trooped. Mrs. Sanford was there before them, alternately scolding the [152]

returned prodigal, and pitying herself.

"The trials I've been through since you left," she said, "are beyond mortal belief. How you could have the heart to leave me in the lurch so, Bathalina, is more than I know. 'Light come, light go,' as the old saying is; and I doubt you've proved it by this time with that husband of yours."

"But it is too bad you've left him, Bathalina!" Flossy put in. "You've no idea how becoming a husband was to you. You ought never to go without one."

"Where is your other half?" Will asked. "You and he are only one between you, you know."

"In courtin'," answered Bathalina sententiously, rising to the height of the occasion,—"in courtin' there may be only one, but in marriage there's two."

"Hurrah!" he laughed. "You've learned something. That's worthy of Emerson. Allow me to add," he continued with mock solemnity, "that it is a truth as old as the universe, that one plus one is two."

"I'm glad you've come," said Flossy; "for you do make such good things to eat. The last girl we had, made bread so sour that I couldn't eat it without feeling as if angle-worms were crawling down my back. So you don't like being married, Bathalina?"

"It was all for my sinful pride," the servant answered lugubriously, "that I was left to be Peter Mixon's wife. And, if ever you come to be that, you'll repent with your harps hanged on the willows, as the tune says."

"For my part," said Patty, "I think Mr. Mixon will be a widower, if you don't get off those wet clothes soon." [153]

"I doubt he will," assented Mrs. Sanford. "Why she came over in them is more than I can see."

"There, mother," Will said, "I fear your head has been turned by the Irish girls you've sent away."

"It's a mercy I'm spared to come back at all," Mrs. Mixon said. "We all have more mercies than we deserve."

"I'm not so sure of that," her mistress retorted. "Speak for yourself. I don't know as I have any more than I'm entitled to."

It was not in accordance with Bathalina's principles to exhibit any satisfaction at being once more in her old home; but, as she indulged in the most sad of her minors, it was inferred that she was well pleased. She continually bolted into the sitting-room to ask some question, apparently for the sake of feasting her eyes upon the mistress of the house.

"What do you put in squash-pies for seasoning?" she inquired, interrupting an earnest conversation between Mrs. Sanford and Mrs. Brown; the latter having, in these stormy autumn days, just got to her spring calls.

"Why, Bathalina, you know as well as I!" was the answer.

"Well, supposin' I do. Can't I have the satisfaction of askin' when I've been living in tumbledown Irishy places over to Samoset?"

"The girl must have been wandering in her mind when she went off to be married," remarked grandmother Sanford, smiling serenely.

"She was wandering in her body, at least," replied Patty. [154]

"Yes, to be sure," said Mrs. Brown. "And, now I think of it, I don't know how I shall get home. My girl's gone too. She says she gave me a week's warning, but I'm sure I haven't begun to get ready for her to go yet. I must try to get things picked up so we can wash to-morrow or next day, and it rains worse than ever."

The caller had ridden over with Dr. Sanford, whom she had hailed as he passed her door.

"'They that wash on Friday.'"

quoted Flossy under her breath to Patty—

"'Wash for need.'"

"'They that wash on Saturday,
Oh, they are sluts indeed!'"

retorted her cousin. "They won't get at it before that time."

"I shall be ready after dinner," Mrs. Brown continued. "I guess Selina can pick up a pie or something for Joe.—Did I tell you, Mrs. Sanford, that we've heard from my cousin over to Samoset? He ain't really my cousin, only for marrying Eliza. But I feel for Eliza, I'm sure. He's run off with another woman, and Eliza's left to bring up her three boys. It's a mercy they ain't girls."

"I declare it's awful!" her hostess said. "Who was the woman?"

"She was the daughter of that Smithers woman that—you know."

The hostess gave an emphatic nod of the head, as if to indicate that she was aware of some mysterious wickedness connected with the female in question. [155]

"But where did she come from?" she asked. "I thought she went off when Mr. Mullen died."

"Yes, she did," Mrs. Brown assented. "But such folks always turn up again. And the strangest thing about it is,"—and here her voice sank to a confidential whisper,—"that they say Mr. Putnam"—

The entrance of Patty, who had been to make arrangements for the transfer of Mrs. Brown to her own home, put an abrupt end to the conversation. But the hint conveyed had not dropped upon barren soil. Mrs. Brown knew merely that Mrs. Smithers, in her first surprise and dismay at the flight of her daughter, had driven over to Montfield for Mr. Putnam. But before she slept that night, the doctor's wife had conveyed to Patty an impression that the most dreadful stories were told of the relations between the lawyer and this castaway. Patty treated the scandal with contempt; yet she could not but remember that Flossy had met her lover on the road to Samoset, and that Will had heard his name at the gates of Mullen House.

"Will will take you home when he carries Floss to rehearsal," Patty said as she entered. "We are going to Mrs. Shankland's."

CHAPTER XXII.

[156]

A MISUNDERSTANDING.

In this way it came about that Patty started alone for the afternoon rehearsal. The rain was still falling, although less heavily than in the earlier part of the day. The wet leaves which the wind had torn from the trees lay thick upon the walks, crushing soddenly under her feet. The dreariness of autumn seemed suddenly to have fallen upon the land, and nature to have yielded to it without a struggle. The weeds by the roadside were beaten down and broken; the streets were full of pools of turbid water, which reflected dismally the dark sky. The bright glow of the autumnal foliage had been apparently washed away by the torrents of rain, leaving the landscape gray and drear.

Patty was out of sorts, and even the walk in the rain failed to restore her spirits. She did not at all understand the way in which Tom Putnam kept himself aloof. That a man should make a declaration of love, and then treat its object with quiet neglect, was incomprehensible enough. She recalled that night when he had found her on the doorstep, and contrasted it with his manner on Sunday afternoon in the Castle in the Air. She was unable to understand how Tom, if indeed [157] he loved her, could meet her with calmness; and it was but a step further to conclude that she did not possess his heart. She secretly resolved to meet the lawyer with an indifference to which his should be as nothing; to be colder than ice, as unconcerned as a statue, and as firm as the Pyramids. Raising her eyes at this point of her revery, she saw her lover coming towards her down the village street. She felt a glow of pleasure in spite of herself. With a girl like Patty, no method of wooing could have been more effectual than that which circumstances had forced upon the lawyer, although he had felt keenly the loss of her society.

"I am so glad I have met you!" he said. "I was going to your house, but now I will walk on with you."

Patty was steadying her nerves, and sending back the rebellious blood, which would bound at sight of his tall figure, as he turned and walked at her side.

"I have been so occupied!" he continued. "The executors of Mrs. Sutcliff's estate have been at me night and day. First it is a telegram, and then a letter; and, as I've had Judge Hopcroft's business on my hands since he has been ill, it has kept me very much occupied. I am glad it is about done with. I think I have earned all the money I shall get twice over."

"You are very grateful," Patty said, with an exasperating desire to say something disagreeable.

"Grateful! Of course, I am; but I do not like to be kept always away from you."

"Indeed! You have always yourself for company; and, being a man, according to your theory that [158] ought to suffice."

"But I pity you," he returned lightly. "The other half of my theory is, that you need company."

"Thank you, I've had all I wanted."

He made no reply. He perceived easily that something vexed her, but he could not understand her annoyance. He had been desirous of being near Patty, but, deeply occupied, had not been unhappy away from her. Desire and hope will make a man happy, though separated from the object of his passion, where a woman will pine painfully for his presence. A man may be, for a time, content with love; while woman is happy only with the lover.

Tom Putnam did not doubt that Patty loved him; and he was unable to understand why the knowledge of his love did not make her content, as this assurance did him. He was too old and too stable to follow the changes of her mental atmosphere, or to appreciate the hungry longing which made her desire to annihilate her being in his, to have him utterly her own. His love was as yet half impersonal, almost dormant from the effect of long years of self-repression. A man, too, must learn those secrets of affection which the other sex know by instinct; and, if the knowledge be not gained before the flush of youth is passed, even a passionate nature may prove a slow pupil.

The two friends walked on without speaking for several moments, until, for Patty, the silence became intolerable. [159]

"You have been too much taken up with your own affairs, I suppose," she said, "to trouble yourself about grandmother's pension."

"No," he answered. "I was coming to see about that this afternoon."

"Then it wasn't to see me at all," she returned.

"Come," he said, smiling. "That is better. You really do care, then, whether I come to see you, or not."

"I do not care a straw," she retorted, vexed more and more, both with herself and him. "Only I do not like to have people sail under false colors."

"I don't see the application."

"No matter. What is it about the pension?"

"There is a little trouble."

"Of course. I knew you'd be too much taken up with your own affairs. The money's a trifle; but grandmother is an old lady, and will be so disappointed."

"I think the matter may be arranged," he said gravely, ignoring her taunt. "I am very sorry for the delay."

"What is the trouble?"

"I find it hard to prove your grandmother's marriage."

"What!" she cried.

"I have not been able to find proof of your grandmother's marriage."

"Tom Putnam!"

"I have examined the town-records in vain," he continued; "and she told me in the first place that she had no certificate." [160]

"And you dare to think she was never married!"

"Who said I thought that?" he returned, smiling at her vehemence. "I have to look at things in a legal light; and for this business she is to be considered single until there's proof of her marriage produced."

"You insult her and all the family," Patty said hotly, all her Sanford blood rising in wrath. "I had, at least, believed you a gentleman."

They had reached the Shanklands's gate; and she left him without a word further, entering the house with her head carried like that of an offended goddess. As she came into the parlor, she encountered a perfect whirlwind of voices in question, exclamation, and remonstrance.

"Where have you been?"

"What made you so late?"

"O Patty! do you think we ought to have green lights for the death-scene? It makes everybody look so horridly ghastly."

"We've been waiting an age for you."

"There, there!" exclaimed Patty. "Please don't all speak at once. I'm as cross as an Arab," she added, forcing a smile; "and my name is a misnomer."

"I hope you haven't been quarrelling with Mr. Putnam," Miss Sturtevant said maliciously from her seat by the window. "I thought you left him rather unceremoniously."

"At least I've not been prying into other people's affairs," Patty retorted sweetly. "Come, let's begin." [161]

Every thing went wrong that afternoon. Patty could not prevent her mind's dwelling on her interview with the lawyer, instead of upon the work in hand. The direction of the rehearsals had been put into her care as a matter of course; and her experience in amateur theatricals was large enough to enable her to get through her work half mechanically. She was usually very careful; but to-day every one felt that her mind was elsewhere, and each did what was right in his own eyes.

They rehearsed first "The Faithful Jewess," a remarkable tragedy selected by Miss Sturtevant, who played in it the part of a weird prophetess, and got herself up to look like the Witch of Endor. In choosing the play, Miss Flora had had in mind the including of Mr. Putnam in the cast, —a hope which had been doomed to disappointment. That Miss Flora has been absent so long from these pages results from no want of activity upon the part of that energetic young lady. She had waged constant warfare against the heart of Tom Putnam; but so entirely fruitless had thus far been her efforts, that they scarcely seemed worth chronicling. The lawyer was too entirely engrossed by his passion for Patty Sanford to amuse himself, even had he been given to gallant trifling; and never was sweetness more utterly wasted than that which Flora lavished upon the unresponsive bachelor.

Nor had she been more successful in her attempts to obtain possession of the papers which both Jacob Wentworth and Frank Breck desired. She had indeed made some efforts in that direction, [162]

being fully alive to the advantages of herself holding so valuable documents, and thus being in a position to dictate terms, or dispose of her booty to the highest bidder. On the whole, her unscrupulousness, her quick wit and practised skill, had brought her nothing in her summer's campaign but the now valuable bonds of the Samoset and Brookfield Railroad.

CHAPTER XXIII. [163]

NOTES AND SOUVENIRS.

"I TOOK cold leaving off my apron," Mrs. Sanford remarked. "I always do."

"That is a slight cause, daughter Britann," said grandmother. "Do'st thee feel sure there was no other?"

"I suppose I know when I take cold," she retorted. "I always take cold if I leave off my apron; and, if I go to a tea-party, I always wear my apron under my dress."

"I declare!" exclaimed Patty, rushing in like a whirlwind. "I'll never speak to that horrid Tom Putnam again to the longest day I live!"

"Softly, softly," said the old lady. "Thee do'st not wish to make promises and break them. What disturbs thee?"

"It's about you, grandmother. He dared to say you were not married."

"Not married?"

"Not married!" echoed Mrs. Sanford. "And your family always held out to be so much better than ours, and so leading me to marry into it, and help bear the disgrace!"

"Hush, mother!" Patty said impatiently. "There isn't any disgrace. It is only a blunder of Mr. [164] Putnam's."

"Then, your father ought to sue him for libel. I always told you I didn't approve of your dawdling about with that lawyer, with Clarence Toxteth at your beck and call. But you always would have your own way, and disgrace us all by keeping company with the man that slanders your family."

"Slanders our family!" Patty returned, her eyes blazing. "Who said he slandered the family? If he isn't disgraced by my company, I'm sure I am not by his. I shouldn't be ashamed to sweep the streets for him to walk on!"

"You'd demean yourself, I dare say, when you might have the streets swept for you."

"I"—began her daughter.

"Daughter Patience," interposed her grandmother, laying her hand upon the girl's arm, "thee had best not say it."

By a strong effort Patty repressed the retort which had sprung to her lips.

"What does it mean, grandmother?" she asked, when a moment's silence had given her more composure. "Tom Putnam says he can find no proof of your marriage."

"I told thy father to tell him to go to the town-records."

"He says he has, and it is not there."

"Then, the man that married us neglected his duty," the old lady said with gentle severity. "He was a Methodist preacher at Quinnebasset; for we had only one preacher here, and he was away; [165] and that, as thee knows, was before I received light to become a Friend."

"But didn't you have a certificate?" asked Mrs. Sanford.

"No. The man promised us one; but, though he was a man of God, he kept his word no better than one of the world's people, and we never got it."

"What are you talking about?" demanded Flossy, entering. "I told Will I didn't think this play would be very intelligible to the audience; and he said they would have the advantage of the actors, if it were. Was that what you were talking about?"

"Flossy," her aunt said disdainfully, "don't be so silly!"

"Thank you, aunt Britann. I prefer to be silly." So saying, she made her aunt a graceful courtesy, and then sat down. "What were you talking about?"

Patty explained; and her cousin flourished her bowl of pop-corn wildly about with excitement.

"Yes, of course," Flossy burst out. "I knew there was something sure to come of it when I ran away; and there it was in the binding of this book, and the pew was so hard I thought I should die. This cover, you know, is almost torn off, and there's where Linda Thaxter married William French; I mean Edward French, no, Edward Sanford—at least you know what I mean."

Flossy always became less and less intelligible as she became excited; and Patty, knowing this by frequent experience, seized her by both shoulders.

"Wait!" she said. "Stop short there. Now, what are you trying to say?" [166]

By degrees they elicited from her the story of the psalmody in the Presbyterian Church at Samoset; and Dr. Sanford, when he came home, declared that this might prove a decisive piece of evidence. He laughed at Patty's anger, and requested her to write a note to the lawyer, informing him of Flossy's story.

It amused him to see his daughter nibbling her pen over the epistle she had vainly tried to avoid writing.

She wrote and tore up a dozen notes before she would send one. There sat the doctor in his easy-chair, apparently reading, but with his peculiar faint smile curling the corners of his lips sufficiently to show that he appreciated her difficulty. The note when completed read as follows: —

> Tuesday Evening.
>
> Flossy saw in the binding of a hymn-book at Samoset a notice of grandmother's wedding. She will tell you about it, if you will call on her.
>
> Patience Sanford.
>
> P.S.—I have to beg your pardon for my rudeness this afternoon.

The effect of this note was to bring the lawyer to the cottage the next morning. As mischievous fortune chose to have it, Patty was on the piazza, selecting for pressing the brightest of the scarlet and russet woodbine-leaves which had been spared by the storm. She knew his step upon the walk; and, although she would not turn, she was prepared to meet him with a kindness which should atone for yesterday's harshness. But she defeated her own intention. Meaning to be [167]
gracious, she yet was not willing to give the first sign of abandoning hostilities, expecting her lover to know instinctively the state of her mind, and to approach her in a corresponding temper.

The lover's eyes shone with a wistful tenderness as he regarded the slender figure upon which the bright leaves fell in showers of gold and green and scarlet. His relations with Patty troubled him, and yet he knew not how they might be improved. He knew women from books rather than from nature, and his knowledge profited him little in his own dilemma. The sudden changes in Patty were incomprehensible to him. He had accepted her apology as a necessary consequence of the fact that she was a lady: what it had cost her, or how she had passed from anger to tenderness, he did not suspect.

She, on her side, interpreted him no better. His self-restraint she called coldness; and, when he failed to respond to a softened mood, she felt that her affection found no response in his heart. This morning she was unconsciously in a frame of mind which would render her dissatisfied, whatever his attitude: had he divined her relenting, she would have thought him presuming, as now she called him cold. The only comfort Tom might extract from such a situation was the fact, hardly likely to occur to him, that she was a thousand times more displeased with herself than with him.

"Good-morning," the gentleman said, stepping upon the piazza.

"Good-morning," she returned, keeping her face from him. [168]

"It is a right royal day after the storm," he said, rather for the sake of saying something than from any active interest in the weather.

"Yes," she assented laconically.

"How do your theatricals come on?" asked he.

"'As the man went to be hung,—very slowly,' to use Will's slang, or figure of speech as Flossy calls it."

"This world," the lawyer said rather irrelevantly, "is chiefly figures of speech."

"What does that signify?"

"It signifies that you think of our talk yesterday hyperbolically."

Patty felt herself growing flushed and perturbed. Their conversation hid completely the sentiments underlying it. Her tenderness was met by apparent indifference. What was this talk of figures of speech, when he should have said simply "I love you."

"On the contrary," she replied, "I do not think of our conversation yesterday at all."

"Then, why do you so resolutely keep your face from me?"

"Certainly not because I said any thing yesterday that I am ashamed of."

Putnam took from his pocket her note, and read aloud the postscript.

"It is very generous in you to fling that in my face," she exclaimed, turning suddenly.

"It was abominable," he laughed; "but it made you show your face, and that's worth sinning for."

"Why did you keep my note?" she asked, as he carefully replaced it in his pocket-book. "You told [169]
me once you never kept any letters but business ones."

"Oh! I always preserve yours. Every rule has its exception."

"I am flattered," she said, softening a little.

"You've no reason to be," he retorted saucily. "I only keep them because I suppose you are sure to

demand them some time; and, if I couldn't return them, you'd say I kept them."

"Then, I demand them now."

"You shall have them when you give me mine."

"You may have them this minute," she exclaimed.

"Ah!" retorted he, laughing. "I have discovered what I wanted to know. You have cared enough for them to keep them."

"You are the most hateful man on the face of the earth!" she said angrily, running into the house, and up to her own chamber.

She gathered all his notes together, with the trifles she had treasured, even before she confessed to herself that she cared for him,—this odd stone from Mackerel Cove, that Chinese coin he took from his watch-guard one day as a reward for a joke she made, a dry and musty cracker upon which he drew at a picnic a clever caricature of Mrs. Brown's frowsy head, a few dried flowers, and a pencil-sketch or two. She gathered them together, meaning to make a packet of them to put into Tom's hands before he left the house. Then she began to read over the notes, simple things that said little, and from another would have had no especial meaning or value. Here he [170] asked her if he might drive her to a picnic at Wilk's Run; this was to say that he was going to Boston, and would be glad to execute any commissions for her,—trifling things, but written by his hand. She turned over his gifts, keepsakes which any friend might give to another. She recalled, while making up her packet, the circumstances in which each came to her. Memories exhale from mementos as odors from faded roses laid long away among our treasures. Patty ended by a brief shower of tears, and by replacing the souvenirs in the box whence they came. Her tears cleared her mental atmosphere as a thunder-shower may the air of a sultry day. Ten minutes later she flashed down stairs, bright, trenchant, and gay as a dragon-fly. She comforted herself with the illogical conclusion, "After all, I love him so deeply, he must love me."

Meanwhile the lawyer had questioned Flossy. She described so bewilderingly the situation of "this pew, you know," that it was quite impossible to form the slightest idea of its position. He therefore concluded to take the young lady herself to Samoset; and, just as Patty descended from her chamber, the two drove away. The psalmody was found without trouble; and the printed slip in the binding was eventually traced to the newspaper from which it was cut, furnishing the link which had before been missing in the evidence needed to secure the long-talked-of pension.

CHAPTER XXIV. [171]

MRS. SANFORD SPEAKS.

"THERE'S nobody else," said Will Sanford; "and if Tom Putnam won't take the part, the 'Faithful Jewess' may go to the 'demnition bowwows' but her sorrows will never afflict a Montfield audience."

"Nobody would be more heartily rejoiced, I'm sure, than I should," his sister answered, "if she would take a journey in that direction: only there isn't time to learn another play. So you'll have to ask him."

"Why don't you ask him yourself?" Will said. "It's your place."

"I'll never ask him to do any thing. He's too stubborn to live, and he treats me abominably."

"Then, you should heap coals of fire on his head by inviting him to take this part, that nobody but Sol Shankland would have anyway."

"When I heap coals of fire," she returned vigorously, "I want them to burn: I want at least to be able to smell the scorched hair."

"I think you will have that satisfaction," her brother replied, "if you'll walk into his office this afternoon, and tell him there is no one in the three towns can act as well as he can, and ask will [172] he please be that drivelling idiot of a patriarch."

"I'll do nothing of the kind. Besides, I'm going to ride with Clarence Toxteth this afternoon."

"He's always dangling round you nowadays, it seems to me."

"Well, I can't help that, can I?"

"You could if you wanted to. If you married anybody for his money, Patty, I'd never speak to you again."

"Pooh! You'd speak to me if I married a boa-constrictor."

"No. I'd send you a card on which you'd find nothing but the awful words,—

> 'BOA-CONSTRICTORESS, FAREWELL!'"

"Nonsense! You'd come over to be constricted, and the long and lovely bridegroom could make his supper of you. You know you adore me, Will, and so you'll see Tom Putnam. Tell him Sol is sick, or lame, or dead, or whatever it is, and we can't do without him."

"I'm always put upon," her brother said with mock despair: "in fact, I'm but a lovely, timorous flower that has been snubbed in the bud. I suppose I'll have to do it."

"That's a duck. You're an awful nice brother! But then who wouldn't be with such a surpassingly lovely sister!"

Half an hour later, Will encountered the lawyer in the street.

"I was going to see you," he said. "You presented yourself in the nick of time." [173]

"People who present themselves in the nick of time," Putnam answered good-humoredly, "generally find themselves in a tight place. What did you want of me?"

"I wanted to tell you that you are to take the part of the patriarch in the sensational, melodramatic madness entitled 'The Faithful Jewess,' to be performed for the benefit of the church on the 23d of this blessed month of October."

"You are sure that you are not misinformed?"

"Quite sure."

"But I have already declined to take part in those theatricals."

"My informant was very positive," Will said.

"May I ask the name of your informant?"

"Patty Sanford."

"Did she say I was to act?"

"Certainly," Will answered, distorting the truth with perfect recklessness.

"Um! The part must have been given to some one before this."

"Yes. When you refused, there was nobody left to take it but Sol Shankland."

"What has become of him?" asked the lawyer.

"General inanity, I suspect, though he says, 'neümonyer,' as he calls it."

"In that case," Putnam said, laughing, "he might furnish the funds."

"But you'll come to rehearsal to-morrow night?" Sanford asked, fumbling in his pocket for a play-book. "It's at our house at half-past seven." [174]

"If your sister has issued her commands, I suppose I've nothing to do but to obey."

The fact was, that the lawyer repented his former refusal, since it shut him out of the rehearsals at which Patty necessarily spent most of her evenings; and he was glad circumstances had put it into his power to retrieve his error. He found himself daily longing more and more to be near her, and yet shut more completely from her presence. He walked on towards his office with a brisker step, and neglected his business to commit the senseless lines of the part assigned to him.

About the time that Will was so unscrupulously using his sister's name to insnare the lawyer, that young lady was having a somewhat spicy interview with her mother. From the day when young Toxteth had confided to Mrs. Sanford his intentions in regard to Patty, the shallow woman had gone about with the secret locked in her bosom like a vase of perfume, whose subtile odors pervaded every corner of her brain-chambers. Her head unconsciously took a new elevation, and her step a fresh dignity. The Sanfords were independent and comfortable. Dr. Sanford's practice was good, and rather more lucrative than is usual in country-towns. With Will's education, however, and Patty's books and music-teachers to provide for, the surplus at the end of the year was small; and Mrs. Sanford never ceased to sigh for the time when, the son being established in his profession, and the daughter married, her husband could begin to accumulate property. [175]

"Daughter Britann," grandmother would say, "thy mind is overmuch set on this world's goods. The Sanfords are never rich, unless thee shouldst reckon the wealth of brains; and thou hast already sufficient for all thy needs."

"So have you, mother," Mrs. Sanford one day retorted; "but I notice you are just as anxious about your pension, for all that."

"That I shall bestow in charity," the old lady answered. "I hope I am not unduly anxious. If my son Charles had not wished it, I should never have troubled the matter."

"Nonsense!" Mrs. Sanford said. "It would have been a sin to neglect such an opportunity. I am glad that for once Charles had sense enough to do the right thing about a money matter. He's usually so dreadfully squeamish!"

To a mind like Mrs. Sanford, the getting of money was the only end worth pursuing in this world. Her fancy dwelt upon the position Patience might occupy as the wife of a wealthy Toxteth, and upon her own importance as the mother-in-law of the best catch in Montfield. Knowing how much Patty might be influenced by her father, in case she proved blind to her own good in this important matter, Mrs. Sanford one night ventured to broach the subject to him.

"It is time Patty was getting settled," she began.

"Humph!" the doctor returned, "I do not see the need of any haste."

"But there is need. If she lets her chances slip by now, she'll live to repent of it. Girls who are over particular always have to put up with a crooked stick at last." [176]

"What are you driving at?"

"Why," Mrs. Sanford said rather hesitatingly, "she might have Clarence Toxteth, if she only chose."

"How do you know?"

"I do know, and that's enough," his wife answered importantly. "He's half dead for her."

"He'll be whole dead before he gets her, unless she's a bigger fool than I ever thought her."

"Now, Charles, that's the way you always talk. What have you got against Clarence?"

"He hasn't any brains, for one thing."

"He must have," Mrs. Sanford returned, as if her logic admitted of no controversy. "Just see what a smart father he's got! What a sight of money Orrin Toxteth has made!"

"Nonsense! His brains stand in the same relation to his father's as froth does to beer. Good-night. I want to go to sleep."

"You always were prejudiced against Clarence Toxteth," the wife said. But Dr. Sanford allowed this to be the last word by answering nothing.

Mrs. Sanford felt that irritation which one feels who cannot understand how any point of view but one's own is possible. Not to be foiled, she abandoned the attempt to convince her husband, only to concentrate her energies upon her daughter. Very naturally she attempted to dazzle her eyes with the wealth which so bewitched her own fancy. Knowing by experience the difficulty of [177] dealing abruptly with Patty, she began by throwing out hints which seemed to her the acme of strategical tactics, but which were in reality so transparent, that Flossy and Patty made merry over them without stint. Of course, this came to nothing; and Mrs. Sanford would have been the most obtuse of mortals, had she failed to perceive that she produced no impression in the suitor's favor. But the doughty woman had obstinacy, if not firmness; and, the more her plans did not succeed, the more firmly she clung to them. She prepared for the attack; and her daughter, foreseeing what was to come, steeled herself for the combat.

Patty suffered more from the weakness and prejudices of her mother than any one but Dr. Sanford himself. Will, both from his sex and from being much away from home, treated her oddities rather as witticisms. In his sister an inborn reverence for family, and a devotion to the name and relation of a mother, fought with her perception of the ludicrous, and an instinctive repugnance to narrowness and mental inferiority. Shut her eyes as she might, she could not be blind to her mother's faults; and Mrs. Sanford's affection, which should have compensated, had always appeared rather an accident of custom, and but skin-deep. The silly blunders which the doctor's wife constantly made, her absurd superstitions, continually jarred upon her daughter. Patty reproached herself sharply, her conscience flagellating her with vigorous arm for discerning these shortcomings of her mother; but no amount of self-reproach can dull the mental [178] vision. She attempted to see only her mother's kindly deeds; but Patty was neither the first nor the last to discover that reverence and love are not to be constrained by an illogical balance-sheet; and that the taking account of stock in affection generally indicates a tendency to bankruptcy.

Mrs. Sanford had remained in suspense as long as she was able to endure it; and, upon the morning referred to earlier in this chapter, she at last spoke definitely. She was a little in awe of her daughter, having more than once been confused and worsted by that young lady's quickness of thought and expression; and the "Sanford will," she knew of old, had a strength against which it was useless to contend, if it were once determinedly fixed.

"Patty," she said, as they chanced to be alone together, "didn't I hear you tell Willie you were going to ride with Clarence Toxteth this afternoon?"

"Yes, mother. We are going to Samoset to look at those costumes."

"I am glad of it. You haven't treated him very well lately."

"You are losing a hairpin, mother."

"Dear me! Your father's thinking of me, I suppose."

"It ought to please you to have your husband think of you."

"He needn't think all the hairpins out of my head, though," responded Mrs. Sanford. "I'm always losing them."

"Where does the sewing-circle meet next week?" Patty asked, endeavoring to lead the [179] conversation as far as possible from its original theme.

"At Mrs. Brown's; though I doubt she won't be ready for it until a week after it's all over. I declare, I thank the Lord I ain't so shiftless!"

"Well you may," Patty said lightly, feeling safe now.

"He'll be the richest man in Montfield," said Mrs. Sanford, returning to the charge with an abruptness which found the other off her guard.

"Well, what of that?" her daughter asked absently.

"What of that!" the mother cried impatiently. "A good deal of that. But I suppose you'd refuse him, if he offered himself to-day."

"Of course, mother. You know I'm never going to marry."

"Don't talk like a fool, Patience. If you know when you're well off, you'll be careful how you snub Clarence Toxteth."

"I treat him as I do everybody else."

"But you mustn't. You must treat him different. Oh, dear!" Mrs. Sanford continued, quivering with excitement and indignation. "The trouble that girls are from the day they are born! Always contrary, and never knowing what they want, nor what's best for them. Why girls can't be born boys is more than I know!"

"There, mother, that is Irish enough for old Paddy Shaunessey."

"Always flying in the face of luck too," her mother went on, not heeding the interruption, "and always taking up with some crooked stick at last. The way you run after that old Tom Putnam is [180] shameful!"

It perhaps made little difference what Mrs. Sanford said in an argument of this kind, except that a reference to Mr. Putnam was the most infelicitous thing it were possible for her to utter. Patty had self-control enough not to speak the angry words which were on her tongue; but she hastened from the room, leaving her mother to reflect as she chose upon the results of the interview.

CHAPTER XXV. [181]

CLARENCE SPEAKS.

HAD Clarence Toxteth presented himself and his claims at the moment when the lady of his choice, panting and angry, had just escaped from the presence of her mother, his suit would have been disposed of in the most summary manner. It has been somewhere remarked, however, that women are creatures of changeable minds. By the time afternoon and the Toxteth equipage had arrived, the maiden's heart had so far relented, that she greeted her suitor as kindly as ever. As she rolled along in the luxurious carriage, her nimble fancy busied itself in picturing the future as it might be, if she chose to accept the man by her side. The very keenness of the senses, the fineness of perception which she possessed, made ready avenues by which temptations might enter. With tastes which demanded luxury, with at once the love and the knowledge of beauty, it was hard to deny herself the wealth which would put these things within her reach. To one who had been long the acknowledged leader among her associates, there was, too, a peculiar temptation to accept the hand of the wealthiest man in the village, making a brilliant match, and securing her position for the future. The weakness of Patty's nature that afternoon asserted itself; [182] and all the way to Samoset she was rather silent, following in her mind a brilliant will-o'-the-wisp, which shone and glistened indeed, but led over dangerous morasses.

In the errand in relation to the costumes, the young people found themselves unexpectedly delayed; so that the short October twilight was already falling when they drove out of Samoset. By the time Wilk's Run was reached, it was so dark, that, in the shadow of the carriage-top, their faces were not visible to each other. As the gloom deepened, the courage of the young man increased; and when at length he could not see the eyes of his companion, he was able to speak the words which had all the afternoon been jostling each other in eagerness to obtain utterance. Unabashed with all others, Clarence found in Patty's clear glances a penetration against the embarrassment of which he strove in vain; but, that removed, he spoke.

"It may seem strange for me to say it," he began; "but I've quite made up my mind that we should get along nicely together."

"Have you?" she returned, laughing, but secretly uneasy. "We have never quarrelled, that I remember."

"Oh, no!" he answered, "of course not. I hope you don't think so meanly of me as to believe I'd quarrel with you."

"No," she said, smiling to herself; "but I might have quarrelled with you."

"I didn't mean that," said he. "But we get on so nicely together, that, I say, why shouldn't we be [183] always together, you know?"

He could hardly have chosen a more unfortunate phrase in which to couch his proposal. There came over his companion a sickening sense of what it would be to live always with the man at her side. He attempted to embrace her with the arm not occupied with the reins; but she shrank back into the farthest corner of the carriage, filled with the bitterest self-contempt because she listened to him. This self-reproach was his salvation. The sense of her own weakness in letting him declare his passion, and of her dishonesty in keeping a silence which he might interpret favorably, so overwhelmed her with detestation for herself, that by contrast she for the moment almost regarded Clarence as an injured angel of honesty and devotion. From this odd mingling of feelings arose a sort of pity for her suitor; and, although she answered nothing, she suffered him to say on.

"I love you," he continued, "and I should be a fool if I didn't know that I have something to offer

the girl who marries me."

"If I ever married," Patty answered in a constrained voice, "I shouldn't marry for what a man could give me."

"If that is true," she added to herself, "why am I listening to him at all? Oh, what a hypocrite I am!"

"Of course not," Toxteth said, answering the remark he heard. "But a man is no worse for having a few dollars, is he?" [184]

"I suppose not."

"Then, why do you not say that you will marry me?" he demanded almost petulantly.

"I was not aware that you had asked me."

"I have, then. Will you?"

"I cannot tell," she said. "I cannot tell. Don't ask me to say more now."

"I must say," he retorted, rather offended, "that I can't be very much flattered by the way you talk."

"But you know how dreadfully sudden"—

The lie stuck in her throat, and refused to be uttered.

"Is it? How blind you must have been! Couldn't you see all summer that I was smashed?"

Patty was conscious of a wild desire to strangle her lover, and then fling herself under the wheels of the carriage. She longed to get possession of the whip, and lash the gray span into a gallop.

"I am fearfully cold and hungry," she said, feigning a shiver. "Do drive faster."

Clarence was ill pleased with the result of his wooing; yet the fact that he had not been absolutely refused made it needful for him to restrain his impatience. He whipped up his horses, and the carriage bowled along the road in a way that at another time would have filled Patty with delight. As it was, she was conscious of a passing thought that it lay in her power to become the mistress of this dashing equipage, and with the thought came fresh self-condemnation. At her [185] gate she was only coldly civil to Clarence, who drove away, and relieved his feelings by swearing at his horses.

Patty ran up the path to the cottage like a hunted deer. She wanted to get away from Toxteth, to escape as far as possible from the sound of his voice, from the touch of his hand. On the piazza she encountered Tom Putnam, who had been calling at the house.

"How late you are!" he said, taking both her hands in his. "How you tremble! Do you think it prudent to ride in so thin wraps? We have all been worrying about you."

"Let me go!" she exclaimed, snatching her hands from his grasp, and half beside herself with shame and self-loathing. "Let me go! I hate you!"

And she darted into the house.

CHAPTER XXVI. [186]

MULLEN HOUSE.

It is hardly to be wondered at that the sleep of Tom Putnam was not of the soundest that night. He recalled with painful minuteness the details of his relations with Patience, reviewing every word, every look, every gesture, from the evening of the thunder-storm until her passionate exclamation as she encountered him upon the piazza. It was not strange that he did not understand how that fierce declaration of hatred arose from love. When Patty suddenly found herself face to face with her lover, a sudden inner gleam, as with a lightning's flash, showed her clearly her own heart. With swift and terrible distinctness she saw how deep and strong was her love for him, and the miserable way in which she had been paltering with her own happiness and truth. With this came an equally rapid revulsion of feeling. She rebelled against this man for holding her heart in bondage, for constraining her love. Most of all she hated her own weakness; and upon him she wreaked her self-contempt. Knowing nothing of her mental combat, her lover could only wonder gloomily how he had deserved or provoked this bitterness, and in the watches of the night arraigned himself for a thousand fancied shortcomings which in love are crimes.

He fell into a troubled sleep towards morning, and awoke to find the sun staring in at his [187] windows, astonished to find him so late in bed.

October this year was unusually warm and pleasant; and when, after breakfast, Mr. Putnam rode over to Mullen House, whither he had been summoned, he found the air soft and mild as in August. The place was a mile and a half from his home, standing a little out of the village, by itself. The leaves along the way were falling rapidly from the trees, and the sharp teeth of the frost had bitten the wild grapes and nightshade at the roadside. In some moist places the elms still remained full and green, while the brilliant sumach-clusters ran like a crimson line along the way.

The crickets chirped merrily like the little old men they are in the night-time, if the old fairy-tale be true. The asters and golden-rod flaunted their bright blooms over the stone walls. The distant hills looked blue and far.

The house to which the lawyer had been summoned was as singular as it was pretentious. In the lifetime of its builder it had been vulgarly dubbed "Mullen's Lunacy,"—a name not quite forgotten yet. It was of stone, chiefly granite, although in a sort of tower which had been built later than the rest, the material used was a species of conglomerate. The building apparently had been modelled somewhat inexactly after some old English manor-house, and was a very noticeable object in a straggling modern village like Montfield. Mr. Mullen, its builder, had inherited, with a large property, a studious disposition, and a will as remarkable for its firmness as for its [188] eccentricity. He had given his life to study, which came to nothing as far as the world was concerned, since it resulted in no productiveness. He had attained a high degree of scholarly culture, but manifested it chiefly in ways fairly enough regarded by his acquaintances and neighbors as affectations. He wore the dress of the Englishman of letters fifty years before his day,—an anachronism less striking then than now, it is true, but significantly symbolical of his habit of looking to the past rather than the present or future for mental nourishment. His mansion was furnished largely with antique furniture obtained in Europe, and was always associated, in the mind of Patty and Will Sanford, with the mediæval romances they had pored over in the old library in childhood. The Sanfords were among the very few Montfielders who were admitted at Mullen House, as the proprietor chose to style his dwelling, upon any thing like terms of equality. The doctor's family-tree struck its roots deeper into the past than did that upon which the eccentric scholar prided himself; and the two families had been friends for generations. The children had been made welcome to the childless mansion; and, when Ease Apthorpe came home to her grandfather's house, she found the brother and sister already almost as much domesticated there as at home. After the death of Mr. Mullen, the visits of the young people were less frequent; but the close friendship formed with Ease had never been loosened.

Mr. Mullen's youth had vanished early; but he had remained single until well towards middle life. Scandal had made free with his name in connection with Mrs. Smithers, both before and after he [189] had married a timid wife, whom, after the fashion of Browning's Duke, he expected

> "To sit thus, stand thus, see and be seen
> At the proper place, in the proper minute,
> And die away the life between."

A sweet woman, who lived again in her grand-daughter Ease, was Mrs. Mullen,—a flower requiring sunshine and love, and who was as surely chilled to death by the frosty smiles of her husband as the four-o'clocks by the rime of autumn. Dying she left him two children,—Tabitha, the eldest, "a little faithful copy of her sire;" and Agnes, quite as true to the mother-type. Tabitha the father had kept at home, and educated himself. She grew up so like him, that she almost seemed an image into which had been breathed his spirit.

Tabitha Mullen was a woman of stately presence, with keen black eyes, and hair which had been like a raven's wing until time began to whiten it. She dressed always richly, wearing sumptuous apparel, rather because it was in keeping with her state as the only remaining representative of her name, than as if impelled thereto by any womanly vanity. She ruled her household with a rod of iron; and, from the boy who drove the cows afield, to the stately butler, the servants all stood in awe of her. This butler had once been a great scandal to the worthy people of Montfield; and even time had done little to change their feelings. He was one of Mr. Mullen's English [190] innovations; and besides this objection, and the outrage of being a man-servant for indoor service, the butler was, in the minds of the village people, connected with the very questionable inversion of the natural order of things caused by five-o'clock dinners, and the still more outrageous habit of having wine at that meal. Miss Tabitha drank wine at dinner, and had it served by a butler in livery, because her father had done so before her. That Montfielders were shocked was a matter for which she cared no more than she did what missionary the King of Borrioboola-Gha ate for his breakfast. The absurdity of attempting to keep up the state of an old English mansion in a New-England village was a matter which the mistress of Mullen House did not choose to see; and that to which she chose to be blind she would not have perceived if illuminated by the concentrated light of a burning universe. So Mullen House and its mistress, its life and its state, existed in strange anachronism in the midst of the work-a-day world of Montfield.

Not an easy woman to live with was Tabitha Mullen, as her niece had found. Agnes Mullen, the younger daughter, had been reared by the sister of her mother; had married a young music-teacher with no fortune save the

> "Lands
> He held of his lute in fee."

Very happy had they been together, and perhaps, for that reason, had held but loosely to life, [191] departing nearly together, as they believed to a better existence, soon after the birth of little Ease.

The orphan had grown up, snowdrop like, in the gloomy state of Mullen House,—a slender, graceful maiden, gentle and shy. Of yielding disposition, the Mullen strength of will had somehow been tempered in her to a firmness of principle. Hers was one of those natures which hold to what they believe true and pure with the same despairing clasp a drowning man fastens upon a

floating spar, clinging with the strength of one who struggles for very existence. Desiring to yield every thing asked of her, she found the approval of conscience a necessity,—a character to make life in adverse circumstances hard but high, bitter but pure.

In some respects Ease's surroundings were fortunate for her peculiar disposition. The Episcopal form of worship which Miss Tabitha affected as most nearly like the Church of England was particularly suited to the needs of her niece, since it gave color and richness to a faith otherwise too sombre. The young girl's companionship with the Sanfords also had been of a nature calculated to brighten her life.

The relation between Ease and Will Sanford had never been quite the same as before since that Sunday afternoon at Wilk's Run. The young man felt no longer towards Ease as a dear friend simply. The presence of a rival had awakened in his heart the passion which had long lain there dormant. Love ceased to be a dream coldly ideal, and sprang up a living fire. He was conscious [192] now of a keen delight in Ease's presence, very different from the negative pleasure her companionship had hitherto afforded him. The touch of her hand, the brushing of her dress against him, suddenly became events to be watched for and remembered.

This changed very little their outward demeanor, save that they might have seemed to an observer to have become somewhat reserved toward each other. The smallest chances had suddenly assumed too great an importance to be lightly indulged in. A virgin shyness enveloped Ease, which Will had not yet dared break through by the caresses he longed to bestow.

But all this has little to do, directly at least, with the visit of Tom Putnam to Mullen House. He had been not a little surprised by the summons, since no very cordial feeling existed between himself and Miss Mullen; and he had speculated, as he drove along, upon the possible nature of the business involved. His surprise was not lessened, when, after the slightest exchange of civilities compatible with very scant hospitality, Miss Tabitha suddenly came at once to the point by an abrupt question.

"Why," she asked, "have you brought that Smithers woman into the neighborhood?"

"Brought her into the neighborhood?" he echoed in astonishment.

"Yes, brought her into the neighborhood. She is living in your stone cottage at this moment. If you haven't any care for my feelings, you might have considered your own reputation."

"My reputation!" he repeated, puzzled. "What has that to do with it?" [193]

"Mrs. Brown and Mrs. Shankland and Mrs. Sanford could tell you," she retorted with a scornful smile.

He was silent. Wrongly, it is true, but with the weight of a certainty, it flashed upon him that here was the key to Patty's sudden hatred. He turned sick at the thought of the gossip she must have heard; then, with a quick throb of pride, he raised his head in wonder that the woman he loved could believe this of him. He rose at once, and stepped towards the door.

"If you had hinted at your business," he said, "it would have saved my coming over. Whatever cause you may have to be sensitive in regard to Mrs. Smithers, I certainly have none; and you will allow, I think, that the stone cottage belongs to me."

Nor could Miss Mullen's persuasions move him. The thrust she had given his pride, thinking thereby the more surely to accomplish her object, had turned against her. He felt that to send away the woman who had become his tenant would appear an acknowledgment of the truth of the slander against him.

But it was with a heavy heart that he rode homewards.

CHAPTER XXVII. [194]

THE RUSTIC ROAD.

Miss Flora Sturtevant was walking slowly along a lovely forest-road. It was near sunset, and the rays of light shot long bars of dusky gold between the tree-trunks. The robin, the thrush, and the oriole, still delaying through the warm autumnal weather, sang by starts amid the branches. The bright knots of ribbon upon Flora's dress, and the scarlet poppies in her hat, were touched and lighted by the glow, making all the hundred lights and gleams of the wood seem to centre about her figure. She carried in her hand a bunch of ferns and grasses, mingled with a few bright leaves; and she sauntered with the careless air of having come out merely for enjoyment.

The road had once been the county turnpike, but had long ago fallen into disuse. Now the trees met overhead, the grass and ferns had obliterated the marks of wheels, and, except for hunters or loitering pleasure-seekers, the way remained untrodden.

But Miss Sturtevant, idle and leisurely as was her mien, was not simply sauntering to enjoy the pleasure of nature. She was upon a diplomatic errand. Frank Breck had conducted her hither, and had turned back, that she might be alone to encounter a man who Breck knew was soon to [195] pass this way. The lady was perfectly cool and collected. The idea of meeting in the forest a man to whom she had never spoken, and whose character she knew to be bad, seemed not to give her the slightest concern. Perhaps she expected Breck to remain within call; possibly her strong self-

reliance made her insensible to fear.

At length the barking of a dog rang through the woods, and soon sounds of some one approaching were heard. Miss Sturtevant's lips closed with an expression of firmness, over which, however, instantly spread the veil of a smile. Shading her eyes with her hand, and half-turning where she stood, she looked off through the leafy spaces towards the setting sun, conscious that the first glimpse the new-comer caught of her would give him her figure at its best. So absorbed was she in gazing at the sunset, that she apparently did not hear the approaching stranger until he was within half a dozen feet of her. Then she turned suddenly, just as the dog ran up to her. She uttered a little exclamation of surprise.

"How you startled me!" she said, stooping to caress the dog, a handsome pointer. "What a lovely dog you are!"

"He is a kind o' handsome pup," the hunter said, replying to the remark addressed to his dog, —"handsome for a pup, that is," he added guardedly.

"Oh!" cried Flora, catching sight of the game which the man carried. "Oh, how perfectly lovely the necks of those birds are! What are they? What a fine shot you must be!"

"Well, middlin'," he answered, evidently flattered. "Them partridges was terrible shy." [196]

"I've wanted a heron all summer," remarked she, still admiring the glossy necks of the birds. "The feathers, I mean; but I didn't know anybody who could shoot one."

"Herons ain't none too plenty round here," he said, "and it's all-fired hard to get a shot at one."

"Haven't I seen you before?" asked Flora, letting her trimly-gloved hand rest upon the dog's head. "Did you ever live in Boston?"

"I guess I did!" he returned. "I lived with Breck there for most seven years."

"Oh! then, you are Mr. Mixon. It is wonderful that I happened to meet you here. I've wanted to see you for a long time. Do you know who I am?"

"You must be Miss Sturtevant, ain't you?—the one who was so deused smart about the Branch stock."

"Did you hear of that?" she asked, laughing. "I suppose I am the one; but I didn't know I was so smart."

"All-fired smart is what I say," Mixon affirmed with emphasis. "What did you want of me?"

"You may think it strange," she said reflectively; "yes, I'm sure you will think it very strange that I know any thing about it; but you have some papers that I want to see."

Mixon's face instantly assumed an expression of intensest cunning. He leaned upon his gun, bending his head towards his companion. The dog stood between the strangely-matched pair, [197] turning his intelligent face from one to the other. Flora pushed her hat back from her face as if for coolness, but in reality because she knew it was more becoming so. Her blue eyes shot persuasive glances upon the man before her; while her fingers toyed with the long silken ears of the pointer.

"Papers!" Mixon said. "What sort of papers?"

"Papers that old Mr. Mullen"—She left her sentence unfinished, not wishing to risk displaying her ignorance of the real nature of the documents in question. Mixon regarded her sharply.

"Do you know Frank Breck?" he asked. "Maybe, now, he might ha' mentioned this to you."

"I know a great many people besides Frank Breck," she returned, smiling. "I didn't need to go to him for information."

"It's mighty strange," Peter said in a deliberative way, "how many folks thinks I have papers they want. There's Breck; he's always at me. And Miss Mullen—she's sent for me a sight more times than I've been. And then Hannah Clemens, she thought I might have something would put her into her rights. Then there was Tabitha Mullen's lawyer"—

"Mr. Wentworth?" questioned Flora eagerly.

"Yes, that's him. He mittened on to me the other day."

"But I didn't know he had been here."

"He only came down one train," said Peter; "an' he went back on the next. Miss Mullen sent after me to see him. And now you take it up, and want some valuable papers. I wish I could supply you [198] all; but I can't."

"But you can at least let me see"—Flora began. But Mixon interrupted.

"I can't let you see what I hain't got, can I? Somebody must ha' lost an awful precious dociment to make all this stir.—Come, Trip."

"Honestly," Miss Sturtevant said, in her fear that he would escape her, going so far as to lay her fingers upon his arm,—"honestly, haven't you those papers?"

"Naturally I wouldn't want to speak too positively," he returned coolly, "not knowing what you want. But I guess it's safe enough to say no.—Come, Trip."

"Wait," said Flora, retaining the hold she had taken upon Mixon's coat-sleeve. "I didn't mean to put you to trouble without paying you for it."

"Well, that's business. How much, now, should you say was a fair sum, if I had the papers, and would let you see 'em?"

"You might make your own terms," she said quickly, more and more convinced of the value of the mysterious papers. "You'd be the best judge of what it was worth."

"Well, that's generous, almost too all-fired generous. I'm sorry I can't accommodate you; but I can't. Good-night, marm."

And, followed by Trip, Mixon strode off down the rustic way, already dusky in the fast deepening twilight.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

[199]

THE THEATRICALS.

A VERY mixed audience filled to overflowing the town-hall of Montfield. In the front-seats, which had been cleverly reserved for them by a small advance in price, were seated the *élite* of the village, complacently chatting together of the weather, the exhibition, their servants, and such small gossip as serves to savor the somewhat insipid existence of a country village. Behind these sat the farmers with their wives and daughters; the former regarding the curtain with a species of awe, while the latter indulged in clumsy flirtations with the rustic swains, who offered them delicate attentions in the shape of lozenges and peanuts. The talk here among the elders was chiefly of the crops and of cattle; while the youths and maidens speculated, giggling, upon the prospects of a dancing-school for the winter.

The relatives of the performers were chiefly in the reserved seats, and exhibited more or less nervousness according to their temperaments; all alike, however, endeavoring the most preternatural semblance of indifference.

[200]

"I have half regretted," Miss Tabitha Mullen remarked to Dr. Sanford, next whom she chanced to be seated, "that I allowed Ease to take part in this. It scarcely seems the thing with such a mixed audience. But all her associates were concerned in it, and I did not wish to seem over particular."

"You mustn't be too strict with Ease," Mrs. Sanford began to reply for her husband, when the tinkling of a bell announced the rise of the curtain, and she left her remark unfinished.

The young people of Montfield were accustomed at intervals to give theatrical performances, finding this the easiest method of raising funds for charitable purposes. They had accumulated quite a respectable collection of scenery and stage-properties, all more or less primitive, but answering sufficiently well for their purposes. "The Faithful Jewess" required chiefly forest scenery; and of this they possessed quite a variety, amateur talent being apt to run to the rustic drama. The tragedy proceeded smoothly enough, the back-seats understanding little of it, but liking it rather better on that account, besides being amused by the costumes and the high-sounding blank verse. Mr. Putnam was certainly not an accomplished actor; but of a part like that of the patriarch he made as much as the character would admit. The scenes between himself and Patty were really impressive, and won the admiration even of Miss Mullen, who prided herself upon her taste, and was nothing unless critical.

[201]

It is probable that both actors played the better for the presence of a deep feeling towards each other. The lawyer was conscious of a thrill whenever his hand touched hers; and, if Patience was less moved, it was because she was more truly an actor, and more completely identified with her part.

At the later rehearsals the young lady had ignored the presence of any misunderstanding between herself and her lover, and had been outwardly her usual self, bright and gay. She had avoided any approach to sentiment, alike with Toxteth and with Putnam. She had given herself up to the arrangements for the exhibition, attending to those thousand details of which no one else ever thought. She enjoyed the excitement, and that most seductive of all forms of flattery, the self-consciousness of being a motive-power and a leader. She had put aside every thing else to be thought of and met after this evening; and the feverish excitement arising from this undercurrent of feeling buoyed her up to-night.

Her dress, setting off her fine form to advantage, was in color and arrangement admirably adapted to her beauty, and never had she looked so superbly handsome. No wonder that to-night her lovers were more deeply enamoured than ever.

Among her lovers, be it said here, was no longer to be numbered Burleigh Blood. The transfer of his allegiance to Flossy Plant, which Patty had first attempted in half-jest, had become deep earnest; and the giant was the humble slave of the little lady he might almost have balanced upon his extended palm.

[202]

"The Faithful Jewess," with its "ring-round-rosy" situations, its harrowing dialogue, and long-winded soliloquies, at last reached its tragic climax. The actors strung themselves before the curtain in answer to the vigorous applause of hands horny with holding the plough, and then retired to the dressing-rooms to prepare for "The Country Wooing." The Montfield orchestra, under the lead of old Gustave Harlakenden, the German shoemaker, plunged precipitately into the mazes of a wonderful *pot-pourri* of popular melodies; while the audience rustled and buzzed.

Tom Putnam, who was not in the cast for the second play, having resumed his ordinary clothing, emerged from his dressing-room just as Miss Sturtevant came from hers, costumed for "The Country Wooing."

"I must congratulate you," she said, "upon the decided hit you made in 'The Jewess.' You took the house by storm."

"Thank you," returned Tom. "You attribute to me the honor which was due to the ladies in the piece."

"It is very modest of you to say so," Flora smiled; "but you undervalue your own acting. I wonder if you will think me rude and presuming, if I make a request."

"Ladies are supposed never to be either," he answered.

"How satirical! I am afraid to ask you. But I will. Will it be too much to ask you to walk home with me to-night? I go to-morrow, and I want you to take those books I borrowed. I should have returned them before."

"Certainly I will," replied he. "I did not know you went so soon."

"I waited for these theatricals," she said. "My half-sister is to be married next week, and I ought [203]
to have gone before."

They had by this time reached the end of the stage, which served as a sort of green-room. Here direst confusion reigned. Burleigh Blood had made the dreadful announcement that the excitement had driven his part entirely out of his mind.

A dozen voices proffered in consternation several dozen suggestions at once.

"Never mind," Flossy said. "Make up something: nobody will know."

"But the cues?" exclaimed Miss Sturtevant in dismay.

"Oh, dear! I wish I were at home!" cried Dessie Farnum, almost in tears.

"I never could make up any thing," Burleigh said in despair. "I was a fool to take the part anyway!"

"You'll have to trust to the prompter," Patty said. "There's no help for it now. You are not in the first scene, and can look it over."

"Or hunt up your wits," added Emily Purdy.

"Are you ready?" Patty asked. "Ring up."

The bell sounded, bringing the orchestra to so sudden a stop, that one out of sight might have supposed an immense extinguisher suddenly clapped over it.

"Don't bother," Flossy said consolingly to Burleigh as he stood in the wing, vainly endeavoring to follow the advice of Patty. "If you forget, I'll prompt you. I know the whole of your part and mine too."

Had he known that few mortals were more liable to stage-fright than Flossy herself, he might [204]
have been less comforted: as it was, he placed implicit confidence in her ability, and this gave him sufficient self-control to fix for a little his attention upon his book. The next moment, in some way, without any exact knowledge of how he got there, he found himself upon the stage, and the other players one by one going away, and leaving him in the full gaze of that sea of faces. He longed to catch them and hold them back, as each slipped into the friendly obscurity of the wings; but he stood stiff and helpless alone upon the stage with Flossy. The scene which ensued was as follows, the italics indicating what was said in a tone inaudible to the audience.

Flossy (as Waitstill Eastman). "Won't you sit down, Jonathan? *You say I don't mind if I do.*"

Burleigh (as Jonathan Cowboy). "You say I—I don't mind if I do."

F. "Why don't you then? *I'm goin' to.*"

B. "I'm goin' to."

F. "*Don't hold your arms so stiff!* So is Christmas coming. You needn't, though, if you don't want to. (Sits.) I mean to make myself comfortable. *I was waiting for you to sit down.*"

B. "*For me to sit down?*"

F. "*Say that!*"

B. "For me to sit down."

F. "*Sit down!*"

B. "Sit"—

F. "*Goodness! Don't say that!* Your chair don't seem easy, somehow. Maybe the floor ain't even [205]
over there. *I'll move it over there, then.*"

B. "I'll move it, then."

F. "*Move nearer to me.* Don't come any nearer me!"

B. "*Which shall I do?*"

F. "*Move up!* You'd better keep your distance! *Move up! Yes, miss.*"

B. "Yes, miss."

F. "*Keep moving nearer.* Now get out, Jack Cowboy! *Now don't*"—

B. "*I know it.* Now don't be cross, Waitstill. It ain't often a feller has a chance to come and see you."

And, having thus got fairly launched, Burleigh recalled his lines, which he had faithfully committed, and went smoothly on to the end. Flossy had occasionally to direct his actions, for he fixed his attention so firmly upon the words, that his tendency was to repeat them like a parrot; but between them they came through safe. And, as Flossy had once jokingly predicted, her friend's awkwardness passed for clever acting, so that his success was so great as to astonish every one, particularly himself.

CHAPTER XXIX.

[206]

NIGHT-SCENES.

Miss Sturtevant's summer visit to Montfield usually ended with September, but this year she had remained for the theatricals. That she did not carry Tom Putnam's heart as a trophy of her summer's campaign was certainly no fault of hers. As she walked home from the exhibition, leaning upon his arm, she taxed him with his want of attention.

"I have scarcely seen you for the summer," she said. "You have been very sparing of your calls."

"I confess my remissness, but I have so little time."

"You might at least," Flora said, "have come to thank me for my hint about the Samoset and Brookfield. Almost everybody else sold out."

"To your gain," he returned. He had little respect for the woman beside him, and was annoyed at her intrusion.

"I thought I answered your note," he continued. "I certainly intended doing so."

"Oh, you did!" Miss Sturtevant said, leaning upon his arm more heavily. "But a note is a poor substitute for a call from one to whom one is attached."

"I hope," the lawyer observed briskly, determined not to be drawn into a scene, "that you have [207] sold out. I see by the morning paper that the vote has been reconsidered, and the Branch is not to be bought, after all: I suspected it would be so, all the time. The whole thing was only the work of speculators, and I hope you were as lucky as I in getting rid of your paper at the flood."

"What!" cried his companion,—"reconsidered? You do not mean that the Branch isn't to be bought? Uncle Jacob promised"—

"The Branch certainly is not to be bought," Putnam repeated. "The corporation has no use for it, and never had. You haven't held your stock?"

"I have," she answered, pressing her thin lips together. "I am completely beggared. Good-night. I must have time to think."

"I wish I had known," Tom said, standing upon the step below her; for they had reached the Browns' door. "I supposed you knew all about the stock."

"I thought I did," she answered in a strained, thin voice. "It seems I was mistaken. Good-night."

She went in, and the door closed behind her. Tom walked home, kicking his boot-toes out against every pebble, divided between disapproval and pity.

Twenty-four hours later Miss Sturtevant was confronted with Mr. Jacob Wentworth in the library of his Beacon-street residence. The lawyer sat by a grate in which had been kindled a fire as a precaution against the autumnal chill in the air. On a small table at his hand lay the last number of "Punch," between a decanter of choice sherry and a well-furnished cigar-stand. Mr. [208] Wentworth's family being out for the evening, he was enjoying himself in almost bachelor comfort, only the contrasting background of bachelor loneliness being needed to make his happiness complete. He was not well pleased at this late call from Flora, of whom he had never been fond, and who now came to mar the delightful ease of his evening with complaints of the inevitable. She looked worn and old and eager. She had been travelling a large part of the day, and the anxiety which Putnam's news had brought to her had told severely.

"I knew you would reproach me," Mr. Wentworth was saying. "But, when I found that you had deceived me, I felt under no further obligations to you."

"But I did not deceive you. Peter Mixon has the papers."

"I took the trouble to go to Montfield myself," the other answered judicially, "to prevent the possibility of a mistake; for the Mullen property is a large one, and my client's interests are my own. I saw the man personally, and he assured me that he had no papers whatever."

"So he did me," Flora burst out; "but I was not such a fool as to believe him."

The lawyer gave a sweeping wave of the hand as if to thrust completely aside the implication.

"You are imaginative," he said coolly.

"I had proof of it," she returned,—"proof, I tell you; and you have lied to me about the Branch, and ruined me."

She was ashy pale, and even Mrs. Gilfether would have found no lack of expression in her blue eyes now. [209]

"The turning of the road the other way," Wentworth said unmoved, "was for my interest; and, when Miss Mullen assured me that Frank Breck had the papers, I hardly felt under obligation to communicate further with you."

"Frank Breck?"

"Yes. He is the son of an old friend of the Clemens woman."

"Uncle Jacob," Miss Sturtevant said in her harshest voice, rising from her seat as she spoke, "you are a fool. I shall be even with you yet. Good-night."

When, on the night of the theatricals, Patty saw Tom Putnam give his arm to Miss Sturtevant, she accepted at once the proffered escort of Clarence Toxteth. To Toxteth's remarks she replied in monosyllables, pleading that she was very tired. She dismissed him at the piazza-steps, and, passing into the shadow, gave him the impression that she had entered the house. As a matter of fact she discovered her door-key to be missing; and, not caring to disturb any one, she sat down to wait for Will. He was long in coming, for he and Ease loitered that night.

But steps approached; and, to her surprise, Patty saw in the moonlight Bathalina and her quondam husband coming up the walk. They parted midway between the gate and house, Mrs. Mixon advancing alone.

"I thought, Bathalina," Patty said, "that you had given that man up."

"Law, Miss Patty, how you started me! I thought you would have been a ghost." [210]

"Nonsense! Where have you been all this time?"

"Traipsin' up and down, up and down, like the Devil, seeking of somebody to devour. I'm worn almost out of my shoes, but Peter would argufy it out. So we've been traipsin' up and down; and this shawl's so thick, and the weather so warm, let alone it's bein' October and ought to be cool, that I am about melted to death."

"What makes you wear your shawl, then?"

"I'm not a young girl, miss, that I should walk in my figger. I won't go through the streets with my figger showin', if it kills me."

"What are you walking with Peter Mixon for, anyway? I thought you were done with him."

"Well, miss," the servant answered with a great appearance of candor, "Amanda West wouldn't have him, seein' as he was sort of married to me; and I've been thinking very likely it was all my sinful pride refusing to live with him after the Lord had kind o' jined us."

"The Lord kind o' joined you, I should think!" Patty retorted contemptuously. "The Old Evil One had more to do with it."

CHAPTER XXX. [211]

THE WOUNDS OF A FRIEND.

THE plan which Mrs. Toxteth had once mentioned to Ease, of having a masquerade follow the exhibition, had not been forgotten; and the invitations had accordingly been issued. It was arranged that the actors should meet on the morning following the theatricals, and make some arrangement for the exchange of costumes. About ten o'clock Patty, Flossy, and Will walked over to the Hall together.

"I feel like the ashes of yesterday's cigar slopped with the dregs of last night's champagne," yawned Will, with some reminiscence of wicked college frolics.

"And I," Flossy said, "feel like this man, you know, that"—

"No, I don't know," he interrupted. "I never know 'this man,' Floss; but I'm sorry you feel like him."

"If you'd kept still, you might have found out who he was; but now you'll never know."

"Oh, tell us!"

"No, I shall not. 'Twasn't that other, you know, either."

Flossy's "this man," or "that other, you know," were as famous in her particular circle as Sairy Gamp's "Mrs. Harris, my dear," in a more general one. These allusions were seldom intelligible, and it is to be suspected that sometimes the little witch made them purposely obscure for her own amusement. [212]

The company assembled in the Hall was rather a sleepy one, with scarcely energy enough for discussion. The talk naturally ran chiefly upon the performance, the various haps and mishaps, the successes and failures, the money obtained. Patty and Tom Putnam chanced to stand near each other, and a little apart from the others. She had taken a slight cold from her exposure upon the piazza the night before, and was coughing.

"I am very sorry you've taken cold," the lawyer said.

"It is nothing," she returned.

"But every time you cough," he said with mock-pathos, "one of my heart-strings snaps."

"I should think they'd be about all used up by this time, then."

"Oh! I tie them up again, after the fashion of guitar-strings."

"But a tied-up string cannot give a good sound."

"No," he laughed, "only a kind of melancholy 'bong.' But one gets accustomed to any thing."

"It is a pity," she said, "that these mortal frames cannot be made with less rigging. Think how much simpler it would be to grow like a crystal, without all 'the bother of all the fixin's inside on us,' as Bathalina says."

"But a crystal must have a rather cold existence," he returned. "I prefer our present condition, thank you." [213]

"Patty Sanford," called Dessie Farnam, "do come and tell us how to distribute these costumes!"

"It seems to me," Patience answered, "that the simplest way is to lay all the dresses out in one of the rooms, and draw lots for choice. Then each person can go and choose, and nobody be the wiser."

"I think that is best," Clarence Toxteth assented. "I wonder we didn't think of it. You remember our bet?"

"Oh, yes!" Patty replied. "I am as sure of those gloves as if I had them now."

Toxteth had somewhere seen or heard of the fashion of betting gloves; and the custom seemed to him the acme of high-bred gallantry. He had accordingly bet with Patty that he should be able to penetrate her disguise at the masquerade. She was determined to win this wager, and had already settled in her mind the costume she should, if possible, secure.

Some time was occupied in laying out the dresses, and then the lots were drawn from a hat. The first choice fell to Patty, and the second to Emily Purdy; Ease had the third, and Putnam the fourth.

"Now we shall see what we shall see," Patty said gayly. "I'm going to try on all the suits, and take the most becoming."

She disappeared into the dressing-room, and after a few moments emerged empty-handed.

"Where is your dress?" Emily Purdy asked.

"I put it into my trunk," was the reply. "It is all ready to take home that way." [214]

Miss Purdy was absent far longer than Patience had been; but a large bundle in her arms furnished a ready excuse for the delay.

"If everybody is as long as this," Will said, "we that are at the bottom of the list had best go home, and come over to-morrow. I'm the fifteenth."

"I'm two worse than that," Burleigh Blood declared. "And between us, Will, there isn't a suit there I can get into, but my own."

"Take any one," was the reply, "and then get up any thing you choose."

Putnam stood alone by a window when Emily Purdy returned, and she advanced towards him.

"Oh!" she said in a confidential whisper, "how do you suppose Patty could take Clarence Toxteth's suit?"

"So you've spent your time discovering what she chose," he said aloud. "That was as kind of you as it was honorable."

"I couldn't help noticing, could I?" she stammered, abashed.

"No, probably not," he answered with quiet scorn.

"Of course I shouldn't tell anybody," she continued. "But it was so strange of her!"

"She took it as a blind, I presume," he said, "and means to make a new costume. Excuse me. It is my turn."

With much laughter and fun the selection continued until all the dresses had been taken. Burleigh Blood confided to Flossy, that, when his turn came, the only male costume remaining was that of little Tim Bawlin, and that he had taken it. [215]

"What on earth will you do?" she asked.

"I must get up something, but I am sure I don't know what."

"I'd be glad to help you," she said. "If I can, that is."

"Of course you can," he replied. "I shall depend upon you."

As Patty left the hall, she was joined by the lawyer.

"I am going to see your grandmother," he said. "This famous pension business is about settled, and I wish to tell her."

"I am glad if it has at last come to something," she returned. "I doubted if it ever would."

"I want to ask a favor of you," he said as they gained the street.

"What is it?"

"I had the misfortune," he said slowly, "to be forced to take for myself the dress Dessie Farnum wore last night. It is evident enough that I cannot wear it, and I want to change for the one you have."

"What do you mean?" she asked in astonishment.

"As I say."

"How do you know what dress I have?"

"What does that signify, since I do know?"

"It signifies a great deal. I never thought you so dishonorable as to play the spy."

"Do you think me so now?"

"What else can I think?" she demanded hotly.

"As you please: let the insult pass," he said. "The main thing is that you exchange with me." [216]

"I will not exchange with you!"

"You will not?"

"No."

"But, Patty, just consider the talk and the scandal it will make if you wear a man's dress, to say nothing of the indelicacy."

"Indelicacy! Thanks! We are quits on the score of insults."

The costume Patty had chosen was an old-fashioned dress-suit, with knee-breeches and swallow-tailed coat. In selecting it, she had only considered how perfectly it would answer as a disguise, and had acted upon the impulse of the moment.

"It was not like a public mask," she had said to herself, "but a small party of intimate friends." The words of the lawyer set the matter in wholly a new light before her. She tried to feel that all her anger was against him, but was secretly conscious of the imprudence of the thing she had planned to do. The fact that he was right, and yet wrong by not considering the innocence of her intentions, incensed the girl the more.

"I do not see that you have the right to be my mentor in any case," she exclaimed. "But nothing seems to make you so happy as to see me miserable. Why must you be prying about to discover what dress I mean to wear at all? One would expect you to be sufficiently ashamed of that to keep from betraying yourself. But no: you cannot let slip an opportunity of correcting me, even at the [217] expense of smirching yourself. Oh, and this is the love you professed for me!"

"Patty," he said quietly, as she paused to choke back the sobs which strangled her, "will you be kind enough to tell me what all this is about?"

"About? As if you did not"—

"I beg pardon," he interrupted. "I was not done. Is it, then, proof of a want of love that I hurt myself to save you from a foolish thing you will not be willing to do when you come to think of it, and of which you would be ashamed if you did it thoughtlessly?"

"Hurt yourself!" she returned scornfully. "It may hurt you: I do not know. But you cannot wonder if I find it a little hard to believe. But you do not seem to consider whether it hurts me, or not."

"Why should it hurt you to do me a favor, and exchange costumes?"

"The fact that you know what costume I have hurts me. I do not enjoy finding I have been deceived in my friends."

"The faith you have in your friends cannot be very robust to be so easily shaken."

"Thank you again. I am unfortunately accustomed to believe my senses."

"As you please," he said coldly, holding open the gate for her to enter. "But you have not answered my question."

"What question?"

"Will you do me the favor of exchanging dresses with me?"

"I have answered that." [218]

"But you must reconsider."

"Must!" she flashed out,—"must! You have no right to say *must* to me, thank Heaven! and you never will have!"

"You will say it to yourself in this case," he said, pale and self-contained.

"If I do, I shall not need your interference."

She turned her back upon him, and walked between the leafless shrubs towards the house, setting her heels determinedly upon the walk. It was not until she had entered the door that she remembered his errand to her grandmother; and by that time he had taken the path across the orchard to his home.

"I have done it now," he muttered to himself. "The society of women will make a fool of the most sensible of men. But what an ass I was to set to work so clumsily! I wish Emily Purdy were in Tophet!"

CHAPTER XXXI.

[219]

AUNT JEFF REMONSTRATES.

"If it makes you feel bad to have me cross," Patty said one morning, in answer to a remonstrance of Flossy's, "think how much worse it is for me to be cross. I have to endure my own company all the time, you know."

"Well, Patty-pat," Flossy answered meditatively, "be happy and you'll be virtuous. And that reminds me of Bathalina's room. Don't you think that when it's papered—aunt Britann, didn't you say it was to be done this week?—it might have a frieze, or a dado, or something, of mottoes?"

"Of mottoes?"

"Yes. I've thought up some lovely ones. 'A woman is known by the company she forsakes' is a good one. Then, 'The early bird dreads the fire,'—you know how she hates to get up and build the fire."

"Water is more her element," said Will. "Can't you have—

> 'Bonnet and feather
> She'll wash together!'

or something of that kind?"

"Oh, no! That isn't good. 'Be virtuous and you'll be disagreeable' might do; and 'Marry in haste, and separate at leisure.' I'll think up plenty of mottoes, aunt Britann, if you'll have them put on her walls." [220]

"There comes her aunt Thomas Jefferson Gooch, at your service," Will said, glancing from the window. "There must be a storm in the air to bring her over so early."

He was right. Mrs. Gooch had come over to remonstrate with her niece upon her relations to her husband.

"I couldn't rest, Bathalina," she said, "after hearing that that unfacalized critter was round here again, for I knew just what a fool you be. And it ain't no way respectable to have an intermittent husband, always comin' an' goin,' like the old woman's soap. 'Tain't what our folks has been used to. He's got all your money, hain't he? I'm sure I don't see what more he wants. You let him have every copper you had in the bank, I'll be bound."

"Well," retorted Mrs. Mixon, "what if I did? I put that money by for a rainy day, didn't I? an' when it come, I spent it."

"Lawful sakes! I hope you didn't put it by for Peter Mixin's rainy days! As I told your cousin Huldy, he's one of them folks that makes a dreadful cheerful funeral."

"Dear me!" exclaimed Bathalina, in her confusion wetting her finger, and putting it to the water in the boiler to see if it were hot enough to sizzle, like a hot iron. "How confusin' you are, aunt Jeff! '*Restless* mortals toil for nought,' as the hymn says; and you're one of 'em." [221]

"I should think I was!" retorted aunty Jeff. "But I tell you ours is a respectable family, and such culch as Peter Mixup was never brought into it before; to say nothing of having a husband bobbing after you like the tail of a kite, now here and now there!"

"Gracious!" exclaimed her niece fiercely. "How you go on! Don't get me mad, or my sinful pride'll be too much for me."

"Sinful fiddlesticks! If you had any pride, you wouldn't have that rag-tag-and-bobtail, Tom-Dick-and-Harry sort of a husband round you!"

"I shall go mad!" cried Bathalina, with an awful shrillness in her tones. "You'll make me go a raving lunacy!"

"You are one now!" screamed her aunt. "You always was."

Instead of replying, Bathalina seized the rolling-pin, and began to roll the pie-crust she was making with a vigor which bespoke the conflict within. At the same time she burst out into her favorite song,—

> "'Tortured in body, and condemned in spirit,
> No sweet composure'"—

"I always hide the rolling-pin from *my* pastry," broke in aunt Jeff with cutting emphasis. "Pie-crust is like millinery, the less it is handled, the better."

"Sinful sakes!" exclaimed her niece, throwing down the rolling-pin. "I try to live as I'll wish I had when I stand round my dying-bed; but if you come here to fight, we'll just make a business of that, and let other things go. But if you come peaceable, you just keep your tongue still." [222]

"Well, well," the visitor said, somewhat startled, "we won't quarrel. But what is Peter Mixer dangling round here for?"

"Something or other between him and Frank Breck," Bathalina said evasively. "I never asked him; for I found I couldn't get it out of him, though I've tried more'n forty different ways."

"But what's he taking up with you again for?"

"Me?" demanded the other indignantly. "Ain't I his wife? Besides, he says Hannah wants to make up with me, and leave me her property."

"Her property! Where'd she get any?"

"Well," Bathalina answered with an air of profound mystery, which in reality arose from profound ignorance, "Hannah may not have been all she ought to be, an' I ain't sayin' she has. But she may have property for all that. And, since her daughter ran off with that Brown of Samoset, Hannah's set agin her, and Peter's talked her over to consider me. And if she does,—as why shouldn't she? —if she does"—

"Nonsense!" interrupted aunty Jeff sardonically. "Ef she does! Ef is a crooked letter. And I thought our family was done with that Hannah Clemens, or Smithers, or whatever she calls herself. I'm sure I cast her off the day she went off with old Mullen."

With which conclusion she gathered herself together, and departed.

On the afternoon of this same day Burleigh Blood came to take council with Flossy about his masquerade dress. In Montfield the young people were thrown upon their own resources for costumes to be used in theatricals or fancy-dress parties. Burleigh, motherless from boyhood, and having no sisters, was forced to take Miss Plant at her word, and come to her for aid on this occasion, being, if the truth were told, but too glad to do so. The brawny fellow, with his magnificent chest and his deep voice, was as ardently in love with this sallow morsel of humanity as if she had been as like Brunhilde as he like Siegfried. Her odd ways and harmless affectations were to him inexpressibly droll and charming. He had at first been thrown into her society by the caprice of Patty, who amused herself by playing upon the diffidence of her suitor. It was not long before Patty began to suspect that this clear-eyed giant had somehow touched her cousin's heart, which proved large enough to contain him, despite her tiny person. Visions of matchmaking danced rainbow-like before the eyes of Patty, and she contrived that her quondam lover and her cousin should constantly be thrown together; or, more exactly, she fancied she managed what would in any case have come about. Later her own affairs had engrossed her so completely, that she hardly even noticed how matters stood with Flossy. [223]

"I am sure I do not know what to wear," Burleigh said, when he and Flossy were alone together in Mrs. Sanford's parlor. "It is such a bother to get up a rig!"

"I've thought it all out," Flossy answered. "You wear this long frock, you know, and it will disguise your figure, and oh! monks do have such good things to eat! This will do finely, don't you think?" [224]

Her friend had not the least idea of her meaning, and only stared.

"It could be made of black cambric," Flossy continued; "and I'll lend you a rosary, and you'll want an old rope to gird it in. You'll make a magnificent monk."

"Oh! you mean me to dress as a monk."

"Of course. Didn't I say so? Sometimes folks don't understand me, but I'm sure I don't see why. Of course I can't help that."

"No, of course not," he assented. "But how shall I get this robe?"

"Bring me the cloth, and I'll make it. Grandmother will help me."

"It is too bad for you to have so much trouble."

"Pooh! It's no bother. I'm sure I shall be glad to do it; and, besides, I shall know you."

"That's so!" he said. "What are you going to wear?"

"Do you think I'd tell?"

"It is only fair you should, for you'll know me. Besides, I can never find out anybody."

"Well," Flossy said in a sudden burst of confidence, "I'll tell you something. Ease and Will—no, I won't tell that, for I promised not to, and you mustn't mention it if I did. But I'm going to wear the dress Ease wore in 'The Country Wooing.'"

"Was it red?" [225]

"Red? No, indeed! You never know any thing about what a girl has on."

"I know I don't. I don't look at them enough."

"More likely," she retorted, "you look at the wearers, and not at the dresses."

"No: only at you."

Let no reader suppose Burleigh was complimenting: he was only telling the simple truth. Flossy blushed a little at his earnest frankness.

"You'd better look at Patty," she said. "She's ever so much prettier."

"I suppose she must be," he responded *naïvely*; "but I'd rather look at you. I hope you don't mind."

"Oh, not in the least! Why should I? But this is all wool-gathering. Let's arrange about your suit."

"But you haven't told me what your dress is."

"It's a white lute-string."

"Lute-string?"

"Yes, of course," she said, laughing at his puzzled face. "This old-fashioned soft silk."

"Oh! I thought lute-string"—

"Would be like a guitar-string, I suppose; but it isn't. Don't you remember the dress? It had a square corsage"—

"You'd better not tell me any more. It's an old-fashioned soft silk, and it's white. That is all I could remember. I shouldn't know a square corsage from—from a square handspike."

The friendship between Flossy and Burleigh ripened rapidly over that monk's garb. She assumed great airs of superiority and authority over him, which pleased Burleigh marvellously. She [226] climbed into a chair to fit the robe over his shoulders, boxing his ears when he insisted upon turning around that he might see her; being at last forced to compromise by letting him face the mirror, and gaze rapturously at the image of her *petite* person and pale face. But at last Flossy got so embarrassed, that she declared she must at once be satisfied about the weather, and led him off to consult Mrs. Sanford.

"Of course it will be pleasant next Tuesday evening," Mrs. Sanford decided after a consultation with her beloved "Old Farmer's Almanac." "The moon quarters in the west at seven o'clock that very night. I wish," she continued with a sigh, as she returned the almanac to its place, "that we didn't have to change almanacs every year. I just get all my accounts down in one, and its year's gone by. And then I'd like to keep an almanac for association's sake; but I suppose it wouldn't be much good the second year. Things do pass away so in this world!"

CHAPTER XXXII. [227]

HEADS AND TAILS.

The day of the masquerade came, and a more sombre mortal than was Patience Sanford the sun did not shine upon. The resolve to wear the costume she had chosen cost her many a bitter pang. She endeavored to persuade herself that self-respect required this assertion of her independence of control, yet by this very decision it sank like the mercury upon a winter's night. She said to herself, that, had Tom requested her not to wear the dress, she would gladly have yielded; but that his assumption of deliberate indelicacy on her part, and his overbearing way of correcting her, were insolences not to be endured. There was little meekness about Patty's love. As yet it was a flame that scorched rather than warmed. But she was as true as steel, and the fire within would in time work to her finer tempering.

Riding with her father the morning of this day, Patty saw Peter Mixon accompany Tom Putnam into the office of the latter; and she fell to wondering deeply what could be the occasion of so strange a companionship. Had she entered with them unperceived, she might have heard the following conversation:—

"What is up between you and Frank?" the lawyer asked. "You are together a good deal. What sort [228] of a hold have you on him?"

"Hold on him?" echoed the other. "I hain't got no hold on him. We've been gunning together some. He got kind o' used to me when he was a little feller. He always had more sconce than Hazard. Hazard's too almighty good for me. I like a feller's got some devil in him."

"I think likely," Putnam answered. "What is your hold on him?"

"I tell you I hain't got none."

"You may as well carry your lies somewhere else," the lawyer said coolly. "They are wasted on me."

"You was always d—d hard on me," Mixon said after a moment of sullen silence. "You don't take no account o' your family's spoilin' me. I was straight as a Christian before Breck got hold o' me. 'Tain't no fair twittin' on facts gener'ly; but you don't seem to remember that I know your brother-in-law wrote your name once, an' there warn't never nothin' done about it."

"Now you speak of it," returned the other unmoved, "I remember that Peter Mixon witnessed it. It seems to me rather longer than it is broad; for Breck is dead, and Mixon is living."

"But Breck's family ain't dead. You won't bedaub them in a hurry, I'm thinkin'; and you can't

touch me 'thout you do them."

"We talked this all over when Breck died," Putnam said. "It will hardly pay to go over it again now. I want to know just what you and Frank are at." [229]

"'Tain't nothin' that concerns you," the man said, sullenly yielding. "'Tain't nothin' but a paper his father gave me to keep, and he wants it."

"To keep for whom?"

"To keep for—for myself of course. 'Tain't at all likely he'd give me a paper for any one else."

"No, it is not," the lawyer remarked impartially; "and that is why I think you stole it."

"D—n you!" began Mixon, "I'm no more of a thief than Breck was. I'll"—

"There," Putnam interrupted, "that will do. Keep still, and let me see this paper, whatever it is."

"I hain't got it with me."

"Nonsense! Let me see it."

"I hain't got it here, I tell yer. You never take no stock in nothin' I say, seems to me."

"That's true. What is this paper? and how came you by it?"

"He give it to me the night before he died. That old maid Mullen wanted to get it, but Breck he give it to me. 'You've always been a faithful frien' to me,' says he, 'an' you shall have it.' An' then he give it to me."

The lawyer looked at him with mingled amusement and disgust. Perfectly aware that the man was lying, he tried to decide upon what slight foundation of fact had been built this touching death-bed fiction. In his own mind Putnam connected this mysterious paper with the anxiety of his nephew Frank to force Ease Apthorpe to marry him, the mention of Miss Mullen's name [230] giving to this some plausibility. Suddenly a new thought flashed through his mind.

"Is Mrs. Smithers mixed up in this business?" he asked.

Mixon, evidently startled, denied this so strongly, that his questioner was positive he had hit the truth, and insisted upon seeing the mysterious document. Peter stuck to his assertion that he did not have it with him, but at length promised to bring it on the following day for Putnam's inspection. And with this the lawyer was forced to content himself.

On the afternoon of this same day a pleasant little scene was enacted in the chamber of Burleigh Blood, that young man being at once actor and audience.

He had been trying on the dress he was to wear that evening, and his thoughts naturally turned from the robe to its maker. In his fancy rose a picture of the little maiden seated by his own fireside, or flitting about the house as its mistress. He felt his bosom glow, thinking how dear to him would be the traces of her presence, the sound of her voice. His heart grew warm with sweet languors at the dream of clasping her in his arms, of resting that tiny blonde head upon his breast. There is something inexpressibly touching in the love of a strong, pure man. Burleigh neither analyzed nor understood his own passion; but in manly, noble fashion, he loved Flossy with all the strength of his big heart.

"I wonder," Burleigh mused, "if she would be angry if I asked her to marry me; or if she'd have [231] me. She'd be a fool if she did! she knows so much, and is so used to great people! I suppose it is no use to bother my head for what I can't have. But I want her; and she's been very good to me; and perhaps—perhaps she wouldn't really say no. I'm a fool to lose the chance by being afraid to speak! Confound it! a woman's no right to be angry with a fellow for being in love with her. He can't help it, I suppose. I'm sure I can't. Besides I've heard her say she'd like to live in Montfield all her life."

He had thrown himself half-dressed upon the bed, his monkish masquerade costume hanging over a chair near by. Turning and twisting about uneasily as the conflict in his mind became more and more earnest, the silver-pieces loose in his pocket rattled out, one rolling from the bed to the floor. He raised himself, and picked it up. It was a Mexican dollar, dated the year of his birth, and he had for years carried it as a pocket-piece.

"I have half a mind," he soliloquized, tossing the coin in his hand, "to offer myself this very night. I don't think it would be so hard with this suit on as it would in my own clothes. It would be more natural to do any thing extraordinary in a mask. I've a mind to toss up for it. That is one way of settling it. It might go against me, though. However, it won't be any harm to see what it would have been if I *had* tried it."

The coin went spinning into the air.

"Heads!" he called aloud. "Humph!" he commented inwardly, "It's tails. But of course I should have tried the best two in three. Heads! And heads it is, by thunder! That's one and one. Heads! [232] Confound it, it's tails again. But then that was only to try what might have been. Here goes in earnest. Heads!"

The dollar struck upon the edge of the bed, and Burleigh cried out "Bar that!" then, picking it up, found the head uppermost.

"Why didn't I let that go?" he said. "Heads!"

The coin spun round and round gayly. When at last it lay still, the reverse stared the lover in the face.

"Plague take that dollar! it is always tails. I'll change it, and begin again. Heads now!"

The new coin proved no less perverse than the old one, and turned its back toward the young man quite as resolutely as its predecessor.

"Well, then, here goes,—tails! By the great horn spoon, heads it is! I'll make it the best three in five. Tails!"

But neither the "best three in five" nor the "best four in seven" gave any thing of hope or comfort to the lovelorn swain. He ended by dashing the coins together between his palms with a great clash, all the combativeness in him aroused by the perverseness of fate.

"I'll be hanged if I don't propose this very night," he said resolutely. "I'll not be beaten out of that by all the unlucky lucky-pennies between here and Africa. She can't do any more than refuse me, and I certainly never'll get her if I don't try."

With which notable resolve burning in his heart, he adjusted his toilet, and descended to the work-a-day world.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

[233]

"WHEN SHE WILL, SHE WILL."

Patty was the last to come down from dressing that night. She had refused to share with any one the secret of her costume; and even Flossy was ignorant, that beneath the long cloak which completely enveloped her cousin was concealed male attire. She supposed Patty had discarded entirely the suits used in the theatricals, and had manufactured one. And indeed she had seen signs of dress-making in her cousin's chamber; Patty's resolution having at one time so faltered, that she had begun a page's costume, which by its short skirt compromised between propriety and the dress she had chosen. A bundle from Putnam containing the dress he wished her to wear had been sufficient to strengthen her faltering courage; and in full masculine array, knee-breeches and all, Mistress Patience started for the masquerade.

Very pretty and jaunty she looked in the dress, her fine form displayed to the best advantage; but under the embroidered waistcoat and velvet frock beat a very miserable heart, as sad as it was proud. She smarted under what she received as a slur upon her modesty. Conscious of the innocence with which she had chosen the costume, she assumed that the lawyer had impugned [234] her delicacy, when in truth he had merely reproved her thoughtlessness. In carrying out her original intent, and refusing to consider her resolve unmaidenly, she fancied herself protesting and demonstrating the whiteness of her thought; not recognizing, that, on the contrary, she was championing the act itself, of which, in a calmer mood, she would have herself disapproved.

Light streamed from all the windows of the Toxteth mansion, brightening up the sear lawn and leafless trees with a warm glow. Sounds of laughter and snatches of music were already heard, as the Sanfords were rather late in arriving.

"Let us separate," Patty suggested. "I'll stand in the shadow of the piazza a moment, and go in with somebody else. People will be less likely to know us."

"Very well," Will said; and then, as Flossy stepped across the piazza, he added, "What is the trouble with you, Pit-pat? You've been glum as a ghost all day, and now your tone is awfully lugubrious."

"Nothing, nothing," she answered. "Go in quick, before these folks come. You are good to care, but really nothing is the matter."

A group of maskers came up the path as she dismissed her brother with this well-intentioned fib, and with them she entered. Familiar with the house, she slipped past the dressing-room, and went into a sort of recess at the head of the back-stairway. Here in the dark she adjusted her dress as well as she was able, and then seated herself upon her cloak, holding her head in her [235] hands. She dreaded going down to encounter the lights, and the eyes of the company. She shrank from possible discovery, and lingered until the fear of having to enter the parlors alone drove her from her hiding-place. She saw a lady emerging from the dressing-room, and with a swaggering bow Patty offered her arm. The lady, taking it, murmured "Thanks." By the voice Patty recognized Dessie Farnum. The two descended the stairs together.

They found Mrs. Toxteth receiving at the parlor-door. Near her stood a mask whom Patience did not recognize. He was tall and slender, with a figure which his motions seemed to indicate supple and well knit. His dress, which was admirably adapted to display his figure, was that of a Florentine courtier of Lorenzo de' Medici's day. Patty recalled Clarence's speaking of friends from Samoset who were to be present, and set the unknown down as one of the party. As she moved away, however, she felt a touch on her shoulder. She started violently, but by a strong effort endeavored to regain her composure. She felt that at any cost she must preserve her *incognito*; and, resolutely steadying herself, she turned to see who had arrested her. It was the Florentine chevalier. Taking her hand in one of his, with the finger of the other he traced upon her palm the letters "P. S." She shook her head; but, as she did so, it flashed upon her that the unknown was Tom Putnam. She had not considered that it would be necessary for him to procure a dress in place of the one he had taken to exchange with her; and now, in despite her agitation,

she concluded that he must have sent to Boston for the costume he wore, and she admired him in it. Her next thought was that he must have been waiting for her. She refused the arm which he proffered, but followed as he led the way into a small back-parlor which chanced to be empty. There he stood looking at her without speaking. [236]

"Well," she said, when she had endured the silence as long as she could. "What has my Lord Mentor to say now?"

"Nothing," he answered. "The Chevalier Sorrowful might present a petition, but certainly my Lord Mentor is silent."

"I am glad of that at least. Still I should like to be informed if the Chevalier Sorrowful has ever had dealings with Paul Pry."

"The Chevalier," the other said, parrying her thrust, "needs no dealings with Paul Pry. He has eyes for but one lady, and her he can detect under any disguise."

"What keenness of vision!" Patty retorted. Then, hoping to give the conversation a less personal character, she added, "Hark! Who is that singing?"

A voice affecting the Scotch accent was appealing more frantically than tunefully to "Douglas, Douglas, tender and true."

"It is Miss Yamfert from Samoset," the lawyer said. "She is dressed in Scotch costume."

The voice sang on,—

> "'Could you come back to me, Douglas, Douglas,
> In the old likeness that I knew,
>
> [237]
>
> I would be so kind and faithful, Douglas,—
> Douglas, Douglas, tender and true!'"

"Very pretty," Putnam remarked rather savagely. "But, if Douglas is comfortable where he is, he'd much better remain there. If she really loved him, she would have shown it while he was in the flesh. I've no faith in a love which expends itself only in tormenting its object."

"How harsh you are!" Patty said. "Doesn't your scheme of life allow any space for repentance?"

"Yes; but I've the smallest possible faith in it. If she hadn't love enough for Douglas to treat him decently, he was better off with no love at all. No doubt she would think herself sincere in making frantic promises over his grave; but, if he were back, it would be the same dreary story over again."

"Then Douglas had better leave her, and have done," Patty answered.

She felt, that, under the guise of allusions, they were discussing their own relations.

"You are right," he said. "But suppose he cannot choose? What if he be so bound up in her, that he would endure any thing, would forgive any thing?"

"Forgiveness," she retorted bitterly, "is sweet to the forgiver."

"It may at least show him his own weakness. If the lady's love for Douglas is not sufficient to make her glad of a small sacrifice for him, or at least to make her endure it, he has small reason to flatter himself upon the depths of her affection; and he must despise himself for wearing his heart upon his sleeve for her daws to peck at." [238]

"Well," she said irrelevantly, her heart leaping at the assurance that after all he still loved her, "who laughs last laughs best."

"Not always," he returned. "The last laugh may have a bitterness from which the first was happily free."

"Pooh!" she laughed, turning a pirouette, her cue standing out behind her. "How like two owls we are, talking in this gloomy room! Let us get out among people."

She had suddenly recovered her spirits. Since he loved her, she forgot that she was wounding him, and that he was unhappy. At another time the thought would have produced tenderness: now it brought a reaction from her despondency, and for the moment she was her most piquant, saucy self. She hummed a snatch of song,—

> "'You call me inconstant and fickle,
> But there's no justice in that;
> For the passing fancy I showed you'"—

"Patty!" her lover cried, catching her wrist, "are you perfectly heartless?"

"I shall have a *post mortem* made to discover," she returned flippantly. "It will be too late for my own information, but it will satisfy the curiosity of my friends."

"If you do not begin soon to cultivate some show, either of delicacy or sensibility," he said almost brutally, "your friends will cease to be interested. For my part," he went on, his voice showing more and more emotion, "though I can't help being a fool, I shall try to help amusing you with exhibitions of my folly. I have never flattered myself that you could have any particular reason for caring for me; and I may thank my stars, I suppose, that the question is settled. But I tell you this, Patience Sanford, you will go far before you will find a man who will give his heart for you to set [239]

your feet on so absolutely as I have done. If it is any satisfaction for you to know that, you are welcome to the knowledge. Perhaps some time I shall be unselfish enough to hope you may be happy without me. Just now I have an absurd fancy that it would be pleasant to strangle you. If you ever love anybody but yourself, you may know what that means. Good-night, and good-by."

The cup whose sweet foam Patty had a moment before set laughing to her lips proved more bitter than wormwood in its depths. Never had she so thrilled with passion as while her lover cast her off. Never before had she seen him so moved. The dress he wore, setting off as it did his fine figure, gave an appropriate setting for his words, and by its strangeness half explained them. Had he remained a moment longer, Patty felt that she must have thrown herself at his feet, and begged him to forgive and love her still. As it was she burst into tears, but in a moment resolutely suppressed them, and followed her lover into the crowd of maskers.

Dessie Farnum, having seen that her escort did not come from the dressing-rooms above, [240] supposed herself to have been escorted down stairs by Clarence Toxteth, and as such pointed out her companion. Several approached Patty, and crossed her palm with a "T;" but she shook her head, and made her way from the parlors as quickly as possible. She desired nothing now but to get out of the house; and, wrapping herself up, she effected her escape by a side-door, and walked rapidly away. She removed her mask to let the night-air cool her heated cheeks and brow; and, struggling hard to repress the tears which forced themselves into her eyes, she went on towards home.

Suddenly a clatter broke the stillness of the night, the noise of wheels and trampling mingled with oaths and cries. A carriage dashed by her, the horse plunging forward, evidently beyond the control of the driver. Another moment, and the vehicle was overturned. She heard a cry followed by a heavy fall. The horse rushed madly on, with the carriage half dragging behind him, the noise of his frantic hoof-beats dying away in the distance, leaving a stillness more intense than before.

Patty ran forward, and discovered the lifeless body of a man lying on the ground.

CHAPTER XXXIV. [241]

THE MASKERS.

MEANWHILE the other maskers, if not at heart happier than Patty, were at least outwardly gay. The fun was heartily entered into on all sides, and mock flirtations abounded. Flossy accepted the proffered arm of an Italian bandit, one of the Samoset party; and the pair had joined the promenaders moving up and down the long hall.

"But whom do you represent?" he asked. "I do not understand your dress."

"Oh! I'm Dame Trot and her wonderful cat," Flossy returned lightly. "I supposed that even in Italy I had been heard of."

"So you have, Dame Trot; but, not seeing your cat, I was naturally puzzled."

"My cat," she replied confidentially, "is dead."

"Indeed? How sad! When did the melancholy event take place?"

"I do not know exactly. The fact is, he disappeared one night; and, as I'm sure he couldn't live without me, I am convinced that he must be dead."

"And you were deprived of even the privilege of weeping over his grave?"

"He is like Moses," she answered impressively. "The place of his sepulchre no man knoweth to [242] this day."

"That is a distinction," laughed the brigand. "Keep a brave heart, Dame Trot: I may hear tidings of the wonderful cat yet. Meanwhile here is some one who is evidently looking for you."

It was a huge monk, who had all the evening been searching for the white lute-string which she wore.

Some weak souls yield to omens and ill-starred presages, but heroic mortals overcome them. So far from being discouraged by the ill-luck of his penny-tossing, Burleigh was but the more firmly determined to press his suit. Tucking Flossy under his arm, he led her out of the press, and found solitude behind a stand of plants in the back hall.

"I have been trying all the evening to find you," he said. "Did I not do well to make out the lute-string dress?"

"Oh, wonderfully!" she answered, imitating him in pulling off her mask. "Dear me, how hot it is! These masks are so roasting!"

"They are close," he assented. "Look here," he continued with sudden vehemence. "I dare say you'll be angry,—you'll have a right to be,—but I love you, and I want you for my wife!"

"Mercy!" exclaimed Flossy, much as if she had been shot.

An opening among the plants let a beam of light fall upon his honest, manly face; and, as he leaned eagerly towards Flossy, his clear eyes seemed to look into the very depth of her being.

"Don't you care for me?" he pleaded. "I have loved you"— [243]

He left his sentence incomplete, and caught her into his arms, to the great detriment of the lute-string dress. He insisted always that he saw permission in her face; but she quite as strenuously averred that she gave him no answer, and that her face could have expressed nothing but indignant surprise. But in any case they forgot the world in general and the company present in particular, until they heard people going away, and were astonished to find that supper with its unmasking had passed by, and that it was long after midnight.

"And I am so fond of supper!" Flossy said. "It was very unkind of you to keep me here."

"But I am so fond of you," he retorted, "that it was very good of you to stay."

"I've a great mind to eat you," she said.

"Do. I know I shall like it, and I'm sure I'd taste better than pop-corn."

"But I haven't promised any thing," Flossy said, speaking, as usual, quite independently of the subject in hand. "We're not engaged until you've seen father."

An hour or two later, when Burleigh was preparing to retire, his silver lucky-penny dropped to the floor.

"Ah, ha!" he cried, tossing it into the air. "You were wrong, after all, old fellow, unless you wanted to bully me into proposing; and, by George! I think that's the only way I got pluck for it."

And the great honest fellow took himself to bed, and lay awake thinking of Flossy with a simple humility that was very touching. A glow of love and happiness enveloped him like a rosy cloud; and when at last he fell asleep it was to dreams as passionately pure as had been his waking thoughts, and, like them, centring about the little maiden who had that night promised to become his wife. [244]

Before the guests at Mrs. Toxteth's unmasked, Will encountered Putnam, and endeavored to discover his identity.

"You are evidently dumb," he said at last, after having vainly tried to make Tom speak. "'Tis a virtue more to be commended in the other sex."

"By great Cæsar's immortal ghost!" exclaimed the undisguised tones of Clarence Toxteth at his elbow, "that must be Will Sanford's voice. Where is Patty? Didn't she come?"

"She came, but I don't know where she is."

"I've hunted the whole evening for her, and have had supper put off on purpose to find her before we unmasked. I followed Emily Purdy a while, but I knew her voice the minute she spoke."

The lawyer shrugged his shoulders, but still remained silent.

"For my part," Sanford said, "I shouldn't tell her dress if I knew it; but as it happens I don't. She was covered from head to foot in a waterproof when we came."

Putnam turned away with a feeling of relief. He began to hope that Patty's wild freak might pass unknown, and searched through the rooms, meaning to make a last appeal to her to leave before the masks were removed. His search was of course unsuccessful, but he encountered Emily Purdy. [245]

"How clever Patty Sanford was in deceiving us!" he said as soon as he was sure she knew him. "We might have known she only took that man's dress as a blind. Have you seen her to-night? I think her costume the handsomest here."

"No, I haven't seen her," Emily answered. "How is she dressed?"

"You'll see when we unmask," Tom answered; adding, with quiet sarcasm, "It wouldn't be quite fair to tell before."

CHAPTER XXXV. [246]

PETER MIXON.

FINDING a man flung apparently lifeless at her feet, Patty applied herself in the most matter-of-fact way to the discovery whether he were dead or alive.

He had been with much violence pitched headforemost into the ditch; and her first care was to drag his head out of the mire, and to turn him over into an easy position. She loosened his cravat, and bathed his forehead with water. At last a faint groan attested that life had not departed, and the man stirred feebly.

By this time a few men panting and blowing came running up. They had heard the runaway, and pursued as rapidly as possible, humanity and curiosity alike spurring them on. By Patty's direction they carried the injured man into the house of Mrs. Brown, which chanced to be at hand; and then it was seen that he was Peter Mixon. They were obliged to deposit the unfortunate Peter on a lounge while the lady of the house had a bed prepared for him.

"I've been meaning to have a bed made up in the spare-room," that notable housekeeper said,

"ever since brother Phineas's folks were here last spring. I never would have believed, Patience Sanford, that you'd have brought him here! But there! as I was telling Joe only the other day [247] when our old gray cat died, that we've had for more than ten years, our best friends ain't to be depended upon; but they'll go off the handle when you least expect it. And it ain't as if I had a house full of copious apartments: I've only that room for company. However, carry him up."

The sufferer was at length got to bed, a messenger having meanwhile been sent for Dr. Sanford. Patty thought it best to remain until her father came; as Mrs. Brown evinced a strong disposition to stir up the wounded man, and make him tell where he was injured. Mixon lay unconscious, his heavy breathing sounding painfully through Mrs. Brown's dribble of speech. His head was badly gashed, and one of his arms hung limp and helpless. When Dr. Sanford came, he saw at a glance that the man was dangerously hurt, several of his ribs being broken, and it appearing probable that he was injured internally. Dr. Sanford made his daughter useful while he dressed the wounds in the patient's head.

"I shall stay a while," he said when this was done. "How came you here?"

"I was going home, and saw him thrown out."

"Going home? What for?"

"I had a headache, and the rooms were very warm," she replied, dropping her eyes.

"Were you alone?"

"Yes, sir."

Her father looked at her keenly.

"I won't force your confidence," he said; "but I've seen for some time that you were unhappy. Be [248] careful, my daughter."

"I shall be as merry as a grig," she answered, "when I have slept off this headache."

The wind had risen, and the sky was overcast, as Patty hurried towards home. The leaves went scurrying by with a hollow rustle, while all the air was full of those eerie noises which haunt its bosom on All-Hallowe'en. Shivering somewhat from excitement, and more from fatigue, the girl reached her gate. The wounded man had already given place in her mind to the remembrance of her interview with Tom Putnam. Now at last she felt that every thing was ended between them. Instead of going into the house, she crossed the garden towards the brook. Just above the bridge was a pool which the children used to call Black-Clear Eddy, from the singular blackness at once and transparency of the water. Standing beside this she dropped a stone into the pool to break the thin film of ice which was forming. Then she unfastened her cloak, and drew up from beneath the bosom of her dress a silk cord, to which was fastened a hoop of gold wire. It was her secret, known to no one but herself. Years before, Tom Putnam had twisted this ring carelessly from a bit of gold broken from his sister's bracelet, and had given it to Patty for a philopena. She held it a moment in her hand, and then dropped it through the hole in the ice.

"There!" she said to herself, turning away. "That is done. I feel so much like a sensational story, that I am not sure I am not to be continued in our next. I should have done something tragic in [249] throwing away that trumpery ring. A few lines from 'The Faithful Jewess' wouldn't have come in amiss:—

> "'I raise my arms to you, ye starless skies,
> And cry for pity on my hapless lot.
> Ah, perjured one! Why hast thou left me lone?'

"Goodness, how cold it is! Good-by, old ring! Some of the witches riding about to-night may fish you up, and wear you to their sabbath."

She entered the silent house, and crept to her room, where she got quickly to bed, only to lie and toss with troubled thought, which would have ended in tears had she been of weaker mettle. She fell asleep at last: and from her mind, as from Pandora's box, slipped every thing but hope; so that she dreamed she was betrothed to Tom Putnam with the very ring she had dropped into Black-Clear Eddy.

CHAPTER XXXVI. [250]

MRS. SMITHERS.

Peter Mixon's unlucky and disreputable head had been pretty severely battered by his accident; and for several days he remained, as his wife lucidly said, "unsensible." This delirium had passed away, but Dr. Sanford had little hope of the patient's recovery. Bathalina hung over her husband's bed in an agony of late and needless remorse, lamenting that her "sinful pride" had come to this; although the connection was by no means apparent. She sang "Death-bed Reflections" so constantly, that at last Will Sanford threatened her with instant death if he heard another syllable of that doleful hymn. She labored with Peter in regard to his spiritual condition, continually begging him to let her read aloud from the Scriptures.

"You told me you was a Methodist," she said reproachfully; "but either you lied, or you're fallen

from grace. You'd better let me read a chapter: it may arouse your conscience."

"Read, then, if you want to," he said one day, too feeble to resist.

"Where shall I read?" she asked delightedly, giving her Bible a preparatory scrub with her apron.

"Oh!" he answered weakly, "read about David and Goliath: that's as lively a chapter as any I know of." [251]

"Peter Mixon!" cried Bathalina, "don't be blasphemous on your death-bed! But it is a just reward for my sinful pride that I should be the widow of an unbeliever."

Both Patty and Flossy were frequent in their visits to the sick man. He seemed grateful, in his rough way, for their kindness, and would brighten up as they entered the chamber. Particularly he seemed pleased to have Patty about him, and would take from her hand the medicine which no persuasions of his wife could induce him to swallow.

"He takes to you wonderful," Bathalina said: "I don't think he's so bad at heart."

"I noticed the other day," Mrs. Sanford remarked, overhearing her, "that he has a mole on the left side of his chin, and that's a sure sign of goodness. Not so good as on the right side; but I don't doubt he's right-hearted in the main."

Patty occupied herself more with the invalid, because of her mental uneasiness. There is no refuge for unhappiness but labor. Hazard Breck had returned to college; and, before leaving, he called to bid her good-by.

"I perhaps ought not to speak of it," he said hesitatingly, as he rose to go; "but you look very unhappy nowadays, Patty."

"Do I? It must be your fancy. I don't have a mournful thought from one year's end to another. Sentimentalizing isn't in my line."

"I fear it is in mine," he said. "The summer has been a very bitter-sweet one to me. I am glad it is done." [252]

"It is you who are sad," she said, bravely smiling. "You look at me through colored glasses. I am gay as a lark."

"I wish I believed it," he returned.

The pain of a boy's first love, although less fleeting than the bliss, is fortunately also transient. His love and regret were very real to Hazard. He was conscious that Patty did not love him; but he believed that his boyish passion would be eternal, and life for him henceforth only desolation. That we shall some day smile at a fancy makes the present pain none the less poignant.

"You will come back at Christmas, won't you?" Patty said, wishing to divert the conversation.

"No, I think not; but, if I do, I hope you won't look as solemn as you do now."

"Solemn? Nonsense! I'm as merry as a cricket. Where is your brother to-day?"

"He rode over to Samoset with uncle Tom this morning. They won't be back till evening."

After her caller had gone, Patty turned back into the parlor, and looked at her face in the glass.

"I do look like Death's second wife," she soliloquized. "If I could only have a tremendous cry, and get over it, I might feel better, I suppose; but I can't: so there's an end of it. I'll go and see that wretched old Peter instead. I think I shall eventually go as a missionary, and nurse sick cannibals until they get well enough to cook and eat me. Heigh-ho! What a wretched old Peter it is, to be sure! At least I'm thankful to him for giving me something to do. Poor Hazard, I wish I were half as good as he is! Patty Sanford, you are a fool! Go and see that dilapidated Mixon this minute!" [253]

Her shortest way to the house of Mrs. Brown was through the Putnam fields; and to-day, being sure that the lawyer was absent, she started in this direction. Meanwhile a whimsical fate had conducted to the Castle in Air another woman. This visitor came slowly over the brown fields, passing along the bank of the brook, stopping now and then to bite into a rose-hip, or chew the bark from some tender twig. It was Mrs. Smithers, the woman who had summoned Putnam to Samoset, and who had lately come to live in the stone cottage. This woman, who among people had a restless, constrained manner, here moved with a free, elastic step and bearing. Her childhood had been passed in the neighborhood of Montfield; and Hannah Clemens had grown up as lovely as a wild rose. Her sister Bathalina seemed to have absorbed all the ugliness of the family, and to have gone on her half-witted way honestly and contentedly, leaving to the elder her fatal dowry of beauty, wit, and unhappiness. In an evil day Mr. Mullen saw the beautiful, ambitious girl; and to his wealth she yielded only too readily. Never loving him, she had yet the art to fascinate him, until, after the death of his wife, he had been ready to marry her. Her own infatuation for a new lover, the father of the Breck boys, had made her refuse the hand of Mr. Mullen. Outliving both her lovers, who died nearly at the same time, Mrs. Smithers, as, with a slight concession to morality, she called herself, wandered about the country, seldom content to remain for long in one place. Her natural restlessness was increased by her habitual use of opium; and a habit of morose sullenness had grown upon her. Shunned by all her kindred, it was perhaps strange that she should have chosen to return to her native village. She went out chiefly at night; and, having discovered that from the Castle in Air could be seen the tower of Mullen House, often came on moonlight evenings to view the mansion she steadily persisted in calling her own. To-day, having seen Putnam drive away, she ventured to come by daylight; and she descended the ladders just as Patty had crossed the bridge on her way to Mrs. Brown's. The latter walked on composedly, until, at the foot of the elm, Mrs. Smithers blocked her path. [254]

"Well," Mrs. Smithers said, after examining the face of the other a moment in silence, "what do you want? You'll know me another time, I hope."

"Will you let me pass, please," Patty replied coldly.

"So! No: I won't let you pass till I'm ready. I'd like to look at you a while. I've seen you before."

She placed her arms akimbo as she spoke, and stared at Patty, who stood quiet.

"So!" she said at last. "What are you on these premises for? What do you want? Are you after your rights too?"

There was no further motive in the woman's actions at the moment than a wild desire to vent her [255] rage upon any one who offered. As Patty changed color, however, a sudden devilish inspiration darted like the whisper of an evil spirit through Mrs. Smithers's opiumized brain. Completely ignorant of the relations between Patty and Putnam, she understood that her words had been misconceived. By chance she had hit between the joints of the harness. Patty had refused to listen to the insinuations of her mother and Mrs. Brown, who coupled what was known of the character of the new tenant of the stone cottage and her mysterious relations with the lawyer, much to the discredit of that gentleman. Now this woman seemed herself to confirm the slander; and it was no wonder that Patty grew pale.

"So!" Mrs. Smithers said again, seizing the chance to calumniate the man she hated none the less because he had remained unmoved by her fascinations. "So! We know what we know of Tom Putnam. Humph!"

"Will you stand out of my way?" Patty said.

This calmness enraged the woman before her as no violence could have done. She caught Patty forcibly by the wrists.

"So!" she screamed. "You'll hear nothing! I've seen them has held their heads as high as you, and been brought low enough, after all. Do you think, miss, I'm to be ordered out of your way like a dog, when, if I had my rights, there's nobody in this d——d town'd dare queen it over me! So! I'll"—

But Patty wrenched herself free, and ran swiftly towards the street. The other did not follow, but stood cursing, until a turn hid the girl from her sight.

CHAPTER XXXVII. [256]

THANKSGIVING.

It was raining, and raining with a will. It was sure to rain all day: there was no question about that. As Patty looked from her window Thanksgiving morning, and saw the leafless trees and faded grass on Boston Common, soaked in the cold November storm, it seemed to her that she had never gazed upon a drearier scene. She crossed her arms upon the window-sill, resting her chin on them, and fell into a fit of bitter musing.

Flossy, announcing her decision to remain in Montfield through the winter, had coupled with it her intention of spending Thanksgiving week at home.

"I must go and see father once in a while," she remarked. "That's only respectable. And I must have something to wear, you know, even in Montfield. Patty is going with me to bring me back safe."

"I going with you?" her cousin returned. "I had not heard of that before."

"Didn't I tell you? I supposed you'd know. As father would say, 'There are some things which even this Court may be supposed to understand.'"

Patty was secretly glad to get away. To escape from Montfield seemed like an escape from herself. She was restless and dissatisfied, and even the remonstrances of the family at her being [257] away upon Thanksgiving Day fell upon heedless ears. Once the plan was proposed, she felt a feverish desire for its accomplishment until she was actually in the train moving towards Boston. At first she experienced a feeling of relief, as if she had left care and trouble behind; but scarcely had the hills of Montfield faded from sight than she longed to turn back. At home she at least was where she might see her lover, even if it were but to quarrel with him. At home she could sit brooding at her window, looking towards the Putnam place, and imagining the life and the thoughts of its master. Hardly could she restrain the tears which pressed to her eyes as the train bore her farther and farther from home; but with angry pride she controlled herself, and laughed gayly at all Flossy's nonsense.

Mr. Plant had received her kindly; and, in the distractions of pleasure-seeking and of shopping, Patty had forgotten or overcome her sentimental woes until this morning.

Now, with this cheerless rain steadily falling, and Flossy closeted with her father, to whom she now first disclosed her engagement, Patience found herself homesick and miserable.

"There is one thing certain," she mused. "I have been a fool to care for Tom as I have—and I have. He's a man, after all; and all men are alike, I suppose,—self-contained and self-indulgent. Not that he's as bad as most of them; but he's a man; and—I'm a woman. Either there must be some

men different, or a woman could never be happy with any of them. There! Who'd suppose I could [258]
be such a fool? I have been very fond of Tom,—very, very fond: I'm not sure I didn't love him just a little bit. He must have cared for me something, or he never could have kissed my hand so. Oh, dear! it's all over now. There comes Floss. I wonder what uncle Chris said."

"I've done it," Flossy remarked coolly, entering, and seating herself with a nimble spring upon the dressing-table. "The paternal astonishment is extreme, not to say alarming."

"I think it likely," Patty answered.

"Papa didn't seem very enthusiastic over my marrying a farmer," her cousin went on in the same abstracted way. "But, as I told him, it isn't as if he'd got to have the farm here in the way."

"Still a farm would be convenient to have in the house," said Patty, laughing.

"Do you know," the other continued, "it was only my profound sagacity that brought him round."

"Then he has come round?"

"Come round? Bless you, Pitsy-Patsy! he has but one wish,—a desire to embrace Burleigh."

"I'd like to see the embrace," laughed Patty. "With the size of the two, it would be a spectacle. How did you accomplish it?"

"Oh, I spoke of the milk and the butter and the cheese—the lovely cream-cheese—and the honey. I wonder," she interrupted herself, "that bees don't keep a cow, cream is so ravishing with honey. And, when papa's mouth began to water, I heaved a sigh, and so sighing I rolled up my eyes, and [259]
ejaculated how happy we'd be. And what do you suppose he said?"

"Something very profane, I'm afraid," answered Patty.

"No," Floss said. "He didn't. If you'll believe it, he only smacked his lips, and asked if Burleigh raised early vegetables."

"Is that what you cried for?" asked the other, looking at her cousin's swollen eyes.

Instead of answering, Floss sprang from her perch, ran to her friend, and threw her arms about her neck, bursting into tears. The two foolish creatures wept together, and then kissed each other, and doubtless felt better for the demonstration.

The truth was, that the interview between Mr. Plant and his daughter had been a painful one. He cared little for Flossy's society, and the sympathy between them was not of the closest. But he could not, without difficulty, reconcile himself to have his only child, city born and bred, bury herself in the country, and unite herself to a man so far below his idea of a desirable match. He had received the announcement with unaffected amazement, appearing more deeply moved by it than Flossy had ever seen him. It was only after a long and trying scene that he yielded to his daughter's entreaties and his own desire for peace, and gave a grudging consent.

"I think that is enough of a weep," Patty said, giving her cousin a hug. "I'm sure I don't know what we should cry about."

"Now I'll tell you. He's here," said Flossy impressively. [260]

"Who's here?"

"Burleigh."

"Here? In the house? Have you hidden him in a closet?"

"Oh, dear, no! In Boston, I mean. He's coming to dine to-day. I told father."

"Of all schemers!" Patty laughed. "Really, Floss, uncle Chris will frighten Burleigh to death. They won't know how to take each other."

"No," was the answer. "But they needn't take each other. I'm the one to be taken."

"O Dandelion, Floss-head!" Patience cried, catching her cousin's face between her hands, and looking deep into her eyes. "Are you happy, Floss? Is being in love so delightful?"

"That depends upon who is in love," the little witch answered. "Some people in that predicament devote all their energies to making themselves uncomfortable. Let me go: there's the postman."

Out of the room she darted, leaving Patty, with cheeks aflame, to wonder how far her secret had been divined.

The postman brought no letter for Flossy; but at the same hour, in another part of the city, an epistle was delivered bearing the Montfield postmark. Miss Sturtevant tore it open in her cheerless room, and read as follows:—

[261]

Montfield, Nov. 26.

Dear Flora,—Peter Mixon is getting worse, instead of better, every day. I have tried my best to get what I want; but there's always a crew of women about him, and he's as obstinate as a mule. If you could come down, you'd be in the house with him, and you might do something. Of course, if you get the paper I would make it a good thing for you. Can't you come this week? Patty Sanford is always round him when she is here; but she is in Boston now, and you'd have a better chance before she gets back. At all events, come as soon as you can.

Yours truly,

"Uncle Jacob," Flora said to herself, refolding the letter, "I shall go to Montfield to-night. Don't you hope I may give you those papers when I get them?"

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

A TEST OF CIVILIZATION.

[262]

"NOW we shall see," Mr. Plant remarked to his niece as he led her down to dinner, "what stuff Mr. Blood is made of. There is no more crucial test of a man's civilization than the way in which he dines."

"Poor Burleigh!" Patty said to herself. "Little do you dream of the ordeal before you."

But Burleigh had received sundry very minute instructions from a city cousin who had taken it upon herself to prepare him a little for this important visit; and, although he eyed his turtle-soup doubtfully, he got through the first courses well enough. His diffidence was not wholly to his disadvantage, since he was so thoroughly in awe of his host as to treat him with a respect which Mr. Plant found very flattering. All went smoothly until what Flossy called the crisis of the dinner came.

Dining was with Mr. Plant the chief business of life. Other employments were in his eyes simply artifices to kill the time which nature demanded for getting up a proper appetite. He came to this solemn culmination of the day with a mind prepared to hold in reserve his judgment of the success or failure of twenty-four hours of life until he had dined.

[263]

"Father begins dinner," Flossy once said, "in good nature, because he thinks what a fine time he is going to have. By the time he is half way through, he has found enough things wrong to make him ready to be cross. Then he makes a curry, or a salad; and, if that succeeds, he comes out as happy and as gentle as a kitten."

To-day it was unluckily a curry upon which the epicure expended his energies; and having compounded a dish which might have warmed the soul and the liver of an old East-Indian, Mr. Plant sent a portion to his guest with the complacent comment that Mr. Blood would certainly find it the most delicious curry he had ever tasted.

Burleigh was just then talking to Patty.

"I forgot to tell you," he said, "that Tom Putnam came on the train with me."

"Tom Putnam!" exclaimed Patty.

"What is he in Boston for?" inquired Flossy.

"He is looking after that Smithers girl that ran off," Burleigh answered, absently conveying a generous portion of Mr. Plant's fiery preparation to his mouth. "Joe Brown's cousin, you know"—

He left his sentence unfinished, and caught wildly at a glass of water. The curry had suddenly asserted itself; and the general impression of the unsophisticated Burleigh was that he had taken a mouthful of live coals. He gasped and strangled, growing very red in the face, setting his lips together with a firm determination to swallow the scorching viand, or perish in the attempt.

[264]

"Isn't it delicious?" demanded the unconscious host, smacking his lips in unfeigned admiration. "What the devil!" he added, looking up, and catching a glimpse of the agonized face of his guest.

"Papa!" exclaimed Flossy.

"If Burleigh liked curry," Patty said, coming quickly to the rescue, "he would forfeit my good opinion forever. I think it is the most diabolical compound that it has ever entered into the heart of man to invent."

"Besides," her cousin put in, "I won't have you spoiling Mr. Blood's digestion with any of your monstrous mixtures. Think to what a condition you've reduced your own suffering family!"

"Very well," Mr. Plant said, with the air of one who has cast his pearls before swine. "Just as you like."

"But about this Smithers girl," Patty said indifferently. "What does he want of her?"

"He came to get her home again, if he can find her. Somebody saw her on the street in Boston. But her mother says she won't take her back."

"What does Mr. Putnam care about her?" queried Flossy.

"I'm sure I don't know," Burleigh answered.

"Some old flame," volunteered Mr. Plant a little spitefully. "I always thought Putnam couldn't be so quiet for nothing. He's a sly old boy. So he's after a runaway young woman, is he?"

A sudden and entire silence fell upon the party at this unlucky outburst; but Patty quickly broke it.

[265]

"I forgot to ask, Burleigh, when you are going home."

"I must go on the first train to-morrow," he answered. "I have to be at home to-morrow night."

"How nice!" Patty said. "I am going then. I am glad to have company."

"Patty Sanford!" cried her cousin. "You won't go a step before Monday."

But remonstrances were vain. Nothing could shake Patty's sudden determination to get away from Boston, now that her lover had come thither. Her conversation with Mrs. Smithers was indelibly imprinted upon her memory; and this new proof of his intimate relations with the woman or her daughter came to Patience like a stab in an old wound. She made a strong effort to hide her bitter sadness, but an irresistible impulse drove her homeward.

They were all together in the parlor when Mr. Putnam's card was handed to Patty.

"I will not see him!" she said excitedly, starting up from her chair.

"See whom?" asked Floss; while Burleigh's face betrayed his astonishment at this sudden outburst.

"Show him up here," Patty said to the servant, recovering her self-command. In another moment she was bowing to Tom Putnam, and giving him her fingers with an indifference which would not have discredited a society belle.

"We were speaking of your being in the city at dinner," she said presently; "but we thought your business so important we should hardly have the pleasure of seeing you."

"Important is merely a relative term," he answered. "I could not deny myself the pleasure of [266] calling. I see Mr. Plant at Montfield so seldom, that I am glad of any excuse to get sight of him."

"You surely need no excuse for calling," that gentleman said graciously. "I am always glad to see you."

"But Mr. Putnam must have come to the city to see friends who are so much more interesting," Patty remarked, with her most dazzling smile, "that we are indeed flattered at his remembrance."

The girl scarcely knew herself, so strange and unnatural was the part she was playing. A spell seemed to constrain her to go on wounding her lover, even though the blow rebounded upon herself. Inwardly she was saying to herself, "How dare he come from pursuing that woman, and call on me?"

She nerved herself to the task; and, under a show of the utmost cordiality, she lashed Tom Putnam with all the scorn and sarcasm of which she was mistress. He received with dignity her attacks, or parried them adroitly; but he did not make his call a long one.

"God forgive us!" Mr. Plant said as soon as the lawyer had taken leave. "What had that poor devil done, Patty, that you baited him so? And he took it like a hero. If he didn't deserve it, you ought to be bastinadoed; and, if he did, he's brazen-faced enough. Anyway he's plucky. You treated him like a dog."

The company were decidedly out of spirits. Flossy was angry with her cousin's treatment of Putnam, and Burleigh was confused and uncomfortable by the state of the mental atmosphere. As [267] for Mr. Plant, he was annoyed at his niece, at Mr. Blood, at the disturbances which hindered the usual slow and placid digestion of his dinner. He had resolutely avoided giving Burleigh an opportunity of seeing him alone; and now the poor suitor, lacking courage to ask for an interview, found himself obliged to speak out, or leave his errand undone.

"Mr. Plant," he blurted out after a period of perfect silence, in which he had been screwing his courage to the sticking-point, "I want to marry your daughter."

His host started as if a bomb had dropped at his feet.

"I like your impudence," he said.

"Sir?" stammered poor Burleigh, starting to his feet.

"Who are you?" Mr. Plant continued, his impatience finding vent at last, and pouring upon the head of the bewildered suitor. "Does Flossy look as if she'd make a good farmer's wife? Can you give her any thing to compensate for what she must sacrifice in marrying so far outside her circle? I repeat, I like your impudence!"

"I know she would be sacrificing," began Burleigh; but the irate father, whose annoyance had been increasing all day, interrupted.

"Sacrificing!" he said, "of course she is sacrificing. God save us! You'd be an idiot if you didn't know she was sacrificing a thousand times more than you can even understand. What right had you"—

"Papa," Flossy said, very pale, stepping up to her lover, and clasping her hands about his brawny arm,—"you forget, papa, that this is the man I am going to marry." [268]

"Mr. Plant," Burleigh said, lifting his head proudly, and drawing his tiny betrothed close to him, "I never pretended to be worthy of your daughter, and never hoped to be; but she could not find one who would love her better, or be more honest in trying to make her life happy."

"Uncle Chris," whispered Patty, taking his arm, "come into the library."

"God save us!" he ejaculated, looking at her. "What are you crying for?—There, Mr. Blood, shake hands. Good-night, both of you.—Come, Patty."

CHAPTER XXXIX.

THE NIGHT-WATCH.

"I THINK, Patty," her mother said as the last word of a long and vain argument, "that you'll end by bringing my gray hairs to a grave in a lunatic-asylum. You are crazy to think of sitting up with Peter to-night. You are tired out with your ride from Boston anyway."

"But Bathalina has a sick-headache, mother, and I'm only to stay until eleven. Good-night. I'd rather go."

It was the night following Thanksgiving, and Patty had carried out her intention of coming home in the morning. As she walked over to Mrs. Brown's, she seemed to herself to be free from all bodily fatigue, so strongly did her inner excitement buoy her up. She resolutely endeavored to put away all thought of Tom Putnam and the Smithers women; but the consciousness of painful suspicion flowed as a bitter undercurrent through all her musings.

The sick man was unusually tractable that night.

"I'm afeared, Miss Patience," his wife said tearfully, "I'm afeared he's goin' for it. He hasn't swored at me but twice to-day, and one of them his gruel was too hot."

"It was only your soothing influence," Patty answered dispiritedly. "You can go home, and go to bed. I'll watch with him until Sol comes at eleven." [270]

Left alone, the watcher seated herself in the shadow, and plunged anew into distracting and painful reveries; but she quickly was called from them by the sick man.

"I'd like to ask yer to do somethin'," he said feebly.

"What is it?" she asked, going to the bedside.

"Frank Breck's been here," he answered, "tryin' to get my pocket-book; and the women-folks are awful curious too."

One of his first requests on recovering consciousness had been for this pocket-book, which since he had guarded beneath his pillow.

"There's papers in it," Peter went on, "they hadn't ought to see. I want you to keep it for me."

"You seem to keep it very well yourself," she said rather absently.

"Oh! but it's wearin' on me," he returned. "If it isn't took care of for me, I shall kick the bucket sure."

"Why should I take it?"

"I reckon," he said, "that you're one could hold your tongue, or anyways would stick to your word, specially to a man with his ribs all drove into him. I want you to keep it till I get well, and promise not to open it."

"Very well," she replied. "If it will make you feel easier, I promise."

The sick man drew from beneath the pillow a black and oily-looking pocket-book, long and flat, and apparently empty. It was so dirty, that Patty seized the first piece of paper at hand, and wrapped it up, thinking to herself that the valuable papers probably existed only in the imagination of the invalid. [271]

"You are very mysterious and dramatic, my friend," she said to herself. "Is this perhaps a chapter from 'The Blood-boultered Battering-Ram;' or every-day life in Montfield?"

The incident turned her thoughts somewhat from herself, and her weariness asserted itself. Seeing that the patient had sunk into a quiet sleep, Patty lay back in her chair, and let herself drift away into a soft drowse.

It was about half-past ten when she found herself suddenly wide awake from a profound sleep. A presence in the room made itself felt before she opened her eyes, and she cautiously peered between her scarcely parted lids without moving. The light was as she had left it, turned down and dim. The heavy breathings of the sick man told that he was still sleeping. Above his bed bent the figure of a woman. Her back was towards the watcher; and, as Patty opened her eyes, she recognized the stooping form as that of Flora Sturtevant. With a cautious, cat-like movement, the woman slid her hand beneath Mixon's pillow, searching for something which Frank Breck had assured her was to be found there. As Patty watched, her mind gathered up with marvellous quickness the allusions made by the sick man to Breck; and, knowing the long intimacy between the latter and Miss Sturtevant, it was not difficult to guess her errand. [272]

"Do you find what you want?" Patty at length asked coolly.

The other started away from the bed, and turned quickly.

"Patty Sanford!" she exclaimed. "They said his wife was here."

"She is not, you see."

"My room is next this," Flora continued, regaining her self-command, "and, hearing your heavy breathing, I thought the patient might need attention: so I came in."

"Oh!" the watcher said incredulously. "That was very kind of you. I think Sol Shankland is coming now, and he can keep awake: so you need not trouble any further."

It was about four in the afternoon of the next day, when Bathalina returned from a visit to Mrs. Brown's. Mrs. Sanford heard her come in, and sent her daughter to inquire for the sick man.

Patty waited to finish something she was doing; so that, by the time she reached the kitchen, Mrs. Mixon had been to her chamber, and brought down a black dress, which she was engaged in ripping up, to the accompaniment of a doleful minor.

"What are you doing?" Patty asked.

"I'm breaking down my black alpaccy," was the reply. "I'm goin' to have it made over, and trimmed with crape."

"Trimmed with crape? What for?" [273]

"Oh! I'm a widow now."

"A widow!"

"Yes, Peter's gone. I knew he couldn't last much longer. He's been failin', gradual, for a week. You must ha' noticed it."

"But I didn't think," Patty began, wondering how to phrase the condolences it seemed proper to offer under the circumstances.

"No, nor I didn't, neither," the widow remarked, as she hesitated. "I thought he'd hold out longer, or I'd have been more forehanded with my black dress. Anyway I'm glad he got through it before cold weather sot in. It's easier for him. And, besides, Mrs. Brown's house is awful draughty, spec'ly as she never gets ready to have it banked before spring."

"If we can do any thing for you," Patty said, exerting herself to preserve a grave face, "we shall be glad to."

"Thank you kindly," the servant answered. "I'll let you know if there is. I never had much comfort as Peter's wife," she added; "for he was real onery, as you might say: but it's some satisfaction to be his widow; widows are so respectable."

This was too much for Patty's gravity; and she retreated precipitately, leaving the widow to "break down" her black dress at leisure.

Peter Mixon was interred with due solemnity, aunty Jeff coming to take her part in the mourning, with much unction. She had never favored her niece's marriage, it was true, and regarded the deceased as a very black sheep indeed. But to her mind numerous funerals conferred a certain [274] distinction upon a family, and it was a duty which she owed at once to her relatives and to society to see that the mourning was properly attended to. So the dead man was put under the sod, and in time came to the one good appointed to all men,—to nourish the grass and the daisies. Bathalina arrayed herself in her widow's weeds with the satisfaction of a new importance, and began soon to speak of her departed spouse with great regret and affection, persuading herself in time that she sincerely mourned for him, and lamenting that her "sinful pride" had made necessary for her good the severe trial of his loss.

And here it may be mentioned that Frank Breck searched carefully among the effects of the dead man for certain papers which he did not find, because they were in the possession of Patty Sanford.

CHAPTER XL. [275]

CLARENCE AGAIN.

Soberly and slowly Patty was walking towards home on the last day of November. The rain had been falling at intervals through the day, interspersed with spits of snow. Not far from her own gate Patty encountered Clarence Toxteth. The afternoon was already drawing to a close, the gray clouds cutting off the last faint rays of daylight; and, as the young man was somewhat near-sighted, he did not recognize her until they were face to face.

"Ah!" he said. "I am delighted to meet you. I have been to see you."

"Will you turn back now?" she responded.

"I've wanted to see you," said he, turning, "ever since the masquerade; but you were always with that sick tramp."

"I am emulating Florence Nightingale," she returned lightly. "You'll doubtless hear of me some day as a famous sister of charity, or cousin of mercy, or aunt of benevolence, or something of the sort."

"Really? You don't mean it?"

"Who can tell what one does mean?" she queried wilfully. "Will you come and see me take the veil? A nun's life must be dreadfully tame and insipid, but the dress is becoming."

"What do you mean?" her companion asked, puzzled. "You can't be in earnest." [276]

"In earnest? I fancy people are as seldom in earnest as they are in love; but it is easy enough to persuade one's self of being either."

Clarence looked at her with so confused an air, that she burst out into a laugh. Her mood had changed into a mocking, insincere phase; and she experienced a wicked delight in baffling and bewildering her suitor.

"It is a round world," she went on, giving her extravagance more and more the rein, "and round things are apt to be slippery. It is rather trite to call life a masquerade; but it is one, all the same. You fancy you see my face. You are mistaken, it is only a mask: in fact, I dare say you never see your own. Not that it matters in the least, for you're better off for having flattering glasses. I shall hate to wash the convent-floors, for they'll be stone, and awfully cold; but I suppose I shall have to."

"Yes," Clarence stammered. He had not the faintest notion what she was talking about; but the word "masquerade" seemed to furnish a clew. "Why didn't you come to the masquerade?" he asked. "You and Flossy and Burleigh were all missing when we unmasked. You lost your gloves."

"I was there, and you did not know me: so I won."

"But what became of you?"

"I went out to get a breath of air, and that Peter Mixon got thrown out of his carriage at my very feet. Of course I didn't feel like going back after that."

"There are some things very mysterious about that night," Toxteth said. "I'm sure I don't know half that went on in my own house." [277]

"Who ever did?" she retorted. "I'm sure you are better off. Will you come in?"

They had reached the piazza by this time, and Patty laid her hand upon the door-handle.

"I think not," he answered. "They will wait tea for me at home. But I want to ask you something."

"It is dangerous to ask things in this world," she said, "there is always so much uncertainty what the answer will be."

"But I am in uncertainty now."

"That can't be pleasant," replied she; "but the frying-pan is better than the fire. It cannot be any thing that concerns yourself, however, or you couldn't hesitate about it."

"It does concern me, and I want it answered."

"Really?" she said, angry that she could not evade him. "When the sultan throws the handkerchief, I supposed he never had a doubt of its reception."

"Throws the handkerchief? I don't understand."

"It is a Turkish custom, which has been copied the world over by those favored individuals whom fate or fortune has made irresistible; only the handkerchief must be gold-edged."

"If you are going to talk nonsense," the young man said, offended, "I may as well go."

"Nonsense!" Patty retorted, giving her umbrella a flirt. "Do you call it nonsense? It is the most serious thing I know. However, it is no matter. I am hindering you. Good-night."

"Wait," he said. "You promised me an answer long ago, and you've never given it to me." [278]

"An answer? An answer to what?"

"You know what," he said doggedly. "To the question I asked you the day we went to Samoset."

"I haven't had time to think," she answered weakly. "First there was the exhibition, and then the masquerade, and then Peter Mixon's sickness."

"If you require so much time to think," returned he bitterly, "that is answer enough."

"Very well. We'll consider the matter settled."

"No, no!" he exclaimed. "Take your own time. I'll wait. But you ought to answer me."

"That is true," assented Patty gloomily. "Give me a week, only a week, and I will."

"In a week then," he said, "I shall come for my answer. Don't make it 'no,' Patty."

CHAPTER XLI. [279]

OLD MULLEN'S WILL.

Peter Mixon was safely bestowed beneath the sod before Patty remembered the pocket-book which he had confided to her care. One afternoon when she chanced to be alone in the house, she came upon it, and, opening it, began idly enough to examine the contents. There was little of importance except a bulky document which proved to be a will, although, so little accustomed was she to legal phraseology, it was some time before the reader comprehended the full import of the instrument. Slowly she realized that the paper to which Peter Mixon had clung so tenaciously, and which Frank Breck had wished to obtain was a will executed by old Mr. Mullen;

and that in it he bequeathed real estate and personal property, without reserve, to Mrs. Smithers. With the will in her hand, Patty sat pondering on the consequences of its discovery. Her thoughts turned first to the legatee, and she pictured to herself Mrs. Smithers as mistress of Mullen House and its splendors. She would hardly have been human, and certainly would not have been a woman, had she not bitterly hated one who had robbed her of security in her faith of her lover. What she believed of Putnam's relations with his tenant, Patty hardly knew. She had heard [280] scandals concerning this woman and the late owner of Mullen House; and the character of Mrs. Smithers, even charity could scarcely call doubtful. She was still, in spite of her thirty-five years and her turbulent life, remarkably handsome; and her daughter, whom the lawyer had followed to Boston, was more beautiful still. Patty refused to believe absolute evil of Tom, but jealousy and doubt cast their blighting shadows over her heart.

From considering Mrs. Smithers, thought naturally turned to the present occupants of Mullen House. In regard to Miss Mullen, Patty was little troubled; but for Ease she was perplexed and grieved. She sat confused and excited by the complex thoughts and feelings which crowded upon her. Suddenly the door-bell rang, and its echoes sounded through the empty house. At this moment of all others, a carriage had come with a message from Miss Mullen, requesting Miss Sanford to come to her on important business. The strangeness of the summons struck Patty. There was no one at home with whom to advise. She hesitated a moment, but ended by deciding to go; and, with the will she had just read in her pocket, she was driven towards Mullen House.

During the past few weeks the inner life at Mullen House had been stormy enough. Miss Tabitha had daily pressed upon her niece, with increased vehemence, the suit of Frank Breck. As she met with constant resistance, however, the proud woman began to melt from command into entreaty; but, while Ease could not but be moved by this change, it is possible that it defeated itself. There [281] is in the gentlest human breast a trace of selfish pride, which takes pleasure, often half-unconsciously, in the humiliation of authority. When tyranny condescends to supplication, it confesses its power broken, and for its fall there is little respect or pity. In vain did Miss Tabitha —not explaining the secret of Breck's power, however—picture the ruin of the family honor, the calamity of the lapsing of Mullen House into the hands of strangers. Ease had learned to lean upon Will Sanford in her perplexity; and, with the trusting faith of a girl's first love, she believed that for all evils her lover would somehow find a remedy.

Miss Tabitha herself was moved chiefly by the prospect of abandoning her place in Montfield society. She had posed so long upon her semi-theatrical elevation that she dreaded worse than death a descent to the level of commonplace life. In addition to the usual evils attendant upon the loss of property, the whole habit of her existence, her methods of thought, the narrowness of the circle of her interests, bound her yet more strongly to the old *régime*. In her accustomed orbit she moved with dignity and precision, but she lacked the broad strength of character needful for adjustment to new and unfavorable conditions. In her struggle to induce Ease to marry Frank Breck, she felt as if it was for life itself she were fighting; and the latter was clever enough to take advantage of this feeling, even while not wholly understanding it.

Breck was no histrionic villain in sable cloak and drooping plume, or even in gaiters and slouched [282] hat. He was simply an unscrupulous young man, sensuous, and morally weak, inheriting from his father that selfishness which is so nearly akin to the relentless instinct of self-preservation in animals. Self-gratification was the essential law of his being.

Breck and Miss Mullen met upon the common ground of need. His expensive tastes made poverty as intolerable to him as it was bewildering and abhorrent to her. When he assured the mistress of Mullen House that he would save her from ruin only at the price of the hand of Ease, Miss Tabitha was ready to consent to any sacrifice on the part of her niece sooner than to encounter the loss of home and fortune. It was as a last desperate effort that she had sent for Patience, being urged to the step by Frank, who showed in this case more zeal than discretion.

CHAPTER XLII. [283]

BOLD PLAY.

When Patience reached Mullen House, she was shown into the drawing-room, where she found Miss Mullen alone. The room was in keeping with its stately mistress. Its furniture was massive, and black with age, its draperies heavy and rich. Miss Tabitha evidently made an especial effort to appear gracious, coming forward to meet her guest with an effusive greeting very unlike her usual reserve.

"I beg pardon for sending for you," she said; "but I wanted to see you alone. Take this chair: it is easier than that one. I hope you are very well."

Patty met the advances of her hostess somewhat coldly; but the latter determinedly ignored this, and talked lightly of indifferent things, until the guest cut her short by asking somewhat abruptly why Miss Mullen wished for her. Then that lady became somewhat embarrassed, and found it difficult to introduce the delicate business of the interview.

"It is about Ease," she said, after some preliminary skirmishing; "about Ease and—and myself. I sent for you because you have so much influence over her. You have such a strong character, Patty! And, besides, this concerns indirectly a member of your family." [284]

Patty sat silent, beginning to surmise vaguely what was coming.

"I must tell you a family secret," the elder lady went on. "It isn't fit for me to tell, or you to hear; but you cannot understand our trouble if I don't. My father—perhaps you have heard the scandals, the stories about that Smithers woman."

The other assented silently.

"My father," Miss Mullen continued desperately, "was completely imposed upon by that miserable creature. He even wanted to marry the vile thing; and she succeeded in extorting from him a paper which gave her Mullen House after his death."

"A will," Patty said.

"Yes," the other admitted,—"a sort of a will, I suppose. I never saw it, but Mr. Breck called it so."

"Mr. Breck!"

"Yes. He had far more to do with that vile woman than my father, though, of course, they kept it hid, so as to get money from father; and Mr. Breck had this paper."

"How did he get it?"

"She says he got somebody to steal it. The miserable creature came here once, and threatened to turn me out of the house. And O Patty! she could do it if she had that paper."

"But where is it now?"

"Frank Breck has it."

"Ah!" Patty said, light breaking in upon her. In an instant she comprehended the bold game [285] Frank had been playing. Pretending to have the paper which he had failed to obtain from Mixon, and which lay at that moment in her pocket, he had demanded the hand of Ease as its price.

"He declares," poor Miss Mullen said, "that, unless Ease marries him, he will ruin us; and he can do it."

"He is contemptible enough to do it," Patty returned with curling lip. "He'd do any thing for his own ends. But what has all this to do with me?"

"O Patty! you've so much influence with Ease: she admires you so much! You couldn't see us turned out of house and home! If you would talk to her, and persuade her, and show her how much depends upon her. You could bring her to it, I'm sure. She won't listen to me. And if you'd get your brother to go away a while"—

"Stop!" Patty exclaimed, starting to her feet. "How dare you talk to me in that way! I shall tell Ease, that, if she consents to marry Frank Breck, she will be too contemptible for honest people to speak to."

The proud mistress of Mullen House caught Patty's hand, even fell on her knees to her, weeping, and begging her to pity her gray hairs.

"Get up," said Patty, chilled and repelled by the intense selfishness which every word displayed. "You care nothing for Ease; but she is safe, at least. I have your father's will here: Peter Mixon gave it to me before he died."

Miss Mullen gave a cry, and fell back into a sitting posture, white and staring; while from the [286] embrasure of a window behind whose curtain she had concealed him that he might overhear the interview, sprang Frank Breck.

"That will belongs to me," he said. "Peter Mixon got it from Mrs. Smithers for father, and never delivered it to him. Give it to me!"

"It belongs to Mrs. Smithers," Patty returned, standing at bay. "I shall give it to its rightful owner."

"No, no!" cried Miss Mullen, seizing again the hand of her guest. "No, no! She could turn us into the street the minute she got it. Oh, for pity's sake, Patience, give it to me! I shall die of shame if Mullen House gets into her hands. Oh, for the love of God, let me have it! Think of Ease. You love her. Will shall marry her. I'll give them my part in all the property—but just enough to live on. I'll do any thing, any thing, any thing, if only you'll give me that will. Don't rob us of our home and all we have!"

"It isn't I that rob you," Patty said sadly.

"By God!" Frank cried, grasping roughly, in his turn, the hand which Patty freed from the convulsive clasp of Miss Mullen, "you shall give it to me. You shall never take it out of this house, if I have to kill you!"

Patty uttered a scream which rang through the dusky old room, and by a strong and sudden effort wrenched herself free, throwing her assailant to his knees; then she turned, and darted out of the room and out of the house. As she gained the long avenue, she heard Breck in pursuit, and she ran as she had never run before in the most hoydenish days of her girlhood. He overtook her [287] just as she reached the great gate, but not before she had seen the figure of a man in the street.

"Help, help!" she cried.

In another instant Tom Putnam stood between her and his nephew. The lawyer looked from one to the other in amazement; while Patty, panting and breathless, thrust into his hands the will, but could not speak. Frank attempted to snatch the precious document, but his uncle held him off.

"What is this?" he asked. "What does this mean, Frank?"

"It means that between you, you are making a devilish mess," the young man said in a rage; "and I wash my hands of it.—I wish you joy of what you have done."

He cast a scowling look at Patty, as he addressed to her the last words, and, not heeding his uncle's voice, strode off down the street.

"Will you tell me what all this is about?" Tom asked, unfolding the will.

"You can see for yourself," she answered. "It is about that—about your tenant."

"My tenant?"

"Yes," she said coldly,—"Mrs. Smithers."

She turned away, and walked in the direction of her home. She felt the bitterest humiliation in speaking to the man she loved the name of the woman of his relations to whom she dared not think.

"Wait," he said: "I am going with you."

A quick step placed him at her side; but she had averted her face. He laid his hand upon her arm. [288]

"Don't touch me!" she exclaimed, shaking off his fingers. "I will not bear it. Take that will to her, and give her your congratulations."

"What?" he cried. "You have heard,—but you cannot have believed"—

"Believed!" she retorted fiercely. "I believe nothing but that she told me"—

"What?" he demanded.

Before she could answer, Dr. Sanford's buggy rolled along towards them.

"Take me home, father," cried poor Patty.

And a moment later Tom Putnam was left alone.

CHAPTER XLIII. [289]

CLARENCE IS ANSWERED.

The week which Patty had asked of Clarence Toxteth had expired; and that young lady was in her chamber, giving the last touches to her toilet before going down to the parlor to meet her suitor. The days seemed to her to have passed with flying feet. She had occupied herself much more in thinking how short a space she had for deliberation than in considering the important question she was now to answer. She therefore found herself no nearer a conclusion when Clarence called than when she had dismissed him a week earlier.

Her toilet completed, the girl leaned her face upon her hands, and regarded herself in the mirror.

"I must decide," she mused. "I must give him an answer. I never can say yes. Suppose he should want to touch me, or to kiss me. Ugh! I should die! How red my face is! It must be because I hurried so. The color is becoming, though. I ought to go down, but it will do him good to wait a while; and I must think.

"Oh, I wish a woman was independent as a man is! Then I needn't be engaged to anybody. But I never can care for anybody as I did for Tom. How could Tom be so—how could he act so! I must [290] be engaged to Clarence to show Tom that I'm not heart-broken for him. Oh, how I hate Tom Putnam!—at least I hate the way he acts. Hate makes more matches than love, I dare say. What nonsense! Let me think: I must think. I'm sure Clarence is nice. He has so refined personal habits! And then his wife could have any thing money could buy. Wife? There's time enough to think of that: this is only the engagement, and I dare say one gets fond of any man by being engaged to him long enough. Perhaps I should get to be willing to be Mrs. Toxteth. I'm sure I hope so. This comb is certainly in a little bit too high. There! I am pretty, but a girl is despised forever that will own she thinks herself so. Dear me! I must go down stairs and see that horrid Clarence. I'm sure I don't see why he need be forever bothering me for an answer. How unhappy I am! and I'm afraid I deserve it. I wonder if he wouldn't give me a week longer. No, I don't think I quite dare to ask for that: I've treated him shamefully now. But I'll make amends: I'll say yes, but I do hate to awfully."

And down stairs swept the young lady to meet the suitor to whom she had decided to plight her troth. He rose to meet her, uttering some polite commonplace, and she began to rattle on about the gossip of Montfield. She dreaded the question he had come to ask; yet soon she began to experience an irritated desire that he would speak, and end this suspense. She carried that fatal yes as a burden of which she would fain be rid as quickly as possible. At last the question came. [291]

"Have you thought that the week you asked is up?" Clarence inquired.

"I remembered it," she answered, dropping her eyelids.

"You haven't given me my answer."

"Did you expect me to come to you with it?" she asked, fencing to gain time.

"Of course not; but I have come for it."

"I am not worth so much trouble," she said.

"Is that my answer?"

"Certainly it isn't," she replied. "But why must you be in such haste about it?"

"Haste about it!" he repeated. "I should think I had waited long enough. If I am not worth answering, I cannot be worth marrying."

His indignation influenced Patty in his favor; but alas! his last word made her shudder.

"Oh! It isn't that," she ambiguously exclaimed.

"But do you mean to say yes, or no?" Clarence demanded with some irritation.

Patty looked at him with dilated eyes.

"It must come," she thought, "and then I shall be engaged to him, and he'll have the right to kiss me; but I must say it."

She opened her lips to give the fatal assent.

"No," they said, it seemed to her entirely without her volition.

"What!" he exclaimed.

"I said 'no,'" she repeated, feeling as if amare had been removed from her breast. "I like you very much, Clarence; but I don't think we are quite suited for each other." [292]

"You don't!" he retorted, smarting with wounded love and vanity. "Then why couldn't you say so at once, and not keep me making a fool of myself for nothing all summer?"

"I own I've treated you horridly," she said humbly. "And I beg your pardon; but I didn't know my own mind."

"You ought to have known," he continued, becoming more angry as she grew more yielding. "You may go farther and fare worse, Patty Sanford. I might have known you were leading me on. I always thought you were a flirt, but I did think you'd treat an old friend decently. Thank Heaven, I needn't go to the world's end for a wife!"

"Indeed!" Mistress Sanford said, drawing herself up with fine dignity. "I congratulate you on your escape from the snare into which I have been leading you. I might have known your penetration was too keen not to see through the wiles of a mere flirt."

"I—that is"—he stammered in confusion.

"I am very sorry I have taken so much of your time," she continued. "But then, as you just remarked so happily, it isn't as if you had to go to the world's end to find a wife."

"I didn't mean" began he, thoroughly abashed,—"I didn't mean"—

"Very likely not," she interrupted. "I didn't either. I beg your pardon," she added more calmly. "Did I show you those views aunt Shasta sent us from Paris last week?" [293]

"Yes—I don't know," Clarence replied. "I must be going."

"I am very glad you called," Patty said. "I have enjoyed it very much. You must be neighborly. You know the Brecks are gone; and Flossy is so absorbed in Burleigh that I am sure to be lonesome."

And she bowed out the rejected suitor, who went home with a tingling sensation about his ears.

"I might have known," he muttered to himself; "but her mother was so sure she'd have me. Confound it! It isn't safe to trust anybody's opinion of a woman but your own, and it's best to be d——d doubtful of that."

As for Patty, she went back to her chamber bitterly ashamed of herself, yet happier than she had been for many a long day.

CHAPTER XLIV. [294]

WILL AND EASE.

Meanwhile Mrs. Smithers had begun proceedings for obtaining the property willed her by Mr. Mullen. The days which followed at Mullen House were gloomy ones. Mr. Wentworth came down only to spend the larger part of his time and strength in cursing and fuming, which added little to the comfort of his client or her niece. To Ease, leaving the homestead could not be what it was to her aunt, who had no life apart from its theatrical stateliness. But Miss Mullen was too energetic to fold her hands. In less than a week from the time Mrs. Smithers put in a claim for the property, Miss Tabitha announced that she had made arrangements to take up her abode with a cousin residing in Boston.

"But what am I to do?" Ease asked in dismay.

"I was wondering this morning what you intended," her aunt said coolly. "As you have been the means of our losing all we have, I supposed you must have some plans. I hope you won't disgrace

the family. If your father hadn't been a spendthrift, you'd have as much as I have to live on."

The sisters had each inherited a small property from their mother, and upon this Miss Tabitha had now to depend. Mrs. Apthorpe's portion had been expended in the last illness of her [295] husband, who lingered between life and death five tedious years, during which Mr. Mullen had refused the slightest aid to his heart-broken daughter.

In these dark days, when Miss Tabitha was showing a spirit equally hard, Ease turned for comfort to Will Sanford. Accustomed to lean upon others, she found his presence and help a necessity. He had but one solution for her difficulties,—that of matrimony.

"But we are not even engaged," Ease protested.

"Oh! it isn't necessary to be engaged before you are married," he answered. "That can be attended to afterward quite as well."

Still, to marry on nothing a year is a delicate matter; and Will consulted his father in his perplexity.

"Married?" the doctor said. "What have you to live on?"

The son drew from his pocket a handful of silver, which he eyed doubtfully.

"That is about the extent of my available capital."

"Not a very substantial basis upon which to acquire a family," his father said.

"I wish," exclaimed Will, rattling the coins he held, "that I had as much money as I could lift; and oh, wouldn't I lift!"

"No doubt," Dr. Sanford assented grimly. "But you haven't; and it takes money to support a wife. Young love is delightful company, but a great eater."

"But there are two sides to the question," said Will. "Ease must be thought of. That old tabby-cat Tabitha has deserted her, and I can't stand by and see her turned out of house and home. And [296] there's no other way I can help her. I might go to teaching school to support myself; but in the long-run I can make more at my profession. Now, will you lend me the money I need till I can pay my way?"

"My dear boy, debt is a pestilence which walketh at noonday, and doesn't lie quiet at night, nor let you."

"But I must endure that rather than let Ease suffer."

"But don't fancy I should forgive you the debt."

"I should hope not," Will said, unconsciously drawing himself up. "I didn't mean to beg a living."

"That strikes fire," his father said, laughing. "I think you had better arrange the matter with Ease as soon as you can, and have things settled. I am proud of your choice too."

"I"—Will began; but, instead of speech, he wrung his father's hand, and was off for Mullen House.

CHAPTER XLV. [297]

A QUIET WEDDING.

THE marriage of Will and Ease was naturally a quiet one. Wedding Ease with the certainty of hard work before him, and with the consciousness of taking up a man's burdens, Will was thoughtful and grave. He was full of a serious joy, and, as Patty declared, began already to look older and more sedate. Regret as he might the loss to his bride of her old home, he secretly experienced a virile joy that their fortunes were to be of his own carving.

"My boy," Dr. Sanford said to him upon the eve of his wedding-day, "make two agreements with your wife the day you marry, and stick to them,—never to cry over spilt milk, and never to cross a bridge till you come to it. That takes care of the past and the future; and, if you cannot bear the present together, you had better separate."

Bathalina, too, had her word to say.

"I approve of your bein' married," she said. "Some folks don't take no stock in folks gettin' married so young; but I believe in it. Then you ain't so much older than your children that they treat you as if you was their grand-dad; but they're kind of company for you. Now, when you get to be an old man, you may have a son as old as or older than yourself to stick by you. I always [298] believed in folks bein' married young myself."

The ceremony took place at the Episcopal church, which the Mullens had for years attended, and was wholly free from display.

"God bless you!" Dr. Sanford greeted the newly-wedded pair as they stepped over the threshold of his home. "May you never be less in love than now!"

On the following day Miss Mullen flitted from Montfield like the last-remaining bittern, and established herself with her maiden cousin in Boston, where she gradually recovered her normal condition, and posed before a circle of select if somewhat antiquated people, among whom she

soon came to feel perfectly at home.

Meanwhile life in Montfield went on much as usual. Tom Putnam endeavored vainly to come to an understanding with Patty. She resolutely avoided him, except on a single occasion. As Ease and Patty sat sewing one day, conversation turned on Mrs. Toxteth's masquerade.

"Do you know," Ease said, "I never found out what you wore? Emily Purdy told me beforehand that you were going in a man's dress, but of course I didn't believe that."

"Emily Purdy!" exclaimed Patty.

In an instant the whole matter was clear to her, and she saw how Putnam had obtained his knowledge of her costume. The following day she met the lawyer on the street, and stopped him [299] with a little gesture of the hand.

"It is hardly worth while to bother you with apologies," she said; "but I shall respect myself a trifle more if I tell you that I have discovered how you knew of my masquerade-dress, and I beg your pardon for so misjudging you."

"You do not need to apologize," said he eagerly. "It is I who should"—

"Not at all," she interrupted. "Good-morning."

And she walked swiftly away.

For the rest of our friends, Burleigh continually urged upon Flossy the desirability of a speedy marriage; Clarence Toxteth had taken his wounded heart, or vanity, to Europe; Mrs. Smithers took possession of Mullen House; and December brooded in a sulky, rainy mood over the land.

"A green Christmas," Mrs. Sanford said, "makes a full churchyard. I knew we'd have a mild fall when the 21st of September was so mild. Don't you remember, mother? The wind was south-west, and the day very warm."

"The weather has truly been very warm this season," replied grandmother Sanford.

"I think it must be the weather," continued Mrs. Sanford, "that ails Bathalina. She isn't worth any thing for work now: all she'll do is the heavy talking and light lifting. She seems to lay up her husband's death against the doctor. But, as I told her, Peter wouldn't respond to the medicine; and what could Charles do?"

"I know of only one thing Bathalina is good for now," Patty remarked. "She'd make a very [300] ornamental figure in a lunatic-asylum, with her long widow's veil."

"She is certainly crazy enough," put in Flossy. "She told me last night that Noah must have been familiar with the Bible, because he gave his sons names out of it, and that that showed how old the Bible was."

"There comes Will with the letters," Ease said, running to meet him.

"It's as good as eating perennial wedding-cake to see Ease and Will," Flossy laughed. "They are those two souls, you know, that have only a single thought."

"Young married couples," Patty returned somewhat cynically, "are apt to be so foolish that a single thought is quite as much as they can get up between them."

"You are getting misanthropical," Flossy said. "It isn't becoming. And, so saying, she went to stir up the young couple to see—Oh, here you are!"

"Here's a letter for Patty," Will said: "I think it is from Hazard Breck."

The letter which he put into his sister's hands was written in a bold, somewhat boyish hand, which always seemed to Patty very like Hazard himself. It was as follows:—

> Dear Patty,—I don't know as I ought to write to you as I am going to, but I am sure you are too much my friend not to understand that I mean right. I want your help; and, to make things clear, I must tell you something. You know that Smithers woman who has got possession of Mullen House, and I dare say you have heard folks blame uncle Tom [301] for taking so much care of her. He has always treated her better than she deserved. When her daughter ran away, she came after him to help find her; but they lost all trace till now. I am mixing things all up, for I hate to tell you the truth: it must come, though. You know well enough what father was, and—think how hard it is for me to tell you, Patty, and you'll excuse my writing this—Mrs. Smithers always said that this girl, her daughter, was my half-sister. Father asked uncle Tom, on his death-bed, to take care of the two; and she's had an income out of his pocket. The man with whom Alice Smithers ran away from Samoset has left her, and somehow or other she has got here. She met me on the street, and begged for a bit of bread. She is sick and penniless, and promises, that, if her mother will let her come home, she will behave. Mrs. Smithers only answers her letters by threats of vengeance if she dares go to Mullen House. I can't write to uncle Tom; for Mrs. Smithers hates him for having tried to make her behave decently, and, now that she is independent, she will do nothing for him. Cannot you do something, Patty, to help this poor girl? She looks half dead, and she has always been delicate.
>
> I am too troubled about this to write about any thing else; but I hope you will have a

very merry Christmas and a happy New Year.

Very truly yours,

HAZARD BRECK.

Patty read this letter carefully twice. Then she started up.

"I am going down to the brook for rose-hips to put about the Christmas-cake," she said.

CHAPTER XLVI.

[302]

CHRISTMAS.

PATTY went out of the house, and across the orchard. The grass over which she took her way was wet with the cold fog that made the air chill. Everywhere the trees and bushes were loaded with crystal drops upon which no sun shone to make them glitter. The fields were faded, and blotched with patches of gray and brown, and a frost-bitten green. Patty had thrown over her shoulders a long cloak, which covered her from head to feet; and as she walked through the fields she might have passed for the spirit of the sombre weather.

Along the margin of the brook which separated the fields of the Putnam place from Dr. Sanford's possessions, the wild roses grew in profusion, and left so many of their scarlet hips behind them, that the birds had not been able to devour the half. Patty moved along among the leafless shrubs, her cloak catching upon the briers, and her fingers suffering not unfrequently from the same sharp cause, while she gathered the rose-hips for which she had come. The brook, which was quite free from ice, and somewhat swollen by rain, gurgled and murmured past her. The drops shook down upon her from the dripping branches, so that by the time she reached Black-Clear [303] Eddy her cloak was pretty thoroughly wet.

She had not been here since the night she threw her ring into the pool. Remembering how clear was the water, she leaned over to see if she could discover the trinket. Looking carefully for some time, she fancied that her eye caught the gleam of gold. Kneeling upon the wet margin of the brook, she bent down, and assured herself that she indeed saw the ring lodged in a tuft of water-grass. Instantly she longed to recover it. She began to bare her arm, and then paused, laughing at her own folly. The pool was something like eight feet deep, and there seemed no way for her to get possession of the ring but by the use of a hook and line. She ruthlessly sacrificed her handkerchief, tearing it into strips; and, fastening a bent hair-pin to the end of this improvised line, with a pebble for a sinker, she began to angle.

"'Simple Simon went a-fishing,'"

she sang to herself,

"'For to catch a whale:
All the water that he had
Was'"—

"In Black-Clear Eddy apparently," the voice of Tom Putnam said close behind her.

So absorbed had she been, that she had not heard him approach. She sprang up quickly, and faced him.

"I wish you a Merry Christmas!" he continued, before she could speak.

"Thank you!" she answered. "I wish you many. How came you here?" [304]

"In the simplest way in the world. I walked."

"But people do not usually go strolling about wet fields in such weather as this."

"Oh! you mean to ask why I came here. I was going over to pay your grandmother her pension for the month—and to see you."

"I am flattered," Patty said, "by even so secondary a remembrance."

She turned her face towards home, and began slowly to walk in that direction, as if expecting him to follow. Every time she encountered her lover, she found it more difficult to retain her self-possession. So completely was she now occupied in schooling herself, that to Putnam she seemed absent and distant.

"Wait," he said, as she turned from him. "You are leaving your rosebuds."

"Thank you!" she returned, taking them from him.

Their hands touched, and both were conscious of a thrill.

"What have I done to offend you?" he burst out. "Why do you avoid me, Patty?"

"Do I?" she asked, fixing her eyes upon the faded grass.

"You know you do. If I have done any thing wrong, any thing that offends you, it was at worst a

sin of ignorance, and I sincerely beg your pardon. It is Christmas time, and you cannot better observe it than by a general amnesty."

"Will a general amnesty satisfy you, then?" she asked, teasing a tuft of the withered aftermath with her foot. [305]

Patty understood little her own mood. She desired intensely to be reconciled to her lover; but she was tormented by a secret feeling, that, if he loved her as she wished to be loved, his passion would break down all obstacles. She could endure a lukewarm affection better from any man in the world than from him. To give a sign of her own tenderness, to meet his advances half way, would leave her unsatisfied, even though it resulted in that understanding for which she so ardently longed. She wished to be seized, to be conquered by a passion so powerful as to break down all barriers, to sweep away all hinderances. Hazard's letter, too, had affected her strongly. She had never really believed her lover guilty of any tangible offence, but with a woman's inconsistency had secretly required him to prove his purity. Now that she understood the nature of his relations with Mrs. Smithers, and found here one more proof of his unselfishness, she felt herself contemptible for ever allowing a shadow of doubt to cross her mind. Her feelings were a wild mixture, and instinctively she waited to prove the strength of her lover's passion and its power over her. She stood there in the misty light, knowing that Putnam thought her trifling with him, and angry that he permitted her to do so.

"Is a general amnesty all you desire?" she asked again, as he remained silent.

"If it is the best you have to give," he said coldly. "Still I may perhaps be pardoned if I ask why I need the grace of an amnesty at all. What is my offence?" [306]

"Who accused you of any?" she queried evasively.

"Is it a sin of omission, or of commission?" he persisted.

"Nowadays we seem only to talk in conundrums of great moral import," she said. "It doesn't seem to me to amount to much."

Her companion looked at her as might at the sphinx one whom that monster gave the choice between guessing her riddle, and being devoured. A sense of irritation struggled with his love. He felt at once the annoyance of one who is trifled with, and the strong tenderness of his regard for this slender woman before him. He came a step nearer to her.

"Does any thing seem to you to amount to much?" he demanded. "I think sometimes that you are only half human. You draw men on to love you, and then give only mockery in return."

"If there were only a rock in the middle of Black-Clear Eddy," Patty returned, with an affectation of the utmost deliberation, "I would certainly get a harp, and play the Loreley."

She raised her eyes as she spoke, and they met his. For an instant the two regarded each other as if each strove for mastery in that long, deep glance. Then she turned away once more.

"We had better go to the house," she said. "The grass is very wet."

He took a long stride towards her, and caught her by the arms, looking full into her face.

"You shall love me!" he exclaimed in a voice intense with feeling. "You *must* love me! I will have you, Patty, in spite of yourself." [307]

A look of defiance flashed upon him from the dark eyes, but it faded into one of gladness. She freed herself gently from his grasp, and moved on. But at the first step she turned back; and, lifting one of his hands in both of her own, she kissed it.

"I do love you," she said in a low voice. "I think I have loved you always."

Then she found herself half smothered in his arms.

There are few threads which need further gathering up. Mrs. Smithers persistently refused to receive her daughter, and the girl soon died from poverty and heart-break. A late remorse seized the unhappy mother, who made Mullen House the scene of disgraceful orgies, until an overdose of opium put an end to her ill-regulated life. In process of time, by a train of circumstances which need not be related here, Mullen House came into the possession of young Dr. Sanford and his wife: Ease thus returned again to the home of her ancestors. But all this was long after the April day upon which Patty and her cousin Flossy were both united to the men they had chosen. "Giant Blunderbore and the Princess Thumbling," Will called Mr. and Mrs. Blood; but the giant was so bewildered with happiness, that he shook the joker's hand cordially, and thanked him for his good wishes.

Patty and her husband walked home across the bridge over the brook, on whose banks the grass was already green, and the alder-tassels golden. [308]

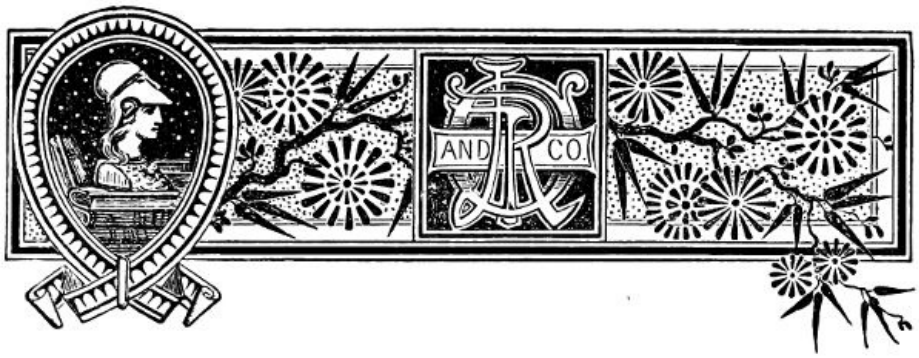
"Let us look in the eddy," the bride said. "We might see that ring."

For answer, her husband lifted her hand, and showed her, embedded in the midst of her wedding-ring, the golden thread she had thrown in the pool.

"It is symbolical," he said with a happy smile. "It signifies how my life is enclosed in yours."

She answered him with a look.

FINIS.



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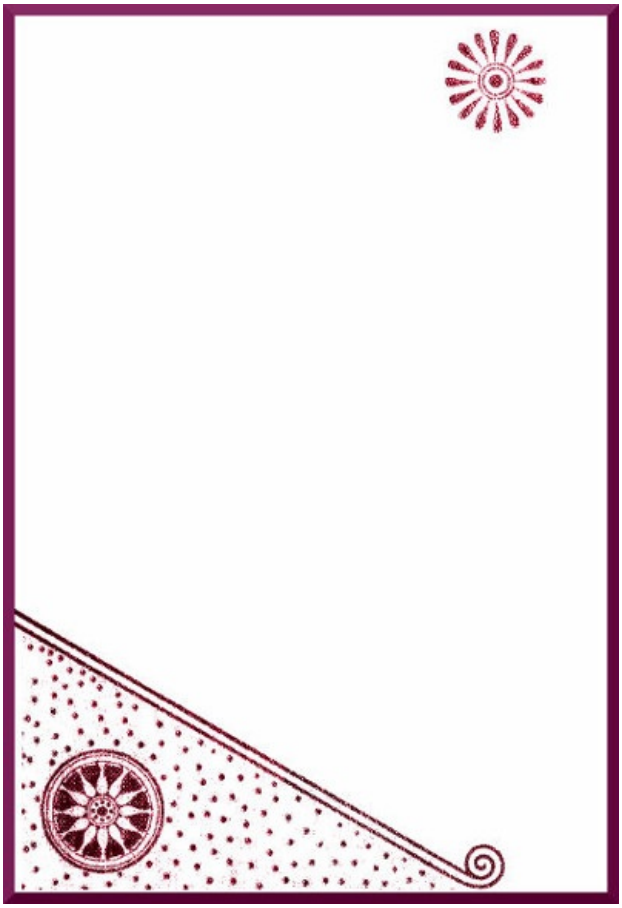

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