

Daisy Brooks; Or, A Perilous Love

Laura Jean Libbey

The background of the lower half of the page is a vibrant pink color. It is decorated with various blue geometric shapes, including triangles, squares, rectangles, and curved lines, arranged in a pattern that resembles a stylized maze or a complex architectural design. The shapes are scattered across the page, with some overlapping.

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cover

DAISY BROOKS;
OR,
A PERILOUS LOVE.
BY
LAURA JEAN LIBBEY,
AUTHOR OF
“Parted on Her Bridal Tour,” or “Miss Middleton’s Lover,”
“When His Love Grew Cold,” “He Loved, But Was
Lured Away,” “When Lovely Maiden Stoops
to Folly,” “The Crime of Hallow E’en,”
“Lovers Once, But Strangers
Now,” Etc., Etc.

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DAISY BROOKS.

CHAPTER I.

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

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

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

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

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

Both stood gazing intently out into the darkness. The storm had now commenced in earnest. The great trees bent to and fro like reeds before the wind; the lightning flashed, and the terrific crash of roaring thunder mingled with the torrent of rain that beat furiously against the casement. It seemed as if the very

flood-gates of heaven were flung open wide on this memorable night of the master's return.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

There had been strange rumors of the unhappiness of Basil Hurlhurst's former marriage. No one remembered having seen her but once, quite five years before. A beautiful woman with a little babe had suddenly appeared at Whitestone Hall, announcing herself as Basil Hurlhurst's wife. There had been a fierce, stormy

interview, and on that very night Basil Hurlhurst took his wife and child abroad; those who had once seen the dark, glorious, scornful beauty of the woman's face never forgot it. Two years later the master had returned alone with the little child, heavily draped in widower's weeds.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Go away, you miserable beggar-woman,” she cried, “or I shall set the hounds

on you at once. Do you hear me, I say?"

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

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

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

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

"Pluma," called the woman, softly, "come here."

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

"Pluma—come—here—instantly!"

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

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

"No," answered the child.

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

"Ye—es."

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

"Yes," answered the child, dubiously.

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

Again the reckless spirit of the child flashed forth.

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

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

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

“Go, Pluma!” she commanded, bitterly.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Suddenly the great bells of Whitestone Hall ceased pealing for the joyous birth of Basil Hurlhurst’s daughter, and bitter cries of a strong man in mortal anguish rent the air. No one had noticed how or when the sweet, golden-haired young

wife had died. With a smile on her lips, she was dead, with her tiny little darling pressed close to her pulseless heart.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“My wife is—” He could not say more.

“Buried, sir, beneath yonder willow.”

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

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

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

CHAPTER II.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

It was a beautiful morning; no cloud was in the smiling heavens; the sun shone brightly, and the great oak and cedar-trees that skirted the roadside seemed to thrill with the song of birds. Butterflies spread their light wings and coquetted

with the fragrant blossoms, and busy humming-bees buried themselves in the heart of the crimson wild rose. The basket was very heavy, and poor little Daisy's hands ached with the weight of it.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I have often heard of fairies, but this is the first time I have ever caught one napping under the trees. I wonder who she is anyhow? Surely she can not be

some drudging farmer's daughter with a form and face like that?" he mused, suspiciously eyeing the basket of freshly laundered laces against which the flushed cheeks and waving golden hair rested.

Just then his ludicrous position struck him forcibly.

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

Tightening the strap of his game-bag over his shoulder, and readjusting his velvet cap jauntily over his brown curls, Rex was about to resume his journey in the direction of Whitestone Hall, when the sound of rapidly approaching carriage-wheels fell upon his ears. Realizing his awkward position, Rex knew the wisest course he could possibly pursue would be to screen himself behind the magnolia branches until the vehicle should pass. The next instant a pair of prancing ponies, attached to a basket phaeton, in which sat a young girl, who held them well in check, dashed rapidly up the road. Rex could scarcely repress an exclamation of surprise as he saw the occupant was his young hostess, Pluma Hurlhurst of Whitestone Hall. She drew rein directly in front of the sleeping girl, and Rex Lyon never forgot, to his dying day, the discordant laugh that broke from her red lips—a laugh which caused poor Daisy to start from her slumber in wild alarm, scattering the snowy contents of the basket in all directions.

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

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

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

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

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

Touching the prancing ponies with her ivory-handled whip, the haughty young heiress whirled leisurely down the road, leaving Daisy, with flushed face and

tear-dimmed eyes, gazing after her.

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

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

In another moment he was by her side.

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

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

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

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

“Do you live at the Hall?” he asked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER III.

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

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

Daisy glanced up with a startled blush,

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Pluma Hurlhurst laughed. Such rapture was new to her.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“No,” she said. “I—I—do not know—”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Ah! why not?” he mused. “It would be a glorious revenge.” He made his way hurriedly in the direction of his young hostess, who was, as usual, surrounded by a group of admirers. A deep crimson spot burned on either cheek, and her eyes glowed like stars, as of one under intense, suppressed excitement.

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

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

Several gentlemen crowded around Pluma asking the same favor.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Rex,” she cried, suddenly falling on her knees before him, her face white and stormy, her white jeweled hands clasped supplicatingly, “you must not, you shall not leave me so; no one shall come between us. Listen—I love you, Rex. What if the whole world knows it—what will it matter, it is the truth. My love is my life. You loved me until she came between us with her false, fair face. But for this you would have asked me to be your wife. Send that miserable little hireling away, Rex—the gardener will take charge of her.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Pluma hastily rung the bell.

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER IV.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Why not, Daisy?” he asked, quickly.

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

Oh, how soft and beautiful were the eyes swimming in tears and lifted so timidly

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Daisy was young, romantic, and impressible; a thousand thoughts rushed through her brain; it would be so nice to have a young husband to love her and care for her like Rex, so handsome and so kind; then, too, she would have plenty of dresses, as fine as Pluma wore, all lace and puffs; she might have a carriage and ponies, too; and when she rolled by the little cottage, Septima, who had always been so cruel to her, would courtesy to *her*, as she did when Pluma, the haughty young heiress, passed.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Daisy readily consented.

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

By this time they had reached Daisy’s home.

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

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

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

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

“Well!” said Septima, sharply, “this is a pretty time of night to come dancing home, leaving me all alone with the baking! If I hadn’t my hands full of dough

I'd give your ears a sound boxing! I'll see you're never out after dark again, I'll warrant."

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

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

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

Septima shook off the clinging arms angrily.

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

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

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

A sudden terror blanched Daisy's face.

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

"An hour or more ago."

Daisy hastily picked up her hat again.

"Where are you going?" demanded Septima, sharply.

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

CHAPTER V.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Daisy had struggled up from her knees to a sitting posture, putting her hair,

curled into a thousand shining rings, away from her flushed face.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He drew from his breast pocket as he spoke a thick, yellow envelope, which contained several printed forms with blank spaces which were to be filled up.

There was something in his voice which made Daisy look at him, but her eyes fell and her cheeks flushed hotly as she met his glance.

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

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

Daisy looked at the envelope with a wistful glance.

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

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

“What!”

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

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

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

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

John Brooks laughed cheerily.

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

He never forgot the expression of the white, startled face Daisy raised to his. For

once in her life Daisy was unable to shake him from his purpose.

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

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

A dark, dreamy silence wraps the cottage in its soft embrace, the moon, clear and full, sails tranquilly through the star-sown heavens, and the sweet scent of distant orange groves is wafted through the midnight breeze. Yet the dark-cloaked figure that walks quickly and softly up the graveled walk sees none of the soft, calm beauty of the still summer night. She raises the brass knocker with a quick, imperative touch. After a wait of perhaps ten minutes or so Septima answers the summons, but the candle she holds nearly drops from her hands as she beholds the face of her midnight visitor in the dim, uncertain flickering glare of the candle-light.

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

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

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

As Pluma took the seat Septima placed for her, the dark cloak she wore fell from her shoulders, and Septima saw with wonder she still wore the shimmering silk she had in all probability worn at the fête. The rubies still glowed like restless, leaping fire upon her perfect arms and snowy throat, and sprays of hyacinth were still twined in her dark, glossy hair; but they were quite faded now, drooping,

crushed, and limp among her curls; there was a strange dead-white pallor on her haughty face, and a lurid gleam shone in her dark, slumbrous eyes. Pluma had studied well the character of the woman before her—who made no secret of her dislike for the child thrust upon their bounty—and readily imagined she would willingly aid her in carrying out the scheme she had planned.

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER VI.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“DEAR BROTHER REX,—We received the letter you wrote, and the picture you sent with it, and my

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

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

"Your loving little sister,

"BIRDIE."

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

He looked at his watch again.

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

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

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

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

"That's strange," he mused, "exceedingly strange."

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

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

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

The blow was so sudden and unexpected he was completely bewildered; his brain was in a whirl.

He saw a laborer crossing the cotton-fields and called to him.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Early that morning there had been great bustle and stir in the Brooks’ cottage. In vain Daisy had attempted to steal quietly away into her own little room and write a hasty line to Rex, which, if all other means failed her, she could send to him by

one of the men employed in the fields, begging him to come to her at once. Septima would not leave her to herself for a single instant. Even her writing-desk, which had stood on the bureau in the corner for years, was gone. Poor little Daisy cried out to herself—fate was against her.

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

“Nonsense,” replied Septima, sharply, a malicious smile hovering about the corners of her mouth. “I guess the trees and the flowers won’t wither and die of grief if you don’t bid them good-bye; it’s too late now, anyhow. See, here is the stage coming already,” she cried, glancing out of the window, “and here comes John with his valise and umbrella. Make haste, Daisy; where’s your gloves and satchel?”

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

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

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

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

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

John Brooks sat quietly by her side silently wondering what had come over little Daisy—sweet, impulsive little Daisy—in a single night. “She is only a child,” he

muttered to himself, “full of whims and caprices; crying her eyes out last week because she could not go off to school, and now crying because she’s got to go.”

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

CHAPTER VII.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

John Brooks laughed outright.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“You think so much of me, dear good old uncle,” cried Daisy, gratefully. “I—I wonder if any one in the world could ever—could ever care for me as—as you

do?” whispered Daisy, laying her soft, warm cheek against his rough hand.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Poor little Daisy never forgot that first day at boarding-school; how all the dainty young girls in their soft white muslins glanced in surprise at her when Mme. Whitney brought her into the school-room, but she could have forgiven them for that if they had not laughed at her poor old uncle John, in his plain country garb, and they giggled behind their handkerchiefs when she clung to his neck and could not say good-bye through her tears, but sunk down into her seat, leaning her head on her desk, bravely trying to keep back the pearly drops that would fall.

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

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

Most of the girls had left the school-room, dividing off into groups and pairs here and there. Daisy sat watching them, feeling wretchedly lonely. Suddenly a

soft white hand was laid lightly on her shoulder, and a sweet voice said:

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

“Daisy Brooks,” she answered, simply.

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

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

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

“Yes,” said Daisy. “I like you now.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER VIII.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Go on, sir; go on!”

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

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

Daisy!”

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

For some moments neither spoke.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A great lump rose in Daisy’s throat.

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

“And may I ask by what right you dared violate the rules and regulations of this establishment by sending a sealed letter to—a man? Your guardian strictly informed me you had no correspondents whatever, and I find this is a—I blush to confess it—actually a love-letter. What have you to say in reference to your folly, Miss Brooks?”

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

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

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

An alarming thought occurred to madame.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Still Daisy rocked herself to and fro on her knees at her feet. Suddenly a daring

thought occurred to her. The letter which had caused her such bitter woe lay on the table almost within her very grasp—the letter, every line of which breathed of her pure, sacred love for Rex—her Rex—whom she dared not even claim. She could imagine madame commenting upon every word and sentence, ridiculing those tender expressions which had been such rapturous joy to her hungry little heart as she had penned them. And, last of all, and far the most bitter thought, how dear old John Brooks would turn his honest eyes upon her tell-tale face, demanding to know what the secret was—the secret which she had promised her young husband she would not reveal, come what would. If his face should grow white and stern, and those lips, which had blessed, praised, and petted, but never scolded her—if those lips should curse her, she would die then and there at his feet. In an instant she had resolved upon a wild, hazardous plan. Quick as a flash of lightning Daisy sprung to her feet and tore the coveted letter from madame's detaining grasp; the door stood open, and with the fleetness of a hunted deer she flew down the corridor, never stopping for breath until she had gained the very water's edge.

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

CHAPTER IX.

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

The servants looked at one another in blank amazement. No one dared tell her Daisy had fled.

The torn envelope, which Daisy had neglected to gain possession of, lay at her feet.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Daisy paid little heed to the dark rolling clouds that were slowly obscuring the brilliant sunshine, or the swirl and dash of the waves that were rocking her little boat so restlessly to and fro. The hours seemed to slip heedlessly by her. The soft

gloaming seemed to fall about her swiftly and without warning.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Suddenly her little boat spun round and round, the swift water was drawing her directly in the path of the barge; another moment and it would be upon her; she

beat the air with her white hands, gazing with frozen horror at the fatal lights drawing nearer and nearer.

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER X.

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

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

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

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

"I was so sure of Rex," she said, bitterly; "if any one had said to me, 'Rex prefers your overseer's niece, Daisy Brooks, with her baby face and pink-and-white beauty,' I would have laughed them to scorn. Prefers her to me, the haughty heiress of Whitestone Hall, for whose love, or even smile, men have sued in vain! I have managed the whole affair very cleverly!" she mused. "John Brooks does not return before the coming spring, and Septima is removed from my path most effectually, and if Lester Stanwick manages his part successfully, I shall have little to fear from Daisy Brooks! How clever Lester was to learn Rex had been to the Detective Agency! How he must have loved that girl!" she cried, hotly, with a darkening brow. "Ah, Rex!" she whispered, softly (and for an instant the hard look died out of her face), "no one shall take you from me. I would rather look upon your face cold in death, and know no one else could claim you, than see you smile lovingly upon a rival. There is no torture under heaven so bitter to endure as the pangs of a love unreturned!" she cried, fiercely.

She threw open the window and leaned far out into the radiant starlight, as the great clock pealed the hour of seven. "Rex has received my note," she said, "with the one from his mother inclosed. Surely he will not refuse my request. He will come, if only through politeness!" Again she laughed, that low, mocking laugh peculiar to her, as she heard the peal of the bell. "It is Rex," she whispered, clasping her hands over her beating heart. "To-night I will sow the first seeds of distrust in your heart, and when they take root you shall despise Daisy Brooks a thousand-fold more than you love her now. She shall feel the keen thrust of a rival's bitter vengeance!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

between them.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Rex!” cried Pluma, starting to her feet, “you know not what you say—surely you do not know! I would have warned you, but you would not listen. I saw you drifting toward a yawning chasm; I stretched out my arms to save you, but you would not heed me. You are a stranger to the people around here, Rex, or they

would have warned you. Sin is never so alluring as in the guise of a beautiful woman. It is not too late yet. Forget Daisy Brooks; she is not a fit companion for noble Rex Lyon, or pure enough to kiss an honest man's lips."

"For God's sake, Miss Hurlhurst, what do you mean?" cried Rex, slowly rising from his seat and facing her, pale as death. "In Heaven's name, explain the accusations you have just uttered, or I shall go mad! If a man had uttered those words, I would have—"

The words died away on his lips; he remembered he was talking to a woman. Rex's eyes fairly glowed with rage as he turned on his heel and strode rapidly up and down the room.

"Rex," said Pluma, softly advancing a step toward him, "it always grieves a true woman to admit the error of a fallen sister—they would shield her if such a thing were possible."

"I do not believe it," retorted Rex, impetuously. "Women seem to take a keen delight in slandering one another, as far as I can see. But you might as well tell me yonder moon was treacherous and vile as to tell me Daisy Brooks was aught but sweet and pure—you could not force me to believe it."

"I do not attempt to force you to believe it. I have told you the truth, as a loving sister might have done. None are so blind as those who will not see," she said, toying with the jewels upon her white fingers.

"Daisy Brooks is as pure as yonder lily," cried Rex, "and I love her as I love my soul!"

His quivering, impassioned voice thrilled Pluma to her heart's core, and she felt a keen regret that this wealth of love was withheld from her own hungry heart. Rex had never appeared so noble, so handsome, so well worth winning, in her eyes, as at that moment.

"I am sorry for you, Rex," sobbed Pluma, artfully burying her face in her lace kerchief, "because she can never return your love; she does not love you, Rex."

"Yes, she does love me," cried Rex. "I have settled it beyond a doubt."

"She has settled it beyond a doubt—is not that what you mean, Rex?" she asked, looking him squarely in the face, with a peculiar glitter in her sparkling dark eyes.

"There is something you are keeping from me, Pluma," cried Rex, seizing both of her hands, and gazing anxiously into the false, fair, smiling, treacherous face.

“You know where Daisy has gone—in Heaven’s name, tell me! I can not endure the suspense—do not torture me, Pluma! I will forget you have spoken unkindly of poor little Daisy if you will only tell me where she has gone.”

“Sit down, Rex,” she said, soothingly; “I will not dare tell you while you look at me with such a gleaming light in your eyes. Promise not to interrupt me to the end.”

A nameless dread was clutching at his heart-strings. What could she mean? he asked himself, confusedly. What did this foul mystery mean? He must know, or he would go mad!

“You may speak out unreservedly, Miss Pluma,” he said, hoarsely. “I give you my word, as a gentleman, I shall not interrupt you, even though your words should cause me a bitter heart-pang.”

He stood before her, his arms folded across his breast, yet no pang of remorse crept into Pluma Hurlhurst’s relentless heart for the cruel blow she was about to deal him.

“I must begin at the time of the lawn fête,” she said. “That morning a woman begged to see me, sobbing so piteously I could not refuse her an audience. No power of words could portray the sad story of suffering and wrong she poured into my ears, of a niece—beautiful, young, passionate, and willful—and of her prayers and useless expostulations, and of a handsome, dissolute lover to whom the girl was passionately attached, and of elopements she had frustrated, alas! more than once. Ah! how shall I say it!—the lover was not a marrying man.”

Pluma stopped short, and hid her face again in her kerchief as if in utter confusion.

“Go on—go on!” cried Rex, hoarsely.

“‘Lend me money,’ cried the woman, ‘that I may protect the girl by sending her off to school at once. Kind lady, she is young, like you, and I beg you on my knees!’ I gave the woman the required amount, and the girl was taken to school the very next day. But the end was not there. The lover followed the girl—there must have been a preconcerted plan between them—and on the morning after she had entered school she fled from it—fled with her lover. That lover was Lester Stanwick—gay, fascinating, perfidious Lester—whom you know but too well. Can you not guess who the girl was, Rex?”

The dark eyes regarding her were frozen with horror, his white lips moved, but no sound issued from them. She leaned nearer to him, her dark, perfumed hair

swept across his face as she whispered, with startling effect:

“The girl was Daisy Brooks, and she is at this moment in company with her lover! Heaven pity you, Rex; you must learn to forget her.”

CHAPTER XI.

When Daisy Brooks opened her eyes, she found herself lying on a white bed, and in a strange apartment which she never remembered having seen before. For one brief instant she quite imagined the terrible ordeal through which she had passed was but a dream. Then it all came back to her with cruel distinctness.

“Where am I?” she cried, struggling up to a sitting posture, and putting back the tangled golden hair from her face. “How came I here? Who saved me from the terrible dark water?”

“I did,” answered a young man, rising from his seat by the open window. “I saved your life at the risk of my own. Look up into my face, Daisy, and see if you do not remember me.”

She lifted her blue eyes to the dark, handsome, smiling face before her. Yes, she had seen that face before, but she could not remember where.

He laughed, disclosing his handsome white teeth.

“You can not guess, eh?” he said. “Then it is certainly evident I did not make much of an impression upon you. I am disappointed. I will not keep you in suspense, however. We met at Whitestone Hall, on the night of the lawn fête, and my name is Lester Stanwick.”

Ah, she *did* remember him, standing beneath a waving palm-tree, his bold, dark eyes following her every motion, while she was waltzing with Rex.

He saw the flash of recognition in her eyes, and the blush that mantled her fair, sweet face.

“I am very grateful to you, sir, for saving me. But won’t you take me home, please? I don’t want to go back to Madame Whitney’s.”

“Of course not,” he said, with a twinkle in his eyes, “when you left it in such a remarkable manner as running away.”

“How did you know I ran away?” asked Daisy, flushing hotly.

“Madame Whitney has advertised for you,” he responded, promptly.

Although he well knew what he uttered was a deliberate falsehood, he merely guessed the little wild bird had grown weary of the restraint, and had flown away.

“Did she do that?” asked Daisy, thoroughly alarmed, her great blue eyes dilating with fear. “Oh, Mr. Stanwick, what shall I do? I do not want to go back. I would sooner die first.”

“There is no occasion for you to do either,” he replied. “You are in good hands. Stay here until the storm blows over. In all probability the madame has sent detectives out in all directions searching for you.”

Daisy was so young, so unsuspecting, so artless, and knew so little of the ways of the world or its intriguing people that she quite believed his assertion.

“Oh, what shall I do?” she sobbed, covering her face with her hands. “Oh, I *must* go back to Uncle John, and—to—to—”

Stanwick had no idea she meant Rex. He took it for granted she meant John Brooks and Septima.

“It is quite uncertain when John Brooks returns to Allendale,” he said; “and I suppose you are aware his sister has also left the place—gone, no one knows whither—the Brookses’ cottage on the brow of the hill stands empty.”

“Gone!” cried Daisy, catching her breath swift and hard, “did you say, sir? Aunt Septima has gone—no one lives in the cottage?” Poor Daisy quite believed she was losing her senses.

“Yes,” said Stanwick, smothering a low, malicious laugh, “that is what I said; but I am quite surprised that it is news to you. You are all alone in the world, you see. Of course you could not go back to Allendale. You can do no better than stay in your present quarters for at least a week or so, until you fully recover from your mad frolic on the water and gain a little strength.”

“Where am I?” asked Daisy, “and how did I get here? and who lives here?”

“One question at a time, if you please,” laughed Stanwick, gazing admiringly at the beautiful, questioning, eager face.

“I suppose,” he began, with provoking coolness, “you have been filling that little head of yours with romantic ideas of running away from school, and sailing far out to sea, and straight into the arms of some handsome hero who would save you, and would carry you off to some castle, and turn out to be a prince in

disguise! That's the way they usually turn out, isn't it? But you found the theory did not work very well in real life, and your little romance came near costing you your life—eh, Miss Daisy? As for the second question, I rescued you, just in the nick of time, by jumping into the turbulent waves and bearing you out of harm's way and keeping that little romantic head of yours above water until the barge could be stopped, and you were then brought on board. I recognized you at once," he continued; "and to prevent suspicion and inquiry, which would have been sure to follow, I claimed you—as my wife! Do not be alarmed," he said, as a sharp, horrified cry rose to the red lips. "I simply did that in order to protect you from being returned at once in bitter disgrace to Madame Whitney's. Not knowing what else to do with you when the boat landed, I brought you here, and here you have been ever since, quite unconscious up to date."

"Was it last night you brought me here?" asked Daisy.

"You are not good at guessing. You have been here two nights and two days."

"But who lives here?" persisted Daisy. "Is this your house?"

"Oh, dear, no," laughed Stanwick. "Upon my honor, you are not very complimentary to my taste," he said, glancing around the meagerly furnished apartment. "As near as I can understand it, the house is occupied by three grim old maids. Each looks to be the twin of the other. This was the first shelter I could find, and I had carried you all the way from the boat in my arms, and under the circumstances, after much consulting, they at last agreed to allow you to remain here. Now you have the whole story in a nutshell."

"Why did they not send to Septima to come to me?" she asked presently.

"Because they thought you were with your best protector—your husband."

"Did you tell them that here, too?" asked Daisy, growing white and ill with a dizzy horror. "Oh, Mr. Stanwick, send for them at once, and tell them it is not so, or I must!" she added, desperately.

"You must do nothing of the kind, you silly child. Do you suppose they would have sheltered you for a single instant if they had not believed you were my wife? You do not know the ways of the world. Believe me, it was the only course I could pursue, in that awkward dilemma, without bringing disgrace and detection upon you."

As if in answer to the question that was trembling upon Daisy's lips, he continued:

“I am stopping at a boarding-place some little distance from here. This is not Baltimore, but a little station some sixty miles from there. When you are well and strong you may go where you please, although I frankly own the situation is by no means an unpleasant one for me. I would be willing to stay here always—with you.”

“Sir!” cried Daisy, flushing as red as the climbing roses against the window, her blue eyes blazing up with sudden fire, “do you mean to insult me?”

“By no means,” responded Lester Stanwick, eagerly. “Indeed, I respect and honor you too much for that. Why, I risked my life to save yours, and shielded your honor with my name. Had I been your husband in very truth I could not have done more.”

Daisy covered her face with her hands.

“I thank you very much for saving me,” she sobbed, “but won’t you please go away now and leave me to myself?”

Roué and villain as Lester Stanwick was, he could not help feeling touched by the innocence and beauty of little Daisy, and from that instant he loved her with a wild, absorbing, passionate love, and he made a vow, then and there, that he would win her.

From their boyhood up Rex and Lester had been rivals. At college Rex had carried off the honors with flying colors. Pluma Hurlhurst, the wealthy heiress, had chosen Rex in preference to himself. He stood little chance with bright-eyed maidens compared with handsome, careless, winning Rex Lyon.

Quite unobserved, he had witnessed the meeting between Rex and Daisy at the fountain, and how tenderly he clasped her in his arms as they waltzed together in the mellow light, to the delicious strains of the “Blue Danube,” and knowing Rex as well as he did, he knew for the first time in life Rex’s heart was touched.

“It would be a glorious revenge,” Stanwick had muttered to himself, “if I could win her from him.” Then a sordid motive of revenge alone prompted him—now he was beginning to experience the sweet thrillings of awakened love himself. Yes, he had learned to love Daisy for her own sweet self.

He smiled as he thought of the last words Pluma Hurlhurst had said to him: “Revenge is sweet, Lester, when love is turned to bitter hatred. Help me to drag Rex Lyon’s pride as low as he has this night dragged mine, and you shall have my hand as your reward. My father is an invalid—he can not live much longer—then you will be master of Whitestone Hall.” As he had walked down the broad

gravel path, running his eye over the vast plantation stretching afar on all sides, like a field of snow, as the moonlight fell upon the waving cotton, he owned to himself it was a fair domain well worth the winning.

But as he stood there, gazing silently down upon little Daisy's face—how strange it was—he would have given up twenty such inheritances for the hope of making sweet little Daisy Brooks his wife.

It was well for Daisy Brooks he little dreamed of the great barrier which lay between them, shutting him out completely from all thoughts of love in Daisy's romantic heart.

CHAPTER XII.

“Please go away,” sobbed Daisy. “Leave me to myself, and I will get up.”

“Very well,” said Stanwick, involuntarily raising her little white hands courteously to his lips; “and remember, I warn you, for your own sake, not to dispute the assertion I have made—that you are my wife.”

“Why?” asked Daisy, wistfully. “They will forgive me when I tell them how it all came about.”

“You do not know women’s ways,” he replied. “They would hand you over at once to the authorities; you would bring disgrace and ruin upon your own head, and bitter shame to John Brooks’s heart. I know him well enough to believe he would never forgive you. On the other hand, when you feel well enough to depart, you can simply say you are going away with your husband. No one will think of detaining you; you will be free as the wind to go where you will. It will cost you but a few words. Remember, there are occasions when it is necessary to prevaricate in order to prevent greater evils—this is one of them.”

Daisy could not dispute this specious logic, and she suffered herself to be persuaded against her will and better judgment. She was dreadfully homesick, poor little soul! and to go back to Allendale, to Rex, was the one wish of her heart. But would he clasp her in his arms if a shadow of disgrace blotted her fair name? She would go back to him and kneel at his feet, and tell him why she had left Mme. Whitney’s. She certainly meant to tell him of all that followed, and, with her little, warm cheek pressed close to his, ask him if she had done right.

At that moment the door of an adjoining room opened, and Lester observed the three ladies standing in a row in the door-way. He knew that three pairs of eyes were regarding him intently through as many pairs of blue glasses.

“Good-bye, my little wife,” he said, raising his voice for their benefit; “I’m off now. I shall see you again to-morrow;” and, before Daisy had the least idea of his intentions, he had pressed a kiss upon her rosy lips and was gone.

The three ladies quickly advanced to the couch upon which Daisy reclined.

“We are very glad to find you are so much better this morning,” they exclaimed, all in a breath. “Your husband has been almost demented about you, my dear.”

They wondered why the white face on the pillow turned so pink, then faded to a dead white, and why the tear-drops started to her beautiful blue eyes.

“I was telling my sisters,” pursued one of the ladies, softly, “you were so young to be married—hardly more than a child. How old are you, my dear—not more than sixteen, I suppose?”

“Sixteen and a few months,” answered Daisy.

“How long have you been married, my dear?” questioned another of the sisters.

A great sob rose in Daisy’s throat as she remembered it was just a week that very day since she had stood in the dim old parlor at the rectory, while Rex clasped her hands, his handsome, smiling eyes gazing so lovingly down upon her, while the old minister spoke the words that bound them for life to each other. It almost seemed to Daisy that long years had intervened, she had passed through so much since then.

“Just a week to-day, madame,” she made answer.

“Why, you are a bride, then,” they all chorused. “Ah! that accounts for your husband’s great anxiety about you. We all agreed we had never seen a husband more devoted!”

Daisy hid her face in the pillow. She thought she would go mad upon being so cruelly misunderstood. Oh! if she had only dared throw herself into their arms and sob out her heartaches on their bosoms. Yes, she was a bride, but the most pitifully homesick, weary, disheartened little girl-bride that ever the sun shone on in the wide, wild world.

They assisted Daisy to arise, brushing out her long, tangled, golden curls, declaring to one another the pretty little creature looked more like a merry, rosy-cheeked school-girl than a little bride-wife, in her pink-and-white dotted muslin, which they had in the meantime done up for her with their own hands.

They wondered, too, why she never asked for her husband, and she looked almost ready to faint when they spoke of him.

“There seems to be something of a mystery here,” remarked one of the sisters when the trio were alone. “If that child is a bride, she is certainly not a happy one. I do not like to judge a fellow-creature—Heaven forbid! but I am sorely afraid all is not right with her. Twice this afternoon, entering the room quietly, I

have found her lying face downward on the sofa, crying as if her heart would break! I am sorely puzzled!”

And the flame of suspicion once lighted was not easily extinguished in the hearts of the curious spinsters.

“‘Won’t you tell me your sorrow, my dear?’ I said.

“‘No, no; I dare not!’ she replied.

“‘Will you not confide in me, Mrs. Stanwick?’ I asked.

“‘She started up wildly, throwing her arms about my neck.

“‘Won’t you please call me Daisy?’ she sobbed, piteously; ‘just Daisy—nothing else.’

“‘Certainly, my dear, if you wish it,’ I replied. ‘There is one question I would like to ask you, Daisy—you have told me your mother is dead?’

“‘Yes,’ she said, leaning her golden head against the window, and watching the white clouds overhead in the blue sky—‘my poor, dear mother is dead!’

“‘Then will you answer me truthfully the question I am about to ask you, Daisy, remembering your mother up in heaven hears you.’

“‘She raised her blue eyes to mine.

“‘I shall answer truthfully any question you may put to me,’ she said; ‘if—if—it is not about Mr. Stanwick.’

“‘It is about yourself, Daisy,’ I said, gravely. ‘Tell me truthfully, child, are you really a wife?’

“‘She caught her breath with a hard, gasping sound; but her blue eyes met mine unflinchingly.

“‘Yes, madame, I am, in the sight of God and man; but I am such an unhappy one. I can not tell you why. My heart is breaking. I want to go back to Allendale!’

“‘Is that where you live, Daisy?’

“‘Yes,’ she said; ‘I am going to start to-morrow morning.’”

“‘How strange!’” echoed the two sisters.

“‘The strangest part of the affair is yet to come. The little creature drew from her pocket a twenty-dollar bill.

“‘You have been kind and good to me,’ she said. I must take enough to carry me back to Allendale. You shall have all the rest, madame.’

“‘Put your money back into your pocket, Daisy,’ I replied. ‘Your husband has already paid your bill. He begged me to accept it in advance on the night you came.’

“She gave a great start, and a flood of hot color rushed over her face.

“‘I—I—did not know,’ she said, faintly, ‘how very good Mr. Stanwick has been to me.’”

The three sisters looked at one another in silent wonder over the rims of their spectacles and shook their heads ominously.

Dear reader, we must return at this period to Rex—poor, broken-hearted Rex—whom we left in the company of Pluma Hurlhurst in the spacious parlor of Whitestone Hall.

“Daisy Brooks is at this moment with Lester Stanwick! You must learn to forget her, Rex,” she repeated, slowly.

A low cry escaped from Rex’s lips, and he recoiled from her as though she had struck him a heavy blow. His heart seemed fairly stifled in his bosom, and he trembled in every limb with repressed excitement.

“Here is a letter from Madame Whitney,” she continued. “Read it for yourself, Rex. You see, she says: ‘Daisy fled. It has been since ascertained she went to Elmwood, a station some sixty miles from here, where she now is, at the cottage of the Burton sisters, in company with her lover. I shall not attempt to claim her—her retribution must come from another source.’”

The words seemed to stand out in letters of fire.

“Oh, my little love,” he cried, “there must be some terrible mistake! My God! my God! there must be some horrible mistake—some foul conspiracy against you, my little sweetheart, my darling love!”

He rose to his feet with a deep-drawn sigh, his teeth shut close, his heart beating with great strangling throbs of pain. Strong and brave as Rex was, this trouble was almost more than he could bear.

“Where are you going, Rex?” said Pluma, laying a detaining hand upon his arm.

“I am going to Elmwood,” he cried, bitterly, “to prove this accusation is a cruel

falsehood. Daisy has no lover; she is as sweet and pure as Heaven itself! I was mad to doubt her for a single instant.”

“Judge for yourself, Rex—seeing is believing,” said Pluma, maliciously, a smoldering vengeance burning in her flashing eyes, and a cold, cruel smile flitting across her face, while she murmured under her breath: “Go, fond, foolish lover; your fool’s paradise will be rudely shattered—ay, your hopes crushed worse than mine are now, for your lips can not wear a smile like mine when your heart is breaking. Good-bye, Rex,” she said, “and remember, in the hour when sorrow strikes you keenest, turn to me; my friendship is true, and shall never fail you.”

Rex bowed coldly and turned away; his heart was too sick for empty words, and the heavy-hearted young man, who slowly walked down the graveled path away from Whitestone Hall in the moonlight, was as little like the gay, handsome Rex of one short week ago as could well be imagined.

There was the scent of roses and honeysuckles in the soft wind; and some sweet-voiced bird awakened from sleep, and fancying it was day, swung to and fro amid the green foliage, filling the night with melody. The pitying stars shone down upon him from the moonlighted heavens; but the still, solemn beauty of the night was lost upon Rex. He regretted—oh! so bitterly—that he had parted from his sweet little girl-bride, fearing his mother’s scornful anger, or through a sense of mistaken duty.

“Had they but known little Daisy is my wife, they would have known how impossible was their accusation that she was with Lester Stanwick.”

He shuddered at the very thought of such a possibility.

The thought of Daisy, his little girl-bride, being sent to school amused him.

“Poor little robin!” he murmured. “No wonder she flew from her bondage when she found the cage-door open! How pleased the little gypsy will be to see me!” he mused. “I will clasp the dear little runaway in my arms, and never let her leave me again! Mother could not help loving my little Daisy if she were once to see her, and sister Birdie would take to her at once.”

The next morning broke bright and clear; the sunshine drifted through the green foliage of the trees, and crimson-breasted robins sung their sweetest songs in the swaying boughs of the blossoming magnolias; pansies and buttercups gemmed the distant hill-slope, and nature’s fountain—a merry, babbling brook—danced joyously through the clover banks. No cloud was in the fair, blue, smiling

heavens; no voice of nature warned poor little Daisy, as she stood at the open window drinking in the pure, sweet beauty of the morning of the dark clouds which were gathering over her innocent head, and of the storm which was so soon to burst upon her in all its fury. Daisy turned away from the window with a little sigh. She did not see a handsome, stalwart figure hurrying down the hill-side toward the cottage. How her heart would have throbbed if she had only known Rex (for it was he) was so near her! With a strangely beating heart he advanced toward the little wicket gate, at which stood one of the sisters, busily engaged pruning her rose-bushes.

“Can you tell me, madame, where I can find the Misses Burton’s cottage?” he asked, courteously lifting his hat.

“This is the Burton cottage,” she answered, “and I am Ruth Burton. What can I do for you?”

“I would like to see Daisy Brooks, if you please. She is here, I believe?” he said, questioningly. “May I come in?”

Rex’s handsome, boyish face and winning smile won their way straight to the old lady’s heart at once.

“Perhaps you are the young lady’s brother, sir? There is evidently some mistake, however, as the young lady’s name is Stanwick—Daisy Stanwick. Her husband, Lester Stanwick—I believe that is the name—is also in Elmwood.”

All the color died out of Rex’s handsome face and the light from his brown eyes. He leaned heavily against the gate-post. The words seemed shrieked on the air and muttered on the breeze.

“Daisy is *not* his wife! My God, madame!” he cried, hoarsely, “she *could not* be!”

“It is very true,” replied the old lady, softly. “I have her own words for it. There may be some mistake, as you say,” she said, soothingly, noting the death-like despair that settled over the noble face. “She is a pretty, fair, winsome little creature, blue-eyed, and curling golden hair, and lives at Allendale. She is certainly married. I will call her. She shall tell you so herself. Daisy—Mrs. Stanwick—come here, dear,” she called.

“I am coming, Miss Ruth,” answered a sweet, bird-like voice, which pierced poor Rex’s heart to the very core as a girlish little figure bounded through the open door-way, out into the brilliant sunshine.

“God pity me!” cried Rex, staggering forward. “It is Daisy—my wife!”

CHAPTER XIII.

Rex had hoped against hope.

“Daisy!” he cried, holding out his arms to her with a yearning, passionate cry. “My God! tell me it is false—you are *not* here with Stanwick—or I shall go mad! Daisy, my dear little sweetheart, my little love, why don’t you speak?” he cried, clasping her close to his heart and covering her face and hair and hands with passionate, rapturous kisses.

Daisy struggled out of his embrace, with a low, broken sob, flinging herself on her knees at his feet with a sharp cry.

“Daisy,” said the old lady, bending over her and smoothing back the golden hair from the lovely anguished face, “tell him the truth, dear. You are here with Mr. Stanwick; is it not so?”

The sudden weight of sorrow that had fallen upon poor, hapless Daisy seemed to paralyze her very senses. The sunshine seemed blotted out, and the light of heaven to grow dark around her.

“Yes,” she cried, despairingly; and it almost seemed to Daisy another voice had spoken with her lips.

“This Mr. Stanwick claims to be your husband?” asked the old lady, solemnly.

“Yes,” she cried out again, in agony, “but, Rex, I—I—”

The words died away on her white lips, and the sound died away in her throat. She saw him recoil from her with a look of white, frozen horror on his face which gave place to stern, bitter wrath. Slowly and sadly he put her clinging arms away from him, folding his arms across his breast with that terrible look upon his face such as a hero’s face wears when he has heard, unflinchingly, his death sentence—the calm of terrible despair.

“Daisy,” he said, proudly, “I have trusted you blindly, for I loved you madly, passionately. I would as soon believe the fair smiling heavens that bend above us false as you whom I loved so madly and so well. I was mad to bind you with such cruel, irksome bonds when your heart was not mine but another’s. My

dream of love is shattered now. You have broken my heart and ruined and blighted my life. God forgive you, Daisy, for I never can! I give you back your freedom; I release you from your vows; I can not curse you—I have loved you too well for that; I cast you from my heart as I cast you from my life; farewell, Daisy—farewell forever!”

She tried to speak, but her tongue cleaved to the roof of her mouth. Oh, pitying Heaven, if she could only have cried out to you and the angels to bear witness and proclaim her innocence! The strength to move hand or foot seemed suddenly to have left her. She tried hard, oh! so hard, to speak, but no sound issued from her white lips. She felt as one in a horrible trance, fearfully, terribly conscious of all that transpired around her, yet denied the power to move even a muscle to defend herself.

“Have you anything to say to me, Daisy?” he asked, mournfully, turning from her to depart.

The woful, terrified gaze of the blue eyes deepened pitifully, but she spoke no word, and Rex turned from her—turned from the girl-bride whom he loved so madly, with a bursting, broken heart, more bitter to bear than death itself—left her alone with the pitying sunlight falling upon her golden hair, and her white face turned up to heaven, silently praying to God that she might die then and there.

Oh, Father above, pity her! She had no mother’s gentle voice to guide her, no father’s strong breast to weep upon, no sister’s soothing presence. She was so young and so pitifully lonely, and Rex had drifted out of her life forever, believing her—oh, bitterest of thoughts!—believing her false and sinful.

Poor little Daisy was ignorant of the ways of the world; but a dim realization of the full import of the terrible accusation brought against her forced its way to her troubled brain.

She only realized—Rex—her darling Rex, had gone out of her life forever.

Daisy flung herself face downward in the long, cool, waving green grass where Rex had left her.

“Daisy,” called Miss Burton, softly, “it is all over; come into the house, my dear.”

But she turned from her with a shuddering gasp.

“In the name of pity, leave me to myself,” she sobbed; “it is the greatest kindness

you can do me.”

And the poor old lady who had wrought so much sorrow unwittingly in those two severed lives, walked slowly back to the cottage, with tears in her eyes, strongly impressed there must be some dark mystery in the young girl’s life who was sobbing her heart out in the green grass yonder; and she did just what almost any other person would have done under the same circumstances—sent immediately for Lester Stanwick. He answered the summons at once, listening with intense interest while the aged spinster briefly related all that had transpired; but through oversight or excitement she quite forgot to mention Rex had called Daisy his wife.

“Curse him!” he muttered, under his breath, “I—I believe the girl actually cares for him.”

Then he went out to Daisy, lying so still and lifeless among the pink clover and waving grass.

Poor Daisy! Poor, desperate, lonely, struggling child! All this cruel load of sorrow, crushing her girlish heart, and blighting her young life, and she so innocent, so entirely blameless, yet such a plaything of fate.

“Daisy,” he said, bending over her and lifting the slight form in his arms, “they tell me some one has been troubling you. Who has dared annoy you? Trust in me, Daisy. What is the matter?”

Lester Stanwick never forgot the white, pitiful face that was raised to his.

“I want to die,” she sobbed. “Oh, why did you not leave me to die in the dark water? it was so cruel of you to save me.”

“Do you want to know why I risked my life to save you, Daisy? Does not my every word and glance tell you why?” The bold glance in his eyes spoke volumes. “Have you not guessed that I love you, Daisy?”

“Oh, please do not talk to me in that way, Mr. Stanwick,” she cried, starting to her feet in wild alarm. “Indeed you must not,” she stammered.

“Why not?” he demanded, a merciless smile stirring beneath his heavy mustache. “I consider that you belong to me. I mean to make you my wife in very truth.”

Daisy threw up her hands in a gesture of terror heart-breaking to see, shrinking away from him in quivering horror, her sweet face ashen pale.

“Oh, go away, go away!” she cried out. “I am growing afraid of you. I could never marry you, and I would not if I could. I shall always be grateful to you for what you have done for me, but, oh, go away, and leave me now, for my trouble is greater than I can bear!”

“You would not if you could,” he repeated, coolly, smiling so strangely her blood seemed to change to ice in her veins. “I thank you sincerely for your appreciation of me. I did not dream, however, your aversion to me was so deeply rooted. That makes little difference, however. I shall make you my wife this very day all the same; business, urgent business, calls me away from Elmwood to-day. I shall take you with me as my wife.”

She heard the cruel words like one in a dream.

“Rex! Rex!” she sobbed, under her breath. Suddenly she remembered Rex had left her—she was never to look upon his face again. He had left her to the cold mercies of a cruel world. Poor little Daisy—the unhappy, heart-broken girl-
bride—sat there wondering what else could happen to her. “God has shut me out from His mercy,” she cried; “there is nothing for me to do but to die.”

“I am a desperate man, Daisy,” pursued Stanwick, slowly. “My will is my law. The treatment you receive at my hands depends entirely upon yourself—you will not dare defy me!” His eyes fairly glowed with a strange fire that appalled her as she met his passionate glance.

Then Daisy lifted up her golden head with the first defiance she had ever shown, the deathly pallor deepening on her fair, sweet, flower-like face, and the look of a hunted deer at bay in the beautiful velvety agonized eyes, as she answered:

“I refuse to marry you, Mr. Stanwick. Please go away and leave me in peace.”

He laughed mockingly.

“I shall leave you for the present, my little sweetheart,” he said, “but I shall return in exactly fifteen minutes. Hold yourself in readiness to receive me then; I shall not come alone, but bring with me a minister, who will be prepared to marry us. I warn you not to attempt to run away,” he said, interpreting aright the startled glance she cast about her. “In yonder lane stands a trusty sentinel to see that you do not leave this house. You have been guarded thus since you entered this house; knowing your proclivity to escape impending difficulties, I have prepared accordingly. You can not escape your fate, my little wild flower!”

“No minister would marry an unwilling bride—he could not. I would fling myself at his feet and tell him all, crying out I was—I was—”

“You will do nothing of the kind,” he interrupted, a hard, resolute look settling on his face. “I would have preferred winning you by fair means, if possible; if you make it impossible I shall be forced to a desperate measure. I had not intended adopting such stringent measures, except in an extreme case. Permit me to explain what I shall do to prevent you from making the slightest outcry.” As he spoke he drew from his pocket a small revolver heavily inlaid with pearl and silver. “I shall simply hold this toy to your pretty forehead to prevent a scene. The minister will be none the wiser—he is blind? Do you think,” he continued, slowly, “that I am the man to give up a thing I have set my heart upon for a childish whim?”

“Believe me,” cried Daisy, earnestly, “it is no childish whim. Oh, Mr. Stanwick, I want to be grateful to you—why will you torture me until I hate you?”

“I will marry you this very day, Daisy Brooks, whether you hate me or love me. I have done my best to gain your love. It will come in time; I can wait for it.”

“You will never make me love you,” cried Daisy, covering her face with her hands; “do not hope it—and the more you talk to me the less I like you. I wish you would go away.”

“I shall not despair,” said Stanwick, with a confident smile. “I like things which I find it hard to obtain—that was always one of my characteristics—and I never liked you so well as I like you now, in your defiant anger, and feel more determined than ever to make you my own.”

Suddenly a new thought occurred to him as he was about to turn from her.

“Why, how stupid of me!” he cried. “I could not bring the parson here, for they think you my wife already. I must change my plan materially by taking you to the parsonage. We can go from here directly to the station. I shall return in exactly fifteen minutes with a conveyance. Remember, I warn you to make no outcry for protection in the meantime. If you do I shall say you inherited your mother’s malady. I am well acquainted with your history, you see.” He kissed his finger-tips to her carelessly. “*Au revoir*, my love, but not farewell,” he said, lightly, “until we meet to be parted nevermore,” and, with a quick, springy step Lester Stanwick walked rapidly down the clover-bordered path on his fatal errand.

In the distance the little babbling brook sung to her of peace and rest beneath its curling, limpid waters.

“Oh, mother, mother,” she cried, “what was the dark sorrow that tortured your

poor brain, till it drove you mad—ay, mad—ending in death and despair? Why did you leave your little Daisy here to suffer so? I feel such a throbbing in my own poor brain—but I must fly anywhere, anywhere, to escape this new sorrow. God has forgotten me.” She took one step forward in a blind, groping, uncertain way. “My last ray of hope has died out,” she cried as the memory of his cruel words came slowly back to her, so mockingly uttered—“the minister would be none the wiser—he is blind.”

CHAPTER XIV.

When Lester Stanwick returned to the cottage he found that quite an unexpected turn of events had transpired. Miss Burton had gone out to Daisy—she lay so still and lifeless in the long green grass.

“Heaven bless me!” she cried, in alarm, raising her voice to a pitch that brought both of the sisters quickly to her side. “Matilda, go at once and fetch the doctor. See, this child is ill, her cheeks are burning scarlet and her eyes are like stars.”

At that opportune moment they espied the doctor’s carriage proceeding leisurely along the road.

“Dear me, how lucky,” cried Ruth, “Doctor West should happen along just now. Go to the gate, quick, Matilda, and ask him to stop.”

The keen eyes of the doctor, however, had observed the figure lying on the grass and the frantic movements of the three old ladies bending over it, and drew rein of his own accord to see what was the matter.

He drew back with a cry of surprise as his eyes rested on the beautiful flushed face of the young girl lying among the blue harebells at his feet.

“I am afraid this is a serious case,” he said, thoughtfully, placing his cool hand on her burning forehead; “the child has all the symptoms of brain fever in its worst form, brought on probably through some great excitement.” The three ladies looked at one another meaningly. “She must be taken into the house and put to bed at once,” he continued, authoritatively, lifting the slight figure in his strong arms, and gazing pityingly down upon the beautiful flushed face framed in its sheen of golden hair resting against his broad shoulders.

The doctor was young and unmarried and impressible; and the strangest sensation he had ever experienced thrilled through his heart as the blue, flaring eyes met his and the trembling red lips incoherently beseeched him to save her, hide her somewhere, anywhere, before the fifteen minutes were up.

A low muttered curse burst from Stanwick’s lips upon his return, as he took in the situation at a single glance.

As Daisy's eyes fell upon Stanwick's face she uttered a piteous little cry:

"Save me from him—save me!" she said, hysterically, growing rapidly so alarmingly worse that Stanwick was forced to leave the room, motioning the doctor to follow him into the hall.

"The young lady is my wife," he said, with unflinching assurance, uttering the cruel falsehood, "and we intend leaving Elmwood to-day. I am in an uncomfortable dilemma. I must go, yet I can not leave my—my wife. She must be removed, doctor; can you not help me to arrange it in some way?"

"No, sir," cried the doctor, emphatically; "she can not be removed. As her physician, I certainly would not give my consent to such a proceeding; her very life would pay the forfeit."

For a few moments Lester Stanwick paced up and down the hall lost in deep thought; his lips were firmly set, and there was a determined gleam in his restless black eyes. Suddenly he stopped short directly before the doctor, who stood regarding him with no very agreeable expression in his honest gray eyes.

"How long will it be before the crisis is past—that is, how long will it be before she is able to be removed?"

"Not under three weeks," replied the doctor, determinedly.

"Good heavens!" he ejaculated, sharply. "Why, I shall have to—" He bit his lip savagely, as if he had been on the point of disclosing some guarded secret. "Fate is against me," he said, "in more ways than one; these things can not be avoided, I suppose. Well, doctor, as I am forced to leave to-day I shall leave her in your charge. I will return in exactly two weeks. She has brain fever, you say?"

The doctor nodded.

"You assure me she can not leave her bed for two weeks to come?" he continued, anxiously.

"I can safely promise that," replied the doctor, wondering at the strange, satisfied smile that flitted like a meteor over his companion's face for one brief instant.

"This will defray her expenses in the meantime," he said, putting a few crisp bank-notes into the doctor's hand. "See that she has every luxury."

He was about to re-enter the room where Daisy lay, but the doctor held him back.

"I should advise you to remain away for the present," he said, "your presence

produces such an unpleasant effect upon her. Wait until she sleeps.”

“I have often thought it so strange people in delirium shrink so from those they love best; I can not understand it,” said Stanwick, with an odd, forced laugh. “As you are the doctor, I suppose your orders must be obeyed, however. If the fever should happen to take an unfavorable turn in the meantime, please drop a line to my address, ‘care of Miss Pluma Hurlhurst, of Whitestone Hall, Allendale,’” he said, extending his card. “It will be forwarded to me promptly, and I can come on at once.”

Again the doctor nodded, putting the card safely away in his wallet, and soon after Lester Stanwick took his departure, roundly cursing his luck, yet congratulating himself upon the fact that Daisy could not leave Elmwood—he could rest content on that score.

Meanwhile the three venerable sisters and the young doctor were watching anxiously at Daisy’s bedside.

“Oh, my poor little dear—my pretty little dear!” sobbed Ruth, caressing the burning little hands that clung to her so tightly.

“Won’t you hide me?” pleaded Daisy, laying her hot cheek against the wrinkled hand that held hers. “Hide me, please, just as if I were your own child; I have no mother, you know.”

“God help the pretty, innocent darling!” cried the doctor, turning hastily away to hide the suspicious moisture that gathered in his eyes. “No one is going to harm you, little one,” he said, soothingly; “no one shall annoy you.”

“Was it so great a sin? He would not let me explain. He has gone out of my life!” she wailed, pathetically, putting back the golden rings of hair from her flushed face. “Rex! Rex!” she sobbed, incoherently, “I shall die—or, worse, I shall go mad, if you do not come back to me!”

The three ladies looked at one another questioningly, in alarm.

“You must not mind the strange ravings of a person in delirium,” said the doctor, curtly; “they are liable to imagine and say all sorts of nonsense. Pay no attention to what she says, my dear ladies; don’t disturb her with questions. That poor little brain needs absolute rest; every nerve seems to have been strained to its utmost.”

After leaving the proper medicines and giving minute instructions as to how and when it should be administered, Dr. West took his departure, with a strange,

vague uneasiness at his heart.

“Pshaw!” he muttered to himself, as he drove briskly along the shadowy road, yet seeing none of its beauty, “how strange it is these young girls will fall in love and marry such fellows as that!” he mused. “There is something about his face that I don’t like; he is a scoundrel, and I’ll bet my life on it!”

The doctor brought his fist down on his knee with such a resounding blow that poor old Dobbin broke into a gallop. But, drive as fast he would, he could not forget the sweet, childish face that had taken such a strong hold upon his fancy. The trembling red lips and pleading blue eyes haunted him all the morning, as though they held some secret they would fain have whispered.

All the night long Daisy clung to the hands that held hers, begging and praying her not to leave her alone, until the poor old lady was quite overcome by the fatigue of continued watching beside her couch. Rest or sleep seemed to have fled from Daisy’s bright, restless eyes.

“Don’t go away,” she cried; “everybody goes away. I do not belong to any one. I am all—all—alone,” she would sigh, drearily.

Again she fancied she was with Rex, standing beneath the magnolia boughs in the sunshine; again, she was clinging to his arm—while some cruel woman insulted her—sobbing pitifully upon his breast; again, she was parting from him at the gate, asking him if what they had done was right; then she was in some school-room, begging piteously for some cruel letter; then out on the waves in the storm and the on-coming darkness of night.

The sisters relieved one another at regular intervals. They had ceased to listen to her pathetic little appeals for help, or the wild cries of agony that burst from the red feverish lips as she started up from her slumbers with stifled sobs, moaning out that the time was flying; that she must escape anywhere, anywhere, while there were still fifteen minutes left her.

She never once mentioned Stanwick’s name, or Septima’s, but called incessantly for Rex and poor old Uncle John.

“Who in the world do you suppose Rex is?” said Matilda, thoughtfully. “That name is continually on her lips—the last word she utters when she closes her eyes, the first word to cross her lips when she awakes. That must certainly be the handsome young fellow she met at the gate. If he is Rex I do not wonder the poor child loved him so. He was the handsomest, most noble-looking, frank-faced young man I have ever seen; and he took on in a way that made me

actually cry when I told him she was married. He would not believe it, until I called the child and she told him herself it was the truth. I was sorry from the bottom of my heart that young fellow had not won her instead of this Stanwick, they were so suited to each other.”

“Ah,” said Ruth, after a moment’s pause, “I think I have the key to this mystery. She loves this handsome Rex, that is evident; perhaps they have had a lovers’ quarrel, and she has married this one on the spur of the moment through pique. Oh, the pretty little dear!” sighed Ruth. “I hope she will never rue it.”

CHAPTER XV.

Slowly the days came and went for the next fortnight. The crisis had passed, and Dr. West said she would soon recover. The beautiful, long, golden hair had been shorn from the pretty little head, and the rose-bloom had died out of the pretty cheeks, but the bright, restless light never left the beautiful blue eyes—otherwise there was but little change in Daisy.

It had been just two weeks that morning, they told her, as she opened her eyes to consciousness, since she had first been stricken down.

“And I have been here ever since?” she inquired, wonderingly.

“Yes, my dear,” replied Ruth Burton, softly patting the thin white cheeks; “of course you have been here ever since. I am afraid we are going to lose you soon, however. We have received a letter from your husband, saying he will be here some time to-morrow. Shall you be pleased to see him, dear?”

In one single instant all the dim, horrible past rushed back to Daisy’s mind. She remembered flinging herself down in the clover-scented grass, and the world growing dark around her, as the terrible words of Stanwick rang in her ears—he would be back in just fifteen minutes to claim her.

Ah, bonny little Daisy, tossing on your pillow, babbling empty nothings, better would it have been for you, perhaps, if you had dropped the weary burden of your life into the kindly arms of death then and there than to struggle onward into the dark mystery which lay entombed in your future.

“Shall you be glad to see Mr. Stanwick, dear?” repeated the old lady, and, unconscious of any wrong, she placed the letter he had written in Daisy’s hands. Like one in a terrible dream, Daisy read it quite through to the end. “You see, he says he incloses fifty dollars extra for you, dear. I have placed it with the twenty safe in your little purse.”

“Oh, Miss Ruth, you are so very kind to me. I shall never forget how good you have all been to me,” said Daisy, softly, watching the three peaceful-faced old ladies, who had drawn their rocking-chairs, as was their custom, all in a row, and sat quietly knitting in the sunshine, the gentle click of their needles falling

soothingly upon Daisy's poor, tired brain.

"We shall miss you sadly when you go," said Ruth, knitting away vigorously. "You have been like a ray of sunshine in this gloomy old house. We have all learned to love you very dearly."

"You love me?" repeated Daisy, wonderingly. "I was beginning to believe every one hated me in the whole world, every one has been so bitter and so cruel with me, except poor old Uncle John. I often wonder why God lets me live—what am I to do with my life! Mariana in the moated grange, was not more to be pitied than I. Death relieved her, but I am left to struggle on."

"Heaven hear her!" cried Ruth. "One suffers a great deal to lose all interest in life. You are so young, dear, you could not have suffered much."

"I have lost all I hold dear in life," she answered, pathetically, lifting her beautiful, childish blue eyes toward the white fleecy clouds tinted by the setting sun.

Their hearts ached for the pretty, lonely little creature. They believed she was thinking of her mother. So she was—and of Rex, the handsome young husband whom she so madly idolized in her worshipful childish fashion, who was worse than dead to her—the husband who should have believed in her honor and purity, though the world had cried out to him that she was false. He had thrust aside all possibility of her writing to him; cast her out from his life; left her to be persecuted beyond all endurance; bound by a vow she dare not break to keep her marriage with Rex a secret. Though he was more cruel than death, she loved Rex with a devotion that never faltered.

Daisy lay there, thinking of it all, while the soft, golden sunlight died out of the sky, and the deep dusk of twilight crept softly on.

Then the old ladies arose from their chairs, folded their knitting, and put it away. Dusk was their hour for retiring.

They were discussing which one should sit up with Daisy, when she summoned them all to her bedside.

"I want you all to go to bed and never mind me," coaxed Daisy, with a strange light in her eyes. "Take a good sleep, as I am going to do. I shall be very happy to-morrow—happier than I have ever been before!"

She clasped her white arms about their necks in turn, clinging to them, and sobbing as though she was loath to part with them.

Ruth's hand she held last and longest.

"Please kiss me again," she sobbed. "Clasp your arms tight around me, and say 'Good-night, Daisy.' It will be so nice to dream about."

With a cheery laugh the old lady lovingly complied with her request.

"You must close those bright little eyes of yours, and drift quickly into the Land of Nod, or there will be no roses in these cheeks to-morrow. Good-night, my pretty little dear!"

"Good-night, dear, kind Ruth!" sighed Daisy.

And she watched the old lady with wistful, hungry eyes as she picked up her shaded night-lamp, that threw such a soft, sweet radiance over her aged face, as she quietly quitted the room.

A sudden change came over Daisy's face as the sound of her footsteps died away in the hall.

"Oh, God! help me!" she cried, piteously, struggling to her feet. "I must be far away from here when daylight breaks."

She was so weak she almost fell back on her bed again when she attempted to rise. The thought of the morrow lent strength to her flagging energies. A strange mist seemed rising before her. Twice she seemed near fainting, but her indomitable courage kept her from sinking, as she thought of what the morrow would have in store for her.

Quietly she counted over the little store in her purse by the moon's rays.

"Seventy dollars! Oh, I could never use all that in my life!" she cried. "Besides, I could never touch one cent of Stanwick's money. It would burn my fingers—I am sure it would!"

Folding the bill carefully in two she placed it beneath her little snowy ruffled pillow. Then catching up the thick, dark shawl which lay on an adjacent table, she wrapped it quickly about her. She opened the door leading out into the hall, and listened. All was still—solemnly still.

Daisy crept softly down the stairs, and out into the quiet beauty of the still, summer night.

"Rex," she wailed, softly, "perhaps when I am dead you will feel sorry for poor little Daisy, and some one may tell you how you have wronged me in your thoughts, but you would not let me tell you how it happened!"

In the distance she saw the shimmer of water lying white and still under the moon's rays, tipped by the silvery light of the stars.

"No, not that way," she cried, with a shudder; "some one might save me, and I want to die!"

In the distance the red and colored gleaming lights of an apothecary's shop caught her gaze.

"Yes, that way will be best," she said, reflectively.

She drew the shawl closer about her, pressing on as rapidly as her feeble little feet would carry her. How weak she was when she turned the knob and entered—the very lights seemed dancing around her.

A small, keen-eyed, shrewd little man stepped briskly forward to wait upon her. He started back in horror at the utter despair and woe in the beautiful young face that was turned for a moment toward him, beautiful in all its pallor as a statue, with a crown of golden hair such as pictures of angels wear encircling the perfect head.

"What can I do for you, miss?" queried the apothecary, gazing searchingly into the beautiful dreamy blue eyes raised up to his and wondering who she could possibly be.

"I wish to purchase some laudanum," Daisy faltered. "I wish it to relieve a pain which is greater than I can bear."

"Toothache, most probably?" intimated the brisk little doctor. "I know what it is. Lord bless you! I've had it until I thought I should jump through the roof. Laudanum's a first-class thing, but I can tell you of something better—jerk 'em out, that's my recipe," he said, with an odd little smile. "Of course every one to their notion, and if you say laudanum—and nothing else—why it's laudanum you shall have; but remember it's powerful. Why, ten drops of it would cause—death."

"How many drops did you say?" asked Daisy, bending forward eagerly. "I—I want to be careful in taking it."

"Ten drops, I said, would poison a whole family, and twenty a regiment. You must use it very carefully, miss. Remember I have warned you," he said, handing her the little bottle filled with a dark liquid and labeled conspicuously, "Laudanum—a poison."

"Please give me my change quickly," she said, a strange, deadly sickness

creeping over her.

“Certainly, ma’am,” assented the obliging little man, handing her back the change.

Daisy quite failed to notice that he returned her the full amount she had paid him in his eagerness to oblige her, and he went happily back to compounding his drugs in the rear part of the shop, quite unconscious he was out the price of the laudanum.

He was dreaming of the strange beauty of the young girl, and the smile deepened on his good-humored face as he remembered how sweetly she had gazed up at him.

Meanwhile Daisy struggled on, clasping her treasure close to her throbbing heart. She remembered Ruth had pointed out an old shaft to her from her window; it had been unused many years, she had said.

“The old shaft shall be my tomb,” she said; “no one will think of looking for me there.”

Poor little Daisy—unhappy girl-bride, let Heaven not judge her harshly—she was sorely tried.

“Mother, mother!” she sobbed, in a dry, choking voice, “I can not live any longer. I am not taking the life God gave me, I am only returning it to Him. This is the only crime I have ever committed, mother, and man will forget it, and God will forgive me. You must plead for me, angel-mother. Good-bye, dear, kind Uncle John, your love never failed me, and Rex—oh, Rex—whom I love best of all, you will not know how I loved you. Oh, my love—my lost love—I shall watch over you up there!” she moaned, “and come to you in your dreams! Good-bye, Rex, my love, my husband!” she sobbed, holding the fatal liquid to her parched lips.

The deep yawning chasm lay at her feet. Ten—ay, eleven drops she hastily swallowed. Then with one last piteous appeal to Heaven for forgiveness, poor, helpless little Daisy closed her eyes and sprung into the air.

CHAPTER XVI.

A strong hand drew Daisy quickly back.

“Rash child! What is this that you would do?” cried an eager, earnest voice, and, turning quickly about, speechless with fright, Daisy met the stern eyes of the apothecary bent searchingly, inquiringly upon her.

“It means that I am tired of life,” she replied, desperately. “My life is so full of sadness it will be no sorrow to leave it. I wanted to rest quietly down there, but you have held me back; it is useless to attempt to save me now. I have already swallowed a portion of the laudanum. Death must come to relieve me soon.⁷⁸ It would be better to let me die down there where no one could have looked upon my face again.”

“I had no intention to let you die so easily,” said the apothecary, softly. “I read your thoughts too plainly for that. I did not give you laudanum, but a harmless mixture instead, and followed you to see if my surmise was correct. You are young and fair—surely life could not have lost all hope and sunshine for you?”

“You do not know all,” said Daisy, wearily, “or you would not have held me back. I do not know of another life so utterly hopeless as my own.”

The good man looked at the sweet, innocent, beautiful face, upon which the starlight fell, quite bewildered and thoughtful.

“I should like to know what your trouble is,” he said, gently.

“I could tell you only one half of it,” she replied, wearily. “I have suffered much, and yet through no fault of my own. I am cast off, deserted, condemned to a loveless, joyless life; my heart is broken; there is nothing left me but to die. I repeat that it is a sad fate.”

“It is indeed,” replied the apothecary, gravely. “Yet, alas! not an uncommon one. Are you quite sure that nothing can remedy it?”

“Quite sure,” replied Daisy, hopelessly. “My doom is fixed; and no matter how long I live, or how long he lives, it can never be altered.”

The apothecary was uncomfortable without knowing why, haunted by a vague, miserable suspicion, which poor Daisy's words secretly corroborated; yet it seemed almost a sin to harbor one suspicion against the purity of the artless little creature before him. He looked into the fresh young face. There was no cloud on it, no guilt lay brooding in the clear, truthful blue eyes. He never dreamed little Daisy was a wife. "Why did he not love her?" was the query the apothecary asked himself over and over again; "she is so young, so loving, and so fair. He has cast her off, this man to whom she has given the passionate love of her young heart."

"You see you did wrong to hold me back," she said, gently. "How am I to live and bear this sorrow that has come upon me? What am I to do?"

She looked around her with the bewildered air of one who had lost her way, with the dazed appearance of one from beneath whose feet the bank of safety has been withdrawn. Hope was dead, and the past a blank.

"No matter what your past has been, my poor child, you must remember there is a future. Take up the burden again, and bear it nobly; go back to your home, and commence life anew."

"I have no home and no friends," she sighed, hopelessly.

"Poor child," he said, pityingly, "is it as bad as that?"

A sudden idea seemed to occur to him.

"You are a perfect stranger to me," he said, "but I believe you to be an honorable girl, and I should like to befriend you, as I would pray Heaven to befriend a daughter of mine if she were similarly situated. If I should put you in a way of obtaining your own living as companion to an elderly lady in a distant city, would you be willing to take up the tangled threads of your life again, and wait patiently until God saw fit to call you—that is, you would never attempt to take your life into your own hands again?" he asked, slowly. "Remember, such an act is murder, and a murderer can not enter the kingdom of heaven."

He never forgot the startled, frightened glance that swept over the beautiful face, plainly discernible in the white moonlight, nor the quiver of the sweet, tremulous voice as Daisy answered:

"I think God must have intended me to live, or He would not have sent you here to save me," she answered, impulsively. "Twice I have been near death, and each time I have been rescued. I never attempted to take my own life but this once. I shall try and accept my fate and live out my weary life."

“Bravely spoken, my noble girl,” replied her rescuer, heartily.

“I must go far away from here, though,” she continued, shuddering; “I am sorely persecuted here.”

The old man listened gravely to her disconnected, incoherent words, drawing but one conclusion from them—“the lover who had cast her off was pursuing the child, as her relentless foe, to the very verge of death and despair.”

“It is my sister who wants a companion,” he said. “She lives in the South—in Florida. Do you think you would like to go as far away as that?”

“Yes,” said Daisy, mechanically. “I should like to go to the furthest end of the world. It does not matter much where I go!”

How little she knew where fate was drifting her! Rex had not told her his home was in Florida; he meant to tell her that on the morning he was to have met her.

“It will be a long, wearisome journey for you to undertake, still I feel sure you are brave enough to accomplish it in safety.”

“I thank you very much for your confidence in me, sir,” said Daisy, simply.

“Tut, tut, child!” exclaimed the old man, brusquely. “That innocent little face of yours ought to be a passport to any one’s confidence. I don’t think there’s any doubt but what you will get on famously with Maria—that’s my sister Mrs. Glenn—but she’s got three daughters that would put an angel’s temper on edge. They’re my nieces—more’s the pity, for they are regular Tartars. Mrs. Glenn sent for my daughter Alice to come down there; but, Lord bless you, I wouldn’t dare send her! There would be a raging quarrel before twenty-four hours! My Alice has got a temper of her own. But, pshaw! I ought not to frighten you, my dear; they could not help but love *you*.”

And thus it was Daisy’s fate was unchangeably settled for her.

“There is one thing I would like you to promise me,” she said, timidly, “and that is never to divulge my whereabouts to any one who might come in search of me. I must remain dead to the world forever; I shall never take up the old life again. They must believe me dead.”

Argument and persuasion alike were useless; and, sorely troubled at heart, the apothecary reluctantly consented. Poor little Daisy impulsively caught him by both hands, and gratefully sobbed out her thanks.

The arrangements were soon completed, and before the gray dawn pierced the

darkness of the eastern sky poor little Daisy was whirling rapidly away from Elmwood.

The consternation and excitement which prevailed at the Burton Cottage when Daisy's absence was discovered can better be imagined than described; or the intense anger of Stanwick upon finding Daisy had eluded him.

"Checkmated!" he cried, white to the very lips. "But she shall not escape me; she shall suffer for this freak. I am not a man to be trifled with. She can not have gone far," he assured himself. "In all probability she has left Elmwood; but if by rail or by water I can easily recapture my pretty bird. Ah, Daisy Brooks!" he muttered, "you can not fly away from your fate; it will overtake you sooner or later."

Some hours after Stanwick had left the cottage, an old man toiled wearily up the grass-grown path.

"Oh, poor little Daisy," he said, wiping the tears from his eyes with his old red and white cotton kerchief; "no matter what you have done I will take you back to my heart—that I will!"

He clutched the letter Mme. Whitney had written him close in his toil-hardened hand. The letter simply told him Daisy had fled from the seminary, and she had every reason to believe she was now in Elmwood. He had received the letter while in New York, and hastily proceeded to Elmwood, the station indicated, at once, without stopping over at Allendale to acquaint Septima with the news.

"She shall never be sent off to school again," he commented; "but she shall stop at home. Poor little pet, she was always as happy as the day was long; she sha'n't have book-learning if she don't want it. I am too hard, I s'pose, with the child in sending her off among these primpy city gals, with their flounces and furbelows, with only three plain muslin frocks. The dickens fly away with the book-learnin'; I like her all the better just as she is, bless her dear little heart! I'm after little Daisy Brooks," he said, bowing to the ladies who met him at the door. "I heard she was here—run away from school, you see, ma'am—but I'll forgive the little gypsy. Tell her old Uncle John is here. She'll be powerful glad to see me."

Slowly and gently they broke to him the cruel story. How the dark, handsome stranger had brought her there in the storm and the night; and they could not refuse her shelter; the gentleman claimed her to be his wife; of her illness which culminated in her disappearance.

They never forgot the white, set face turned toward them. The veins stood out like cords on his forehead, and the perspiration rolled down his pallid cheeks in great quivering beads. This heart-rending, silent emotion was more terrible to witness than the most violent paroxysms of grief. Strangely enough they had quite forgotten to mention Rex's visit.

"You don't know how I loved that child," he cried, brokenly. "She was all I had to love in the whole world, and I set such store by her, but Stanwick shall pay dearly for this," he cried, hoarsely. "I shall never rest day or night until my little Daisy's honor is avenged, so help me God! You think she is dead?" he questioned, looking brokenly from the one to the other.

They only nodded their heads; they could not speak through their sobs.

At that moment several of the neighbors who were assisting in the search were seen coming toward the cottage.

They gathered in a little knot by the garden wall. With a heart heavier than lead in his bosom John Brooks went forward to meet them.

"You haven't got any track of my little Daisy?" he asked, despondingly. The men averted their faces. "For God's sake speak out, my men!" he cried, in agony; "I can't stand this suspense."

"There are footprints in the wet grass down yonder," one of them replied; "and they lead straight down to the old shaft. Do you think your girl has made away with herself?"

A gray, ghastly pallor settled over John Brooks' anguished face.

"The Lord knows! All of you stay here while I go down there and look. If I should find anything there I'd rather be alone."

There was a depth of agony in the man's voice that touched his hearers, and more than one coat-sleeve was drawn hastily across sympathetic eyes as they whispered one to the other he would surely find her there.

John Brooks had reached the very mouth of the pit now, and through the branches of the trees the men saw him suddenly spring forward, and stoop as if to pick up something, and bitter cries rent the stillness of the summer morning.

"Daisy! oh, Daisy! my child, my child!"

Then they saw him fall heavily to the ground on the very brink of the shaft.

"I guess he's found her!" cried the sympathizing men. "Let us go and see."

They found John Brooks insensible, lying prone on his face, grasping a tiny little glove in one hand, and in the other a snowy little handkerchief, which bore, in one corner, worked in fanciful design, the name of "Daisy."

CHAPTER XVII.

Glengrove was one of the most beautiful spots in the south of Florida. The house—similar to many in the South in style of architecture—stood in the midst of charming grounds which were filled with flowers. To the left of the house was a large shrubbery which opened on to a wide carriage-drive leading to the main road, but the principal attraction of Glengrove was its magnificent orange grove, where the brilliant sunshine loved to linger longest among the dark-green boughs, painting the luscious fruit with its own golden coloring—from green to gold. A low stone wall divided it from the beach which led to the sea.

It was early morning. In an elegant boudoir, whose oriel window overlooked the garden, sat three young ladies, respectively, Bessie Glenn, two-and-twenty; Gertie Glenn, twenty; and Eve Glenn, eighteen—all dark-eyed, dark-haired, and handsome, yet each of a distinct different type.

“I declare, Bess,” cried Gertie, indignantly, twisting the telegram she held in her hand into a wisp, “it’s from Uncle Jet! Guess what he says!”

“I couldn’t possibly,” yawns Bess, from the depths of her easy-chair; “it’s too much trouble.”

“Is it about Alice?” questioned Eve, maliciously.

“Yes,” replied Gertie; “but you are to try and guess what it is.”

“Why, I suppose some stranger has chanced to flutter down into the quiet little village of Elmwood, and Alice thinks it her duty to stay there and capture him.”

“That isn’t it at all,” snapped Gertie. “Uncle Jet says Alice can not come; but he has taken the liberty of sending another young lady in her stead, and hopes Miss Daisy Brooks will be the right person in the right place. She will arrive on the twentieth, at nine A. M.”

Eve jumped to her feet in actual astonishment, and even Bessie dropped her novel, with widely opened eyes.

“Just fancy some tall, gaunt old maid of a companion, with such a name!” she cried, raising her eyebrows and picking up her book again. “I think you will find

the daisy a rather ancient and faded flower.”

“She couldn’t be anything else,” assented Gertie.

“Wouldn’t it be fun if she should turn out to be young and pretty, and take the shine off both of you?” laughed Eve, puckering up her mouth. “I would enjoy it immensely!”

“Eve, will you hold your tongue?” commanded Bessie, sharply.

“You’d better hold your temper!” retorted Eve.

“Pshaw! what’s the use of being so silly as to quarrel over a Miss Nobody?” cried Gertie, stamping her pretty slippered foot. “Guess what else is the news.”

“Haven’t I told you I despise guessing?” cried Bess, angrily. “It is not good form to insist upon a person’s guessing—please remember it.”

“Write it down on ice,” said Eve, *sotto voce*, mimicking her elder sister’s tone.

“Well,” said Gertie, with a look of triumph, “I drove over to Mrs. Lyon’s yesterday to see how everything was progressing for that contemplated marriage, and, lo! she informs me the wedding is postponed for the present, and Rex—handsome Rex—is coming home alone.”

“No—o!” cried both the sisters in chorus.

Bess sat bolt upright, and Eve danced around the room clapping her hands.

“I don’t think much of a marriage which has been postponed,” said Bess, a bright spot glowing on both of her cheeks. “Who knows but what one of us may have a chance of winning handsome Rex Lyon, after all? He is certainly a golden prize!”

“Don’t count the chickens,’ etc.,” quoted Eve, saucily.

“Gertrude!” said Bess, severely, “you will learn after awhile never to speak before Eve. She is as liable to do mischief as her namesake was in the Garden of Eden.”

“You ought never to go back on your own sex,” retorted Eve, banging the door after her as she quitted the room, Rover, an ugly-looking mastiff, closely following at her heels.

“That is certainly an astonishing piece of news,” said Bess, reflectively, smoothing out the folds of her white cashmere morning wrapper. “Now, here’s a plan for you, Gertie. Find out his address in some way, and we will write to him

on some pretext or other. Rex has probably quarreled with the haughty heiress of Whitestone Hall, and one of us ought certainly to catch his heart in the rebound. Send him an invitation to your birthday party, Gertie.”

“I would be more likely to succeed than you, Bess,” said Gertie, rocking complacently to and fro, and looking maliciously at her sister. “You remember he once remarked he did not like tall ladies, and you are certainly tall, Bess.”

“Well, I’d rather be tall and willowy and graceful, than short and fat and dumpy,” jerked out Bess, spitefully.

“What! at swords’ points yet, eh? Ha, ha, ha!” cried Eve, suddenly, popping her head in at the door. “I’ll be back after awhile to see which one of you gets the best of it.”

Before either of the sisters had time to reply, the family carriage dashed suddenly up to the porch, and a moment later a slight, dark-robed little figure was ushered into their presence.

“This is Miss Brooks, mum,” said Jim, the coachman, addressing the elder sister.

“I’d like to know why you have brought her in here?” cried Bess, angrily. “Why did you not take her into the servants’ hall or into the kitchen?”

But Jim had disappeared.

“Well, now that you are here, you might sit down,” suggested Gertie, wondering what kind of a face was hid behind the long, thick, clinging veil. “You may lay aside your bonnet and veil.”

Trembling and sick at heart with the cold greeting which had been given her, Daisy did as she was bid.

“Why, I declare, you are younger than I am!” cried Eve, impulsively. “We were all expecting to see a wrinkled, dried-up old maid. Why, you’d make a much better companion for me than for mother.”

“E—v—e!” cried the elder Miss Glenn, severely, “be kind enough to leave the room.”

“I sha’n’t go one step until I have had my say out,” cried Eve, planting herself firmly down on a hassock in the middle of the floor. “Nobody likes me because I’m rude and free-spoken,” declared Eve, addressing Daisy; “but I believe in letting people know just what I am to begin with. I’m not one of these sleek, smooth, tiger creatures that hide their claws under velvet-paws. We are three

model sisters," she went on, recklessly; "we have tremendous spats—when we are here alone; but if a visitor happens in we all sit with our arms around one another, 'just to have the appearance' of affection, you know."

The elder Miss Glenn arose with dignity, motioning Daisy to follow her.

"Papa will see you later, Eve, dear," she said, with a baleful glitter in her sloe-black eyes; and as Daisy followed her she could not help but compare her with Pluma Hurlhurst, with that treacherous, mocking smile playing about her full, red lips—and quite unconsciously poor little Daisy fell to thinking.

"Rex will go back to Pluma Hurlhurst now," she thought, with a bitter sigh. "He has cast me out of his life; he will go back and marry her."

Poor, innocent Daisy, how little she knew of life or the insurmountable barrier which lay between the haughty, scheming heiress and Rex—her husband!

"I was asking you if you resided in Elmwood, Miss Brooks," said Bess, raising her voice. "I have asked you twice."

"I beg your pardon; please forgive me," said Daisy, flushing painfully. "I—I was not aware you had spoken. No, I lived near Elmwood—between there and Baltimore."

Daisy was sorely afraid Miss Glenn would ask her to name the exact location. She did not, however, much to Daisy's relief. By this time they had reached the door of Mrs. Glenn's room, and as it was slightly ajar Bessie pushed it open without further ceremony and entered.

"Has Miss Brooks come yet?" asked a thin, querulous voice.

"Yes," answered Bessie; "here she is, mamma."

The room was so dark Daisy could scarcely distinguish the different objects for a moment or so. She saw, however, a dark figure on a couch and a white jeweled hand waving a fan indolently to and fro. A sudden impulse came over Daisy to turn and run away, but by a great effort she controlled her feelings.

"Step forward, if you please, Miss Brooks. I can not observe you well at such a distance; do not tread on the poodle on the rug or brush against the bric-à-brac placed indiscriminately about the room."

"Oh, dear, if there were only a light," thought Daisy, in dismay. She was afraid of taking a single step for fear some of the bric-à-brac mentioned, either at the right or left of her, should come crashing down under her blundering little feet.

“I always exclude the broad glare of early morning light, as I find it especially trying.”

As she spoke she threw back one of the shutters with the end of her fan, and a warm flood of invigorating sunshine poured into the room.

“Dear me,” she cried, staring hard at the beautiful little face before her. “Why, you are a child, scarcely older than my Eve. What could that stupid brother of mine mean by sending you to me? I have a notion to send you back again directly.”

“Oh, please do not, madame,” cried Daisy, piteously. “Only try me first; I will do my very best to please you.”

“But I did not want a young person,” expostulated Mrs. Glenn.

“But you sent for Alice, his daughter, and—and he thought I would do as well,” faltered Daisy, timidly.

“Alice Jet is over forty, and you are not more than sixteen, I should judge. How did you happen to think you could do as well as she?”

The color came and went on Daisy’s pretty flower-like face, and her heart throbbed pitifully.

“I am not so very wise or learned,” she said, “but I should try so hard to please you, if you will only let me try.”

“I suppose, now that you are here, we will have to make the best of it,” replied Mrs. Glenn, condescendingly.

The fair beauty of the young girl’s face did not please her.

“I have always dreaded fair women,” she thought to herself, “they are the most dangerous of rivals. If she stays at Glengrove I shall see she is kept well in the background.”

While in the morning-room below the three girls were discussing the new turn of affairs vigorously.

“I am determined she shall not remain here,” Bessie Glenn was saying.

“I heartily indorse your opinion,” said Gertie, slowly.

And for once in her life the tongue of reckless Eve was silent. She looked thoughtfully out of the window.

CHAPTER XVIII.

The first week of Daisy's stay at Glengrove passed quickly. She was beginning to feel quite at home with Mrs. Glenn and Eve, but Bessie and Gertie held aloof from her. She was beginning to believe she never would be able to win her way to their hearts. Eve—warm-hearted, impulsive Eve—took to her at once.

"You are just the kind of a girl I like, Daisy," said Eve, twirling one of her soft gold curls caressingly around her finger; "and if I were a handsome young man, instead of a girl, I should fall straightway in love with you. Why, what are you blushing so for?" cried Eve. "Don't you like to talk about love and lovers?"

"No," said Daisy, in a low voice, a distressed look creeping into her blue eyes. "If you please, Eve, I'd rather not talk about such things."

"You are certainly a funny girl," said Eve, wonderingly. "Why, do you know all the handsome young fellows around here have fallen deeply in love with you, and have just been besieging both Bess and Gertie for an introduction to you."

No laughing rejoinder came from Daisy's red lips. There was an anxious look in her eyes. Ah! this, then, accounted for the growing coldness with which the two sisters greeted her.

"You do not seem enough interested to even ask who they are," said Eve, disappointedly. "I suppose you have never heard we have some of the handsomest gentlemen around here to be met with in the whole South—or in the North either, for that matter," said Eve, enthusiastically. "Wait until you have seen some of them."

How little she knew the girl's heart and soul was bound up in Rex, whom she told herself she was never again to see.

"Do you see that large gray, stone house yonder, whose turrets you can just see beyond those trees?" asked Eve, suddenly, a mischievous light dancing in her merry hazel eyes.

"Yes," replied Daisy. "I have a fine view of it from my window upstairs. I have seen a little child swinging to and fro in a hammock beneath the trees. Poor little

thing, she uses a crutch. Is she lame?”

“Yes,” replied Eve, “that’s little Birdie; she’s lame. I do not want to talk about her but about her brother. Oh, he is perfectly splendid!” declared Eve, enthusiastically, “and rich, too. Why, he owns I don’t know how many cotton plantations and orange groves, and he is—oh—so handsome! You must take care you do not fall in love with him. All the girls do. If you did not, you would be a great exception; you could scarcely help caring for him, he is so winning and so nice,” said Eve, blushing furiously.

How poor little Daisy’s heart longed for sympathy and consolation! Oh, if she only dared tell Eve the great hidden sorrow that seemed eating her heart away! She felt that she must unburden her heart to some one, or it must surely break.

“Eve,” she said, her little hands closing softly over the restless brown one drumming a tattoo on the window-sill, and her golden head drooping so close to Eve’s, her curls mingled with her dark locks, “I could never love any one in this world again. I loved once—it was the sweetest, yet the most bitter, experience of my life. The same voice that spoke tender words to me cruelly cast me from him. Yet I love him still with all my heart. Do not talk to me of love, or lovers, Eve, I can not bear it. The world will never hold but one face for me, and that is the face of him who is lost to me forever.”

“Oh, how delightfully romantic!” cried Eve. “I said to myself over and over again there was some mystery in your life. I have seen such strange shadows in your eyes, and your voice often had the sound of tears in it. I do wish I could help you in some way,” said Eve, thoughtfully. “I’d give the world to set the matter straight for you. What’s his name, and where does he live?”

“I can not tell you,” said Daisy, shaking her golden curls sadly.

“Oh, dear! then I do not see how I can help you,” cried Eve.

“You can not,” replied Daisy; “only keep my secret for me.”

“I will,” she cried, earnestly.

And as they parted, Eve resolved in her own mind to bring this truant lover of Daisy’s back to his old allegiance; but the first and most important step was to discover his name.

Eve went directly to her own room, her brain whirling with a new plan, which she meant to put into execution at once, while Daisy strolled on through the grounds, choosing the less frequented paths. She wanted to be all alone by

herself to have a good cry. Somehow she felt so much better for having made a partial confidante of Eve.

The sun was beginning to sink in the west; still Daisy walked on, thinking of Rex. A little shrill piping voice falling suddenly upon her ears caused her to stop voluntarily.

“Won’t you please reach me my hat and crutch? I have dropped them on your side of the fence.”

Daisy glanced around, wondering in which direction the voice came from.

“I am sitting on the high stone wall; come around on the other side of that big tree and you will see me.”

The face that looked down into Daisy’s almost took her breath away for a single instant, it was so like Rex’s.

A bright, winning, childish face, framed in a mass of dark nut-brown curls, and the brownest of large brown eyes.

“Certainly,” said Daisy, stooping down with a strange unexplainable thrill at her heart and picking up the wide-brimmed sun-hat and crutch, which was unfortunately broken by the fall.

A low cry burst from the child’s lips.

“Oh, my crutch is broken!” she cried, in dismay. “What shall I do? I can not walk back to the house. I am lame!”

“Let me see if I can help you,” said Daisy, scaling the stone wall with the grace of a fawn. “Put your arms around my neck,” she said, “and cling very tight. I will soon have you down from your high perch; never mind the crutch. I can carry you up to the porch; it is not very far, and you are not heavy.”

In a very few moments Daisy had the child down safely upon *terra firma*.

“Thank you,” said the child. “I know you are tired; we will rest a moment, please, on this fallen log.”

The touch of the little girl’s hands, the glance of the soft brown eyes, and the tone of her voice seemed to recall every word and glance of Rex, and hold a strange fascination for her.

“I shall tell my mother and my brother how good you have been to me, and they will thank you too. My name is Birdie; please tell me yours.”

“My name is Daisy Brooks,” she answered.

Poor little girl-bride, there had been a time when she had whispered to her heart that her name was Daisy Lyon; but that bright dream was over now; she would never be aught else than—Daisy Brooks.

“Is your name really Daisy?” cried the little girl in a transport of delight, scarcely catching the last name. “Why, that is the name my brother loves best in the world. You have such a sweet face,” said the child, earnestly. “I would choose the name of some flower as just suited to you. I should have thought of Lily, Rose, Pansy, or Violet, but I should never have thought of anything one half so pretty as Daisy; it just suits you.”

All through her life Daisy felt that to be the sweetest compliment ever paid her. Daisy laughed—the only happy laugh that had passed her lips since she had met Rex that morning under the magnolia-tree.

“Shall I tell you what my brother said about daisies?”

“Yes, you may tell me, if you like,” Daisy answered, observing the child delighted to talk of her brother.

“He has been away for a long time,” explained Birdie. “He only came home last night, and I cried myself to sleep, I was so glad. You see,” said the child, growing more confidential, and nestling closer to Daisy’s side, and opening wide her great brown eyes, “I was crying for fear he would bring home a wife, and mamma was crying for fear he wouldn’t. I wrote him a letter all by myself once, and begged him not to marry, but come home all alone, and you see he did,” cried the child, overjoyed. “When he answered my letter, he inclosed a little pressed flower, with a golden heart and little white leaves around it, saying: ‘There is no flower like the daisy for me. I shall always prize them as pearls beyond price.’ I planted a whole bed of them beneath his window, and I placed a fresh vase of them in his room, mingled with some forget-me-nots, and when he saw them, he caught me in his arms, and cried as though his heart would break.”

If the white fleecy clouds in the blue sky, the murmuring sea, or the silver-throated bobolink swinging in the green leafy bough above her head, had only whispered to Daisy why he loved the flowers so well which bore the name of daisy, how much misery might have been spared two loving hearts! The gray, dusky shadows of twilight were creeping up from the sea.

“Oh, see how late it is growing,” cried Birdie, starting up in alarm. “I am afraid you could not carry me up to the porch. If you could only summon a servant,

or—or—my brother.”

For answer, Daisy raised the slight burden in her arms with a smile.

“I like you more than I can tell,” said Birdie, laying her soft, pink, dimpled cheek against Daisy’s. “Won’t you come often to the angle in the stone wall? That is my favorite nook. I like to sit there and watch the white sails glide by over the white crested waves.”

“Yes,” said Daisy, “I will come every day.”

“Some time I may bring my brother with me; you must love him, too, won’t you?”

“I should love any one who had you for a sister,” replied Daisy, clasping the little figure she held still closer in her arms; adding, in her heart: “You are so like him.”

Birdie gave her such a hearty kiss, that the veil twined round her hat tumbled about her face like a misty cloud.

“You must put me down while you fix your veil,” said Birdie. “You can not see with it so. There are huge stones in the path, you would stumble and fall.”

“So I shall,” assented Daisy, as she placed the child down on the soft, green grass.

At that instant swift, springy footsteps came hurriedly down the path, and a voice, which seemed to pierce her very heart, called: “Birdie, little Birdie, where are you?”

“Here, Brother Rex,” called the child, holding out her arms to him with eager delight. “Come here, Rex, and carry me; I have broken my crutch.”

For one brief instant the world seemed to stand still around poor, hapless Daisy, the forsaken girl-bride. The wonder was that she did not die, so great was her intense emotion. Rex was standing before her—the handsome, passionate lover, who had married her on the impulse of the moment; the man whom she loved with her whole heart, at whose name she trembled, of whom she had made an idol in her girlish heart, and worshiped—the lover who had vowed so earnestly he would shield her forever from the cold, cruel world, who had sworn eternal constancy, while the faithful gleaming stars watched him from the blue sky overhead.

Yes, it was Rex! She could not see through the thick, misty veil, how pale his

face was in the gathering darkness. Oh, Heaven! how her passionate little heart went out to him! How she longed, with a passionate longing words could not tell, to touch his hand, or rest her weary head on his breast.

Her brain whirled; she seemed, to live ages in those few moments. Should she throw herself on her knees, and cry out to him, “Oh, Rex, Rex, my darling! I am *not* guilty! Listen to me, my love. Hear my pleading—listen to my prayer! I am more sinned against than sinning. My life has been as pure as an angel’s—take me back to your heart, or I shall die!”

“She has been so good to me, Rex,” whispered Birdie, clinging to the veil which covered Daisy’s face. “I broke my crutch, and she has carried me from the stone wall; won’t you please thank her for me, brother?”

Daisy’s heart nearly stopped beating; she knew the eventful moment of her life had come, when Rex, her handsome young husband, turned courteously toward her, extending his hand with a winning smile.

CHAPTER XIX.

On the day following Rex's return home, and the morning preceding the events narrated in our last chapter, Mrs. Theodore Lyon sat in her dressing-room eagerly awaiting her son; her eyebrows met in a dark frown and her jeweled hands were locked tightly together in her lap.

"Rex is like his father," she mused; "he will not be coerced in this matter of marriage. He is reckless and willful, yet kind of heart. For long years I have set my heart upon this marriage between Rex and Pluma Hurlhurst. I say again it must be!" Mrs. Lyon idolized her only son. "He would be a fitting mate for a queen," she told herself. The proud, peerless beauty of the haughty young heiress of Whitestone Hall pleased her. "She and no other shall be Rex's wife," she said.

When Rex accepted the invitation to visit Whitestone Hall she smiled complacently.

"It can end in but one way," she told herself; "Rex will bring Pluma home as his bride."

Quite unknown to him, his elegant home had been undergoing repairs for months.

"There will be nothing wanting for the reception of his bride," she said, viewing the magnificent suites of rooms which contained every luxury that taste could suggest or money procure.

Then came Rex's letter like a thunderbolt from a clear sky begging her not to mention the subject again, as he could never marry Pluma Hurlhurst.

"I shall make a flying trip home," he said, "then I am going abroad."

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She did not notice how white and worn her boy's handsome face had grown when she greeted him the night before, in the flickering light of the chandelier. She would not speak to him then of the subject uppermost in her mind.

"Retire to your room at once, Rex," she said, "your journey has wearied you. See, it is past midnight already. I will await you to-morrow morning in my

boudoir; we will breakfast there together.”

She leaned back against the crimson velvet cushions, tapping her satin quilted slipper restlessly on the thick velvet carpet, ever and anon glancing at her jeweled watch, wondering what could possibly detain Rex.

She heard the sound of a quick, familiar footstep in the corridor; a moment later Rex was by her side. As she stooped down to kiss his face she noticed, in the clear morning light, how changed he was. Her jeweled hands lingered on his dark curls and touched his bright, proud face. “What had come over this handsome, impetuous son of hers?” she asked herself.

“You have been ill, Rex,” she said, anxiously, “and you have not told me.”

“I have not, indeed, mother,” he replied.

“Not ill? Why, my dear boy, your face is haggard and worn, and there are lines upon it that ought not to have been there for years. Rex,” she said, drawing him down on the sofa beside her, and holding his strong white hands tightly clasped in her own, “I do not want to tease you or bring up an unpleasant subject, but I had so hoped, my boy, you would not come alone. I have hoped and prayed, morning and night, you would bring home a bride, and that bride would be— Pluma Hurlhurst.”

Rex staggered from her arms with a groan. He meant to tell her the whole truth, but the words seemed to fail him.

“Mother,” he said, turning toward her a face white with anguish, “in Heaven’s name, never mention love or marriage to me again or I shall go mad. I shall never bring a bride here.”

“He has had a quarrel with Pluma,” she thought.

“Rex,” she said, placing her hands on his shoulders and looking down into his face, “tell me, has Pluma Hurlhurst refused you? Tell me what is the matter, Rex. I am your mother, and I have the right to know. The one dream of my life has been to see Pluma your wife; I can not give up that hope. If it is a quarrel it can be easily adjusted; ‘true love never runs smooth,’ you know.”

“It is not that, mother,” said Rex, wearily bowing his head on his hands.

Then something like the truth seemed to dawn upon her.

“My son,” she said, in a slight tone of irritation, “Pluma wrote me of that little occurrence at the lawn fête. Surely you are not in love with that girl you were so

foolishly attentive to—the overseer’s niece, I believe it was. I can not, I will not, believe a son of mine could so far forget his pride as to indulge in such mad, reckless folly. Remember, Rexford,” she cried, in a voice fairly trembling with suppressed rage, “I could never forgive such an act of recklessness. She should never come here, I warn you.”

“Mother,” said Rex, raising his head proudly, and meeting the flashing scorn of her eyes unflinchingly, “you must not speak so; I—can not listen to it.”

“By what right do you forbid me to speak of that girl as I choose?” she demanded, in a voice hard and cold with intense passion.

Once or twice Rex paced the length of the room, his arms folded upon his breast. Suddenly he stopped before her.

“What is this girl to you?” she asked.

With white, quivering lips Rex answered back:

“She is my wife!”

The words were spoken almost in a whisper, but they echoed like thunder through the room, and seemed to repeat themselves, over and over again, during the moment of utter silence that ensued. Rex had told his pitiful secret, and felt better already, as if the worst was over; while his mother stood motionless and dumb, glaring upon him with a baleful light in her eyes. He had dashed down in a single instant the hopes she had built up for long years.

“Let me tell you about it, mother,” he said, kneeling at her feet. “The worst and bitterest part is yet to come.”

“Yes, tell me,” his mother said, hoarsely.

Without lifting up his bowed head, or raising his voice, which was strangely sad and low, Rex told his story—every word of it: how his heart had went out to the sweet-faced, golden-haired little creature whom he found fast asleep under the blossoming magnolia-tree in the morning sunshine; how he protected the shrinking, timid little creature from the cruel insults of Pluma Hurlhurst; how he persuaded her to marry him out in the starlight, and how they had agreed to meet on the morrow—that morrow on which he found the cottage empty and his child-bride gone; of his search for her, and—oh, cruelest and bitterest of all!—where and with whom he found her; how he had left her lying among the clover, loving her too madly to curse her, yet praying Heaven to strike him dead then and there. Daisy—sweet little, blue-eyed Daisy was false; he never cared to look

upon a woman's face again. He spoke of Daisy as his wife over and over again, the name lingering tenderly on his lips. He did not see how, at the mention of the words, "My wife," his mother's face grew more stern and rigid, and she clutched her hands so tightly together that the rings she wore bruised her tender flesh, yet she did not seem to feel the pain.

She saw the terrible glance that leaped into his eyes when he mentioned Stanwick's name, and how he ground his teeth, like one silently breathing a terrible curse. Then his voice fell to a whisper.

"I soon repented of my harshness," he said, "and I went back to Elmwood; but, oh, the pity of it—the pity of it—I was too late; little Daisy, my bride, was dead! She had thrown herself down a shaft in a delirium. I would have followed her, but they held me back. I can scarcely realize it, mother," he cried. "The great wonder is that I do not go insane."

Mrs. Lyon had heard but one word—"Dead." This girl who had inveigled her handsome son into a low marriage was dead. Rex was free—free to marry the bride whom she had selected for him. Yet she dare not mention that thought to him now—no, not now; she must wait a little.

No pity lurked in her heart for the poor little girl-bride whom she supposed lying cold and still in death, whom her son so wildly mourned; she only realized her darling Rex was free. What mattered it to her at what bitter a cost Rex was free? She should yet see her darling hopes realized. Pluma should be his wife, just as sure as they both lived.

"I have told you all now, mother," Rex said, in conclusion; "you must comfort me, for Heaven knows I need all of your sympathy. You will forgive me, mother," he said. "You would have loved Daisy, too, if you had seen her; I shall always believe, through some enormous villainy, Stanwick must have tempted her. I shall follow him to the ends of the earth. I shall wring the truth from his lips. I must go away," he cried—"anywhere, everywhere, trying to forget my great sorrow. How am I to bear it? Has Heaven no pity, that I am so sorely tried?"

At that moment little Birdie came hobbling into the room, and for a brief moment Rex forgot his great grief in greeting his little sister.

"Oh, you darling brother Rex," she cried, clinging to him and laughing and crying in one breath, "I told them to wake me up sure, if you came in the night. I dreamed I heard your voice. You see, it must have been real, but I couldn't wake up; and this morning I heard every one saying: 'Rex is here, Rex is here,' and I

couldn't wait another moment, but I came straight down to you.”

Rex kissed the pretty little dimpled face, and the little chubby hands that stroked his hair so tenderly.

“Why, you have been crying, Rex,” she cried out, in childish wonder. “See, there are tear-drops on your eyelashes—one fell on my hand. What is the matter, brother dear, are you not happy?”

Birdie put her two little soft white arms around his neck, laying her cheek close to his in her pretty, childish, caressing way.

He tried to laugh lightly, but the laugh had no mirth in it.

“You must run away and play, Birdie, and not annoy your brother,” said Mrs. Lyon, disengaging the child's clinging arms from Rex's neck. “That child is growing altogether too observing of late.”

“Child!” cried Birdie. “I am ten years old. I shall soon be a young lady like Bess and Gertie, over at Glengrove.”

“And Eve,” suggested Rex, the shadow of a smile flickering around his mouth.

“No, not like Eve,” cried the child, gathering up her crutch and sun-hat as she limped toward the door; “Eve is not a young lady, she's a Tom-boy; she wears short dresses and chases the hounds around, while the other two wear silk dresses with big, big trains and have beaux to hold their fans and handkerchiefs. I am going to take my new books you sent me down to my old seat on the stone wall and read those pretty stories there. I don't know if I will be back for lunch or not,” she called back; “if I don't, will you come for me, Brother Rex?”

“Yes, dear,” he made answer, “of course I will.”

The lunch hour came and went, still Birdie did not put in an appearance. At last Rex was beginning to feel uneasy about her.

“You need not be the least alarmed,” said Mrs. Lyon, laughingly, “the child is quite spoiled; she is like a romping gypsy, more content to live out of doors in a tent than to remain indoors. She is probably waiting down on the stone wall for you to come for her and carry her home as you used to do. You had better go down and see, Rex; it is growing quite dark.”

And Rex, all unconscious of the strange, invisible thread which fate was weaving so closely about him, quickly made his way through the fast-gathering darkness down the old familiar path which led through the odorous orange

groves to the old stone wall, guided by the shrill treble of Birdie's childish voice, which he heard in the distance, mingled with the plaintive murmur of the sad sea-waves—those waves that seemed ever murmuring in their song the name of Daisy. Even the subtle breeze seemed to whisper of her presence.

CHAPTER XX.

“I am very grateful to you for the service you have rendered my little sister,” said Rex, extending his hand to the little veiled figure standing in the shade of the orange-trees. “Allow me to thank you for it.”

Poor Daisy! she dared not speak lest the tones of her voice should betray her identity.

“I must for evermore be as one dead to him,” she whispered to her wildly beating heart.

Rex wondered why the little, fluttering, cold fingers dropped so quickly from his clasp; he thought he heard a stifled sigh; the slight, delicate form looked strangely familiar, yet he could see it was neither Eve, Gerty, nor Bess. She bowed her head with a few low-murmured words he scarcely caught, and the next instant the little figure was lost to sight in the darkness beyond.

“Who was that, Birdie?” he asked, scarcely knowing what prompted the question.

Alas for the memory of childhood! poor little Birdie had quite forgotten.

“It is so stupid of me to forget, but when I see her again I shall ask her and try and remember it then.”

“It is of no consequence,” said Rex, raising the little figure in his arms and bearing her quickly up the graveled path to the house.

As he neared the house Rex observed there was great confusion among the servants; there was a low murmur of voices and lights moving to and fro.

“What is the matter, Parker?” cried Rex, anxiously, of the servant who came out to meet him.

“Mrs. Lyon is very ill, sir,” he answered, gravely; “it is a paralytic stroke the doctor says. We could not find you, so we went for Doctor Elton at once.”

It seemed but a moment since he had parted from his mother in the gathering twilight, to search for Birdie. His mother very ill—dear Heaven! he could

scarcely realize it.

“Oh, take me to mother, Rex!” cried Birdie, clinging to him piteously. “Oh, it can not, it cannot be true; take me to her, Rex!”

The sound of hushed weeping fell upon his ears and seemed to bring to him a sense of what was happening. Like one in a dream he hurried along the corridor toward his mother’s boudoir. He heard his mother’s voice calling for him.

“Where is my son?” she moaned.

He opened the door quietly and went in. Her dark eyes opened feebly as Rex entered, and she held out her arms to him.

“Oh, my son, my son!” she cried; “thank Heaven you are here!”

She clung to him, weeping bitterly. It was the first time he had ever seen tears in his mother’s eyes, and he was touched beyond words.

“It may not be as bad as you think, mother,” he said; “there is always hope while there is life.”

She raised her face to her son’s, and he saw there was a curious whiteness upon it.

The large, magnificent room was quite in shadow; soft shadows filled the corners; the white statuettes gleamed in the darkness; one blind was half drawn, and through it came the soft, sweet moonlight. A large night-lamp stood upon the table, but it was carefully shaded. Faint glimmers of light fell upon the bed, with its costly velvet hangings, and on the white, drawn face that lay on the pillows, with the gray shadow of death stealing softly over it—the faint, filmy look that comes only into eyes that death has begun to darken.

His mother had never been demonstrative; she had never cared for many caresses; but now her son’s love seemed her only comfort.

“Rex,” she said, clinging close to him, “I feel that I am dying. Send them all away—my hours are numbered—a mist rises before my face, Rex. Oh, dear Heaven! I can not see you—I have lost my sight—my eyes grow dim.”

A cry came from Rex’s lips.

“Mother, dear mother,” he cried, “there is no pain in this world I would not undergo for your dear sake!” he cried, kissing the stiffening lips.

She laid her hands on the handsome head bent before her.

“Heaven bless you, my son,” she murmured. “Oh, Rex, my hope and my trust are in you!” she wailed. “Comfort me, calm me—I have suffered so much. I have one last dying request to make of you, my son. You will grant my prayer, Rex? Surely Heaven would not let you refuse my last request!”

Rex clasped her in his arms. This was his lady-mother, whose proud, calm, serene manner had always been perfect—whose fair, proud face had never been stained with tears—whose lips had never been parted with sighs or worn with entreaties.

It was so new to him, so terrible in its novelty, he could hardly understand it. He threw his arms around her, and clasped her closely to his breast.

“My dearest mother,” he cried, “you know I would die for you if dying would benefit you. Why do you doubt my willingness to obey your wishes, whatever they may be? Whatever I can do to comfort you I will surely do it, mother.”

“Heaven bless you, Rex!” she cried, feebly caressing his face and his hands. “You make death a thousand-fold more easy to bear, my darling, only son!”

“My dear sir,” said the doctor, bending over him gently, “I must remind you your mother’s life hangs on a thread. The least excitement, the least agitation, and she will be dead before you can call for help. No matter what she may say to you, listen and accede.”

Rex bent down and kissed the pale, agitated face on the pillow.

“I will be careful of my dearest mother. Surely you may trust me,” he said.

“I do,” replied the doctor, gravely. “Your mother’s life, for the present, lies in your hands.”

“Is it true, Rex, that I must die?” she gasped. The look of anguish on his face answered her. “Rex,” she whispered, clinging like a child to his strong white hands, “my hope and trust are in you, my only son. I am going to put your love to the test, my boy. I beseech you to say ‘Yes’ to the last request I shall ever make of you. Heaven knows, Rex, I would not mention it now, but I am dying—yes, dying, Rex.”

“You need not doubt it, mother,” he replied, earnestly, “I can not refuse anything you may ask! Why should I?”

But, as he spoke, he had not the faintest idea of what he would be asked to do. As he spoke his eyes caught the gleam of the moonlight through the window, and his thoughts traveled for one moment to the beloved face he had seen in the

moonlight—how fair and innocent the face was as they parted on the night they were wed! The picture of that lonely young girl-wife, going home by herself, brought tears to his eyes.

“Was there ever a fate so cruel?” he said to himself. “Who ever lost a wife on his wedding-day?”

Surely there had never been a love-dream so sweet, so passionate, or so bright as his. Surely there had never been one so rudely broken.

Poor little Daisy—his wife—lying cold and still in death. Even his mother was to be taken from him.

The feeble pressure of his mother’s hands recalled his wandering thoughts.

“Listen, Rex,” she whispered, faintly, “my moments are precious.”

He felt his mother’s arms clasp closely round his neck.

“Go on, mother,” he said, gently.

“Rex, my son,” she whispered, gaspingly, “I could not die and leave the words unspoken. I want my race to live long generations after me. Your poor little lame sister will go unmarried to the grave; and now all rests with you, my only son. You understand me, Rex; you know the last request I have to ask.”

For the first time a cry came to Rex’s lips; her words pierced like a sword in his heart.

“Surely, mother, you do not mean—you do not think I could ever—”

The very horror of the thought seemed to completely unman him.

“You will marry again,” she interrupted, finishing the sentence he could not utter. “Remember, she whom you loved is dead. I would not have asked this for long years to come, but I am dying—I must speak now.”

“My God, mother!” he cried out in agony, “ask anything but that. My heart is torn and bleeding; have pity on me, have pity!”

Great drops of agony started on his brow; his whole frame shook with agitation.

He tried to collect himself, to gather his scattered thoughts, to realize the full import of the words she had spoken.

Marry again! Heaven pity him! How could he harbor such a thought for a single instant, when he thought of the pale, cold face of little Daisy—his fair young bride—whom he so madly loved, lying pale and still in death, like a broken lily,

down in the dark, bottomless pit which never yielded up its terrible secrets!

“Rex,” wailed his mother, feebly, gazing into his eyes with a suspense heart-breaking to witness, “don’t refuse me this the first prayer I had ever made. If you mean to refuse it would be kinder far to plunge a dagger into my heart and let me die at once. You can not refuse.” One trembling hand she laid on his breast, and with the other caressed his face. “You are good and gentle of heart, Rex; the prayers of your dying mother will touch you. Answer me, my son; tell me my proud old race shall not die with you, and I will rest calmly in my grave.”

The cold night-wind fanned his pallid brow, and the blood coursed through his veins like molten lead. He saw the tears coursing down her pale, withered cheeks. Ah, God! was it brave to speak the words which must bring despair and death to her? Was it filial to send his mother to her grave with sorrow and sadness in her heart? Could he thrust aside his mother’s loving arms and resist her dying prayer? Heaven direct him, he was so sorely tried.

“Comfort me, Rex,” she whispered, “think of how I have loved you since you were a little child, how I used to kiss your rosy little face and dream what your future would be like. It comes back to me now while I plead to you with my fast-fleeting breath. Oh, answer me, Rex.”

All the love and tenderness of the young man’s impulsive heart was stirred by the words. Never was a man so fearfully tried. Rex’s handsome face had grown white with emotion; deep shadows came into his eyes. Ah, what could it matter now? His hopes were dead, his heart crushed, yet how could he consent?

“Oh, Heaven, Rex!” she cried, “what does that look on your face mean? What is it?”

The look of terror on her face seemed to force the mad words from his lips, the magnetic gaze seemed to hold him spellbound. He bent over his mother and laid his fresh, brave young face on the cold, white face of his dying mother.

“Promise me, Rex,” she whispered.

“I promise, mother!” he cried. “God help me; if it will make your last moments happier, I consent.”

“Heaven bless you, my noble son!” whispered the quivering voice. “You have taken the bitter sting from death, and filled my heart with gratitude. Some day you will thank me for it, Rex.”

They were uttered! Oh, fatal words! Poor Rex, wedded and parted, his love-

dream broken, how little he knew of the bitter grief which was to accrue from that promise wrung from his white lips.

Like one in a dream he heard her murmur the name of Pluma Hurlhurst. The power of speech seemed denied him; he knew what she meant. He bowed his head on her cold hands.

“I have no heart to give her,” he said, brokenly. “My heart is with Daisy, my sweet little lost love.”

Poor Rex! how little he knew Daisy was at that self-same moment watching with beating heart the faint light of his window through the branches of the trees—Daisy, whom he mourned as dead, alas! dead to him forever, shut out from his life by the rash words of that fatally cruel promise.

CHAPTER XXI.

One thought only was uppermost in Daisy's mind as she sped swiftly down the flower-bordered path in the moonlight, away from the husband who was still so dear to her.

"He did not recognize me," she panted, in a little quivering voice. "Would he have cursed me, I wonder, had he known it was I?"

Down went the little figure on her knees in the dew-spangled grass with a sharp little cry.

"Oh, dear, what shall I do?" she cried out in sudden fright. "How could I know she was his sister when I told her my name?" A twig fell from the bough above her head brushed by some night-bird's wing. "He is coming to search for me," she whispered to herself.

A tremor ran over her frame; the color flashed into her cheek and parted lips, and a startled, wistful brightness crept into the blue eyes.

Ah! there never could have been a love so sweetly trustful and child-like as little Daisy's for handsome Rex, her husband in name only.

Poor, little, innocent Daisy! if she had walked straight back to him, crying out, "Rex, Rex, see, I am Daisy, your wife!" how much untold sorrow might have been spared her.

Poor, little, lonely, heart-broken child-bride! how was she to know Rex had bitterly repented and come back to claim her, alas! too late; and how he mourned her, refusing to be comforted, and how they forced him back from the edge of the treacherous shaft lest he should plunge headlong down the terrible depths. Oh, if she had but known all this!

If Rex had dropped down from the clouds she could not have been more startled and amazed at finding him in such close proximity away down in Florida.

She remembered he had spoken to her of his mother, as he clasped her to his heart out in the starlight of that never-to-be-forgotten night, whispering to her of the marriage which had been the dearest wish of his mother's heart.

She remembered how she had hid her happy, rosy, blushing face on his breast, and asked him if he was quite sure he loved her better than Pluma Hurlhurst, the haughty, beautiful heiress.

“Yes, my pretty little sweetheart, a thousand times better,” he had replied, emphatically, holding her off at arm’s-length, watching the heightened color that surged over the dainty, dimpled face so plainly discernible in the white, radiant starlight.

Daisy rested her head on one soft, childish hand, and gazed thoughtfully up at the cold, brilliant stars that gemmed the heavens above her.

“Oh, if you had only warned me, little stars!” she said. “I was so happy then; and now life is so bitter!”

A sudden impulse seized her, strong as her very life, to look upon his face again.

“I would be content to live my weary life out uncomplainingly then,” she said.

Without intent or purpose she walked hurriedly back through the pansy-bordered path she had so lately traversed.

The grand old trees seemed to stretch their giant arms protectingly over her, as if to ward off all harm.

The night-wind fanned her flushed cheeks and tossed her golden curls against her wistful, tear-stained face. Noiselessly she crept up the wide, graveled path that led to his home—the home which should have been hers.

Was it fancy? She thought she heard Rex’s voice crying out: “Daisy, my darling!” How pitifully her heart thrilled! Dear Heaven! if it had only been true. It was only the restless murmur of the waves sighing among the orange-trees.

A light burned dimly in an upper window. Suddenly a shadow fell across the pale, silken curtains. She knew but too well whose shadow it was; the proud, graceful poise of the handsome head, and the line of the dark curls waving over the broad brow, could belong to no one but Rex. There was no one but the pitying moonlight out there to see how passionately the poor little child-bride kissed the pale roses on which that shadow had fallen, and how she broke it from the stem and placed it close to her beating heart—that lonely, starved little heart, chilled under the withering frost of neglect, when life, love and happiness should have been just bursting into bloom for her.

“He said I had spoiled his life,” she sighed, leaning her pale face wearily against the dark-green ivy vines. “He must have meant I had come between him and

Pluma. Will he go back to her, now that he believes me dead?"

One question alone puzzled her: Had Birdie mentioned her name, and would he know it was she, whom every one believed lying so cold and still in the bottomless pit? She could not tell.

"If I could but see Birdie for a moment," she thought, "and beseech her to keep my secret!"

Birdie had said her brother was soon going away again.

"How could I bear it?" she asked herself, piteously.

It was not in human nature to see the young husband whom she loved so well drifting so completely away from her and still remain silent. "I will watch over him from afar; I will be his guardian angel; I must remain as one dead to him forever," she told herself.

Afar off, over the dancing, moonlighted waters she saw a pleasure-boat gliding swiftly over the rippling waves. She could hear their merry laughter and gay, happy voices, and snatches of mirthful songs. Suddenly the band struck up an old, familiar strain. Poor little Daisy leaned her head against the iron railing of the porch and listened to those cruel words—the piece that they played was "Love's Young Dream."

Love's young dream! Ah! how cruelly hers had ended! She looked up at the white, fleecy clouds above her, vaguely wondering why the love of one person made the earth a very paradise, or a wilderness. As the gay, joyous music floated up to her the words of the poet found echo in her heart in a passionate appeal:

"No one could tell, for nobody knew,
Why love was made to gladden a few;
And hearts that would forever be true,
Go lone and starved the whole way through,"

Oh, it was such a blessed relief to her to watch that shadow. Rex was pacing up and down the room now, his arms folded and his head bent on his breast. Poor, patient little Daisy, watching alone out in the starlight, was wondering if he was thinking of her.

No thought occurred to her of being discovered there with her arms clasped around that marble pillar watching so intently the shadow of that graceful, manly figure pacing to and fro.

No thought occurred to her that a strange event was at that moment transpiring

within those walls, or that something unusual was about to happen.

How she longed to look upon his face for just one brief moment! Estrangement had not chilled her trusting love, it had increased it, rather, tenfold.

Surely it was not wrong to gaze upon that shadow—he was her husband.

In that one moment a wild, bitter thought swept across her heart.

Did Rex regret their marriage because she was poor, friendless, and an orphan? Would it have been different if she had been the heiress of Whitestone Hall?

She pitied herself for her utter loneliness. There was no one to whom she could say one word of all that filled her heart and mind, no face to kiss, no heart to lean on; she was so completely alone. And this was the hour her fate was being decided for her. There was no sympathy for her, her isolation was bitter. She thought of all the heroines she had ever read of. Ah, no one could picture such a sad fate as was hers.

A bright thought flashed across her lonely little heart.

“His mother is there,” she sighed. “Ah, if I were to go to her and cry out: ‘Love me, love me! I am your son’s wife!’ would she cast me from her? Ah, no, surely not; a woman’s gentle heart beats in her breast, a woman’s tender pity. I will plead with her on my knees—to comfort me—to show me some path out of the pitiful darkness; I can love her because she is his mother.”

Daisy drew her breath quickly; the color glowed warmly on her cheek and lips; she wondered she had not thought of it before. Poor child! she meant to tell her all, and throw herself upon her mercy.

Her pretty, soft blue eyes, tender with the light of love, were swimming with tears. A vain hope was struggling in her heart—Rex’s mother might love her, because she worshiped her only son so dearly.

Would she send her forth from that home that should have sheltered her, or would she clasp those little cold fingers in Rex’s strong white ones, as she explained to him, as only a mother can, how sadly he had misjudged poor little Daisy—his wife?

No wonder her heart throbbed pitifully as she stole silently across the wide, shadowy porch, and, quivering from head to foot, touched the bell that echoed with a resounding sound through the long entrance-hall.

“I would like to see Mrs. Lyon,” she said, hesitatingly, to the servant who

answered her summons. "Please do not refuse me," she said, clasping her little white hands pleadingly. "I must see her at once. It is a question of life or death with me. Oh, sir, please do not refuse me. I must see her at once—and—all alone!"

CHAPTER XXII.

In the beautiful drawing-room at Whitestone Hall sat Pluma Hurlhurst, running her white, jeweled fingers lightly over the keyboard of a grand piano, but the music evidently failed to charm her. She arose listlessly and walked toward the window, which opened out upon the wide, cool, rose-embowered porch.

The sunshine glimmered on her amber satin robe, and the white frost-work of lace at her throat, and upon the dark, rich beauty of her southern face.

“Miss Pluma,” called Mrs. Corliss, the housekeeper, entering the room, “there is a person down-stairs who wishes to see you. I have told her repeatedly it is an utter impossibility—you would not see her; but she declares she will not go away until she does see you.”

Pluma turns from the window with cold disdain.

“You should know better than to deliver a message of this kind to me. How dare the impertinent, presuming beggar insist upon seeing me! Order the servants to put her out of the house at once.”

“She is not young,” said the venerable housekeeper, “and I thought, if you only would—”

“Your opinion was not called for, Mrs. Corliss,” returned the heiress, pointing toward the door haughtily.

“I beg your pardon,” the housekeeper made answer, “but the poor creature begged so hard to see you I did feel a little sorry for her.”

“This does not interest me, Mrs. Corliss,” said Pluma, turning toward the window, indicating the conversation was at an end—“not in the least.”

“The Lord pity you, you stony-hearted creature!” murmured the sympathetic old lady to herself as the door closed between them. “One word wouldn’t have cost you much, Heaven knows, it’s mighty little comfort poor old master takes with you! You are no more like the bonny race of Hurlhursts than a raven is like a white dove!” And the poor old lady walked slowly back to the dark-robed figure in the hall, so eagerly awaiting her.

“There was no use in my going to my young mistress; I knew she would not see you. But I suppose you are more satisfied now.”

“She utterly refuses to see me, does she,” asked the woman, in an agitated voice, “when you told her I wished to see her particularly?”

The housekeeper shook her head.

“When Miss Pluma once makes up her mind to a thing, no power on earth could change her mind,” she said; “and she is determined she won’t see you, so you may as well consider that the end of it.”

Without another word the stranger turned and walked slowly down the path and away from Whitestone Hall.

“Fool that I was!” she muttered through her clinched teeth. “I might have foreseen this. But I will haunt the place day and night until I see you, proud heiress of Whitestone Hall. We shall see—time will tell.”

Meanwhile Mrs. Corliss, the housekeeper, was staring after her with wondering eyes.

“I have heard that voice and seen that face somewhere,” she ruminated, thoughtfully; “but where—where? There seems to be strange leaks in this brain of mine—I can not remember.”

A heavy, halting step passed the door, and stopped there.

“What did that woman want, Mrs. Corliss?”

She started abruptly from her reverie, replying, hesitatingly.

“She wanted to see Miss Pluma, sir.”

“Was Pluma so busily engaged she could not spare that poor creature a moment or so?” he inquired, irritably. “Where is she?”

“In the parlor, sir.”

With slow, feeble steps, more from weakness than age, Basil Hurlhurst walked slowly down the corridor to the parlor.

It was seldom he left his own apartments of late, yet Pluma never raised her superb eyes from the book of engravings which lay in her lap as he entered the room.

A weary smile broke under his silver-white mustache.

“You do not seem in a hurry to bid me welcome, Pluma,” he said, grimly, throwing himself down into an easy-chair opposite her. “I congratulate myself upon having such an affectionate daughter.”

Pluma tossed aside her book with a yawn.

“Of course I am glad to see you,” she replied, carelessly; “but you can not expect me to go into ecstasies over the event like a child in pinafores might. You ought to take it for granted that I’m glad you are beginning to see what utter folly it is to make such a recluse of yourself.”

He bit his lip in chagrin. As is usually the case with invalids, he was at times inclined to be decidedly irritable, as was the case just now.

“It is you who have driven me to seek the seclusion of my own apartments, to be out of sight and hearing of the household of simpering idiots you insist upon keeping about you,” he cried, angrily. “I came back to Whitestone Hall for peace and rest. Do I get it? No.”

“That is not my fault,” she answered, serenely. “You do not mingle with the guests. I had no idea they could annoy you.”

“Well, don’t you suppose I have eyes and ears, even if I do not mingle with the chattering magpies you fill the house up with? Why, I can never take a ramble in the grounds of an evening without stumbling upon a dozen or more pair of simpering lovers at every turn. I like darkness and quiet. Night after night I find the grounds strung up with these Chinese lanterns, and I can not even sleep in my bed for the eternal brass bands at night; and in the daytime not a moment’s quiet do I get for these infernal sonatas and screeching trills of the piano. I tell you plainly, I shall not stand this thing a day longer. I am master of Whitestone Hall yet, and while I live I shall have things my own way. After I die you can turn it into a pandemonium, for all I care.”

Pluma flashed her large dark eyes upon him surprisedly, beginning to lose her temper, spurred on by opposition.

“I am sure I do not mean to make a hermit of myself because you are too old to enjoy the brightness of youth,” she flashed out, defiantly; “and you ought not to expect it—it is mean and contemptible of you.”

“Pluma!” echoed Basil Hurlhurst, in astonishment, his noble face growing white and stern with suppressed excitement, “not another word.”

Pluma tossed her head contemptuously. When once her temper arose it was quite

as impossible to check it as it was when she was a willful, revengeful, spoiled child.

“Another man as rich as you are would have taken their daughter to Washington for a season, and in the summer to Long Branch or Newport—somewhere, anywhere, away from the detestable waving cotton-fields. When you die I shall have it all set on fire.”

“Pluma!” he cried, hoarsely, rising to his feet and drawing his stately, commanding figure to its full height, “I will not brook such language from a child who should at least yield me obedience, if not love. You are not the heiress of Whitestone Hall yet, and you never may be. If I thought you really contemplated laying waste these waving fields that have been my pride for long years—and my father’s before me—I would will it to an utter stranger, so help me Heaven!”

Were his words prophetic? How little she knew the echo of these words were doomed to ring for all time down the corridors of her life! How little we know what is in store for us!

“I am your only child,” said Pluma, haughtily; “you would not rob me of my birthright. I shall be forced to submit to your pleasure—while you are here—but, thank Heaven, the time is not far distant when I shall be able to do as I please. ‘The mills of the gods grind slowly, but they grind exceeding fine,’” she quoted, saucily.

“Thank Heaven the time is not far distant when I shall be able to do as I please.” He repeated the words slowly after her, each one sinking into his heart like a poisoned arrow. “So you would thank Heaven for my death, would you?” he cried, with passion rising to a white heat. “Well, this is no better than I could expect from the daughter—of such a mother.”

He had never intended speaking those words; but she goaded him on to it with her taunting, scornful smile, reminding him so bitterly of the one great error of his past life.

He was little like the kind, courteous master of Whitestone Hall, whom none named but to praise, as he stood there watching the immovable face of his daughter. All the bitterness of his nature was by passion rocked. No look of pain or anguish touched the dark beauty of that southern face at the mention of her mother’s name.

“You have spoken well,” she said. “I am her child. You speak of love,” she cried,

contemptuously. "Have you not told me, a thousand times, you never cared for my mother? How, then, could I expect you to care for me? Have you not cried out unceasingly for the golden-haired young wife and the babe you lost, and that you wished Heaven had taken you too? Did I ever hear my mother's name upon your lips except with a sneer? Do you expect these things made that mother's child more fond of you, were you twenty times my father?"

She stood up before him, proudly defiant, like a beautiful tragedy queen, the sunlight slanting on the golden vines of her amber satin robe, on the long, dark, silken curls fastened with a ruby star, and on the deep crimson-hearted passion-roses that quivered on her heaving breast. There was not one feature of that gloriously dark face that resembled the proud, cold man sitting opposite her.

He knew all she had said was quite true. He had tried so hard to love this beautiful queenly girl from her infancy up. He was tender of heart, honest and true; but an insurmountable barrier seemed ever between them; each year found them further apart.

Basil Hurlhurst lived over again in those few moments the terrible folly that had cursed his youth, as he watched the passion-rocked face before him.

"Youth is blind and will not see," had been too bitterly true with him. It was in his college days, when the world seemed all gayety, youth and sunshine to him, he first met the beautiful face that was to darken all of his after life. He was young and impulsive; he thought it was love that filled his heart for the beautiful stranger who appeared alone and friendless in that little college town.

He never once asked who or what she was, or from whence she came, this beautiful creature with the large, dark, dreamy eyes that thrilled his heart into love. She carried the town by storm; every young man at the college was deeply, desperately in love. But Basil, the handsomest and wealthiest of them all, thought what a lark it would be to steal a march on them all by marrying the dark-eyed beauty then and there. He not only thought it, but executed it, but it was not the lark that he thought it was going to be. For one short happy week he lived in a fool's paradise, then a change came over the spirit of his dreams. In that one week she had spent his year's income and all the money he could borrow, then petulantly left him in anger.

For two long years he never looked upon her face again. One stormy night she returned quite unexpectedly at Whitestone Hall, bringing with her their little child Pluma, and, placing her in her father's arms, bitter recriminations followed. Bitterly Basil Hurlhurst repented that terrible mistake of his youth, that hasty

marriage.

When the morning light dawned he took his wife and child from Whitestone Hall—took them abroad. What did it matter to him where they went? Life was the same to him in one part of the world as another. For a year they led a weary life of it. Heaven only knew how weary he was of the woman the law called his wife!

One night, in a desperate fit of anger, she threw herself into the sea; her body was never recovered. Then the master of Whitestone Hall returned with his child, a sadder and wiser man.

But the bitterest drop in his cup had been added last. The golden-haired young wife, the one sweet love whom he had married last, was taken from him; even her little child, tiny image of that fair young mother, had not been spared him.

How strange it was such a passionate yearning always came over him when he thought of his child!

When he saw a fair, golden-haired young girl, with eyes of blue, the pain in his heart almost stifled him. Some strange unaccountable fate urged him to ever seek for that one face even in the midst of crowds. It was a mad, foolish fancy, yet it was the one consolation of Basil Hurlhurst's weary, tempest tossed life.

No wonder he set his teeth hard together as he listened to the cold words of the proud, peerless beauty before him, who bore every lineament of her mother's dark, fatal beauty—this daughter who scornfully spoke of the hour when he should die as of some happy, long-looked-for event.

Those waving cotton-fields that stretched out on all sides as far as the eye could reach, like a waving field of snow, laid waste beneath the fire fiend's scorching breath! Never—never!

Then and there the proud, self-conscious young heiress lost all chances of reigning a regal queen, by *fair* means, of Whitestone Hall.

CHAPTER XXIII.

The servant who opened the door for Daisy looked earnestly at the fair, pleading young face, framed in rings of golden hair, so pure and spiritual that it looked like an angel's with the soft white moonlight falling over it.

"You will not refuse me," she repeated, timidly. "I must speak to Mrs. Lyon."

"You have come too late," he replied, gently; "Mrs. Lyon is dead."

The man never forgot the despairing look of horror that deepened in the childish blue eyes raised to his.

"Rex's mother dead!" she repeated, slowly, wondering if she had heard aright. "Oh, my poor Rex, my poor Rex!"

How she longed to go to him and comfort him in that terrible hour, but she dared not intrude upon him.

"If there is any message you would like to leave," said the kind-hearted Parker, "I will take it to Mr. Rex."

"No," said Daisy, shaking her head, "I have no message to leave; perhaps I will come again—after this is all over," she made answer, hesitatingly; her brain was in a whirl; she wanted to get away all by herself to think. "Please don't say any one was here," she said, quickly; "I—I don't want any one to know."

The sweet, plaintive voice, as sweet as the silvery note of a forest bird, went straight to his heart.

Whatever the mission of this beautiful, mysterious visitor, he would certainly respect her wishes.

"I shall not mention it if you do not wish it," he said.

"Thank you," she replied, simply; "you are very kind. My life seems made up of disappointments," she continued, as she walked slowly home under the restless, sighing green branches.

It seemed so indeed. She was so young and inexperienced to be thrown so entirely upon the cold, pitiless world—cut off so entirely from all human

sympathy. She entered the house quite unobserved. Eve—bright, merry, dashing Eve—was singing like a lark in the drawing-room, making the old house echo with her bright young voice.

“How happy she is!” thought Daisy, wistfully. “She has home, friends, and love, while I have nothing that makes life worth the living.”

Like a shadow, she flitted on through the dim, shadowy hall, toward her own little room. She saw Gertie’s door was ajar as she passed it, and the sound of her own name caused her to pause voluntarily.

It was very natural for Daisy to pause. How many are there who would have passed on quietly, with no desire to know what was being said of themselves, when they heard their own names mentioned in such a sneering manner? Daisy certainly meant no harm by it; she paused, thoughtfully and curiously, as any one would have done.

“I am sure I don’t like it,” Gertie was saying, spitefully. “It is an actual shame allowing Daisy Brooks to remain here. Uncle Jet was a mean old thing to send her here, where there were three marriageable young ladies. I tell you he did it out of pure spite.”

“I believe it,” answered Bess, spiritedly. “Every one of my beaux either hints for an introduction or asks for it outright.”

“What do you tell them?” questions Gertie, eagerly.

“Tell them! Why, I look exceedingly surprised, replying: ‘I do not know to whom you refer. We have no company at the house just now.’ ‘I mean that beautiful, golden-haired little fairy, with the rosy cheeks and large blue eyes. If not your guest, may I ask who she is?’ I am certainly compelled to answer so direct a thrust,” continued Bess, angrily; “and I ask in well-feigned wonder: ‘Surely you do not mean Daisy Brooks, my mother’s paid companion?’”

“What do they say to that?” asked Gertie, laughing heartily at her elder sister’s ingenuity, and tossing her curl papers until every curl threatened to tumble down. “That settles it, doesn’t it?”

“Mercy, no!” cried Bess, raising her eyebrows; “not a bit of it. The more I say against her—in a sweet way, of course—the more they are determined to form her acquaintance.”

“I don’t see what every one can see in that little pink-and-white baby-face of hers to rave over so!” cried Gertie, hotly. “I can’t imagine where in the world

people see her. I have as much as told her she was not expected to come into the parlor or drawing-room when strangers were there, and what do you suppose she said?"

"Cried, perhaps," said Bess, yawning with ennui.

"She did nothing of the kind," retorted Gertie. "She seized my hand, and said: 'Oh, Miss Gertrude, that is very kind of you, indeed! I thank you ever so much!'"

"Pshaw!" cried Bess, contemptuously. "That was a trick to make you believe she did not want to be observed by our guests. She is a sly, designing little creature, with her pretty face and soft, childish ways."

"But there is one point that seriously troubles me," said Gertie, fastening the pink satin bow on her tiny slipper more securely, and breaking off the thread with a nervous twitch. "I am seriously afraid, if Rex were to see her, that would be the end of our castle in the air. Daisy Brooks has just the face to attract a handsome, debonair young fellow like Rex."

"You can depend upon it he shall never see her," said Bess, decidedly. "Where there's a will there's a way."

"I have never been actually jealous of anyone before," said Gertie, flushing furiously, as she acknowledged the fact; "but that Daisy has such a way of attracting people toward her they quite forget your presence when she is around. 'When one rival leaves the field, another one is sure to come to the fore.' That's a true saying," said Gertie, meditatively. "You see, he did not marry the heiress of Whitestone Hall. So he is still in the market, to be captured by some lucky girl."

"Well, if I am the lucky one, you must forgive me, Gertie. All is fair in love and war, you know. Besides, his wealth is too tempting to see slip quietly by without a struggle."

Before she could reply Eve popped in through the long French window that opened out on the porch.

"Oh, I'm so tired of hearing you two talk of lovers and riches!" she cried, throwing herself down on the sofa. "I do hate to hear love weighed against riches, as if it were a purchasable article. According to your ideas, if a fellow was worth a hundred thousand, you would love him moderately; but if he was worth half a million, you could afford to love him immensely."

“You have got a sensible idea of the matter,” said Bess, coolly.

“For shame!” cried Eve, in a hot fury. “It’s an actual sin to talk in that way. If a handsome young man loves you, and you love him, why, you ought to marry him if he hadn’t a dollar in the world!”

Gertie and the worldly-wise Bess laughed at their younger sister’s enthusiasm.

“Now, there’s Rex Lyon, for instance,” persisted Eve, absolutely refusing to be silenced. “I would wager a box of the best kid gloves either one of you would marry him to-morrow, if he were to ask you, if he hadn’t a penny in his pocket.”

“Pshaw!” reiterated Gertie, and Bess murmured something about absurd ideas; but nevertheless both sisters were blushing furiously to the very roots of their hair. They well knew in their hearts what she said was perfectly true.

“Eve,” said Bess, laying her hand coaxingly on the young rebel’s arm, “Gertie and I want you to promise us something. Come, now, consent that you will do as we wish, that’s a good girl.”

“How can I promise before I know what you want?” said Eve, petulantly. “You might want the man in the moon, after you’ve tried and failed to get his earthly brethren, for all I know!”

“Eve, you are actually absurd!” cried Bess, sharply. “This is merely a slight favor we wish you to do.”

“If you warn her not to do a thing, that is just what she will set her heart upon doing,” said Gertie, significantly.

By this time Eve’s curiosity was well up.

“You may as well tell me anyhow,” she said; “for if you don’t, and I ever find out what it is, I’ll do my very worst, because you kept it from me.”

“Well,” said Gertie, eagerly, “we want you to promise us not to give Daisy Brooks an introduction to Rex Lyon.”

A defiant look stole over Eve’s mischievous face.

“If he asks me, I’m to turn and walk off, or I’m to say, ‘No, sir, I am under strict orders from my marriageable sisters not to.’ Is that what you mean?”

“Eve,” they both cried in chorus, “don’t be unsisterly; don’t put a stumbling-block in our path; rather remove it!”

“I shall not bind myself to such a promise!” cried Eve. “You are trying to spoil

my pet scheme. I believe you two are actually witches and guessed it. What put it into your heads that I had any such intentions anyhow?"

"Then you were actually thinking of going against our interest in that way," cried Gertie, white to the very lips, "you insolent little minx!"

"I don't choose to remain in such polite society," said Eve, with a mocking courtesy, skipping toward the door. "I may take a notion to write a little note to Mr. Rex, inviting him over here to see our household fairy, just as the spirit moves me."

This was really more than Gertie's warm, southern temper could bear. She actually flew at the offending Eve in her rage; but Eve was nimble of foot and disappeared up the stairway, three steps at a bound.

"What a vixen our Gertie is growing to be!" she cried, pantingly, as she reached the top step.

She saw a light in Daisy's room, and tapped quietly on the door.

"Is that you, Eve?" cried a smothered voice from the pillows.

"Yes," replied Eve; "I'd like very much to come in. May I?"

For answer, Daisy opened the door, but Eve stood quite still on the threshold.

"What's the matter, Daisy, have you been crying?" she demanded. "Why, your eyelids are red and swollen, and your eyes glow like the stars. Has Gertie or Bess said anything cross to you?" she inquired, smoothing back the soft golden curls that clustered round the white brow.

"No," said Daisy, choking down a hard sob; "only I am very unhappy, Eve, and I feel just—just as if every one in the world hated me."

"How long have you been up here in your room?" asked Eve, suspiciously, fearing Daisy had by chance overheard the late conversation down-stairs.

"Quite an hour," answered Daisy, truthfully.

"Then you did not hear what I was talking about down-stairs, did you?" she inquired, anxiously.

"No," said Daisy, "you were playing over a new waltz when I came upstairs."

"Oh," said Eve, breathing freer, thinking to herself, "She has not heard what we said. I am thankful for that."

"You must not talk like that, Daisy," she said, gayly, clasping her arms

caressingly around the slender figure leaning against the casement; “I predict great things in store for you—wonderful things. Do not start and look at me so curiously, for I shall not tell you anything else, for it is getting dangerously near a certain forbidden subject. You know you warned me not to talk to you of love or lovers. I intend to have a great surprise for you. That is all I’m going to tell you now.”

Eve was almost frightened at the rapture that lighted up the beautiful face raised to her own.

“Has any one called for me, Eve?” she asked, piteously. “Oh, Eve, tell me quickly. I have hoped against hope, almost afraid to indulge so sweet a dream. Has any one inquired for me?”

Eve shook her head, sorely puzzled.

“Were you expecting any one to call?” she asked. She saw the light die quickly out of the blue eyes and the rich peachlike bloom from the delicate, dimpled cheeks. “I know something is troubling you greatly, little Daisy,” she said, “and I sympathize with you even if I may not share your secret.”

“Every one is so cold and so cruel to me, I think I should die if I were to lose your friendship, Eve,” she said.

Eve held the girl’s soft white hand in hers. “You will never die, then, if you wait for that event to happen. When I like a person, I like them for all time. I never could pretend a friendship I did not feel. And I said to myself the first moment I saw you: ‘What a sweet little fairy! I shall love her, I’m sure.’”

“And do you love me?” asked Daisy.

“Yes,” said Eve; “my friendship is a lasting one. I could do almost anything for you.”

She wondered why Daisy took her face between her soft little palms and looked so earnestly down into her eyes, and kissed her lips so repeatedly.

Poor Daisy! if she had only confided in Eve—reckless, impulsive, warm-hearted, sympathetic Eve—it might have been better for her. “No matter what you might hear of me in the future, no matter what fate might tempt me to do, promise me, Eve, that you, of all the world, will believe in me, you will not lose your faith in me.” The sweet voice sounded hollow and unnatural. “There are dark, pitiful secrets in many lives,” she said, “that drive one to the very verge of madness in their woe. If you love me, pray for me, Eve. My feet are on the edge

of a terrible precipice.”

In after years Eve never forgot the haunted look of despair that crossed the fair face of Daisy Brooks, as the words broke from her lips in a piteous cry.

CHAPTER XXIV.

The announcement of Mrs. Lyon's sudden and unexpected death caused great excitement and consternation the next morning at Glengrove.

"Oh, dear!" cried Gertie, "how provokingly unfortunate for her to die just now! Why couldn't she have waited until after our birthday party? Of course Rex wouldn't be expected to come now; and this whole matter was arranged especially for him; and my beautiful lilac silk is all made, and so bewitchingly lovely, too!"

"What can't be cured must be endured, you know," said Bess; "and now the best thing to be done is to send a note of condolence to him, extending our deepest sympathy, and offering him any assistance in our power; and be sure to add: 'We would be very pleased to have Birdie come over here until you can make other arrangements for her.'"

"Have Birdie here!" flashed Gertie, angrily. "I actually think you have gone crazy!"

"Well, there is certainly a method in my madness," remarked Bess. "Aren't you quick-witted enough to understand that would be a sure way of bringing Rex over here every day?—he would come to see his sister—and that is quite a point gained."

"You are rather clever, Bess; I never thought of that."

And straightway the perfumed little note was dispatched, bearing Gertie's monogram and tender-worded sympathy to the handsome young heir, who sat all alone in that darkened chamber, wondering why Heaven had been so unkind to him.

An hour later Bess and Gertie were in the library arranging some new volumes on the shelves. Mrs. Glenn sat in a large easy-chair superintending the affair, while Daisy stood at an open window, holding the book from which she had been reading aloud in her restless fingers, her blue eyes gazing earnestly on the distant curling smoke that rose up lazily from the chimneys of Rex's home, and upon the brilliant sunshine that lighted up the eastern windows with a blaze of

glory—as if there was no such thing as death or sorrow within those palatial walls—when Rex’s answer was received.

“It is from Rex!” cried Gertie, all in a flutter. “Shall I read it aloud, mamma?” she asked, glancing furtively at Daisy, who stood at the window, her pale, death-like face half buried in the lace curtains.

“It is certainly not a personal letter,” said Bess, maliciously glancing at the superscription. “Don’t you see it is addressed to ‘Mrs. Glenn and daughters.’”

“In a time like that people don’t think much of letters,” commented Mrs. Glenn, apologetically. “Read the letter aloud, of course, my dear.”

It read:

“DEAR LADIES,—I thank you more than I can express for your kind sympathy in my present sad bereavement. I would gladly have accepted your offer of bringing my dear little orphan sister to you, had I not received a telegram this morning from Miss Pluma Hurlhurst, of Whitestone Hall, West Virginia, announcing her intention of coming on at once, accompanied by Mrs. Corliss, to take charge of little Birdie.

“Again thanking you for the courtesy and kindness shown me, I am

“Yours very truly,

“REXFORD LYON.”

There was a low, gasping, piteous cry; and the little figure at the window slipped down among the soft, billowy curtains in a deadly swoon; but the three, so deeply engrossed in discussing the contents of the note, did not notice it. At last Daisy opened her eyes, and the blue eyes were dazed with pain. She could hear them coupling the names of Rex and Pluma Hurlhurst. Rex—her husband!

Daisy was blind and stupefied. She groped rather than walked from the library—away from the three, who scarcely noticed her absence.

Who cared that her heart was broken? Who cared that the cruel stab had gone home to her tender, bleeding heart; that the sweet young face was whiter than the petals of the star-bells tossing their white plumes against the casement?

Slowly, blindly, with one hand grasping the balusters, she went up the broad staircase to her own room.

She tried to think of everything on the way except the one thing that had taken place. She thought of the story she had read, of a girl who was slain by having a dagger plunged into her breast. The girl ran a short distance, and when the

dagger was drawn from the wound, she fell down dead. In some way she fancied she was like that girl—that, when she should reach her own room and stand face to face with her own pain, she should drop down dead.

The door was closed, and she stood motionless, trying to understand and realize what she had heard.

“Have my senses deceived me?” She said the words over and over to herself. “Did I dream it? Can it even be possible Pluma Hurlhurst is coming here, coming to the home where I should have been? God help me. Coming to comfort Rex—my husband!”

She could fancy the darkly beautiful face bending over him; her white jeweled hands upon his shoulder, or, perhaps, smoothing back the bonny brown clustering curls from his white brow.

“My place should have been by his side,” she continued.

It hurt and pained her to hear the name of the man she loved dearer than life mentioned with the name of Pluma Hurlhurst.

“Oh, Rex, my love, my love!” she cried out, “I can not bear it any longer. The sun of my life has gone down in gloom and chill. Oh, Rex, my husband, I have not the strength nor the courage to bear it. I am a coward. I can not give you up. We are living apart under the blue, smiling sky and the golden sun. Yet in the sight of the angels, I am your wife.”

Suddenly, the solemn bells from Rex’s home commenced tolling, and through the leafy branches of the trees she caught a glimpse of a white face and bowed head, and of a proud, cold face bending caressingly over it, just as she had pictured it in her imagination.

Dear Heaven! it was Rex and Pluma! She did not moan. She did not cry out, nor utter even a sigh. Like one turned to marble she, the poor little misguided child-wife, stood watching them with an intentness verging almost into madness.

She saw him lift his head wearily from his white hands, rise slowly, and then, side by side, both disappeared from the window.

After that Daisy never knew how the moments passed. She remembered the tidy little waiting-maid coming to her and asking if she would please come down to tea. She shook her head but no sound issued from the white lips, and the maid went softly away, closing the door behind her.

Slowly the sun sunk in the west in a great red ball of fire. The light died out of

the sky, and the song birds trilled their plaintive good-night songs in the soft gloaming. Still Daisy sat with her hands crossed in her lap, gazing intently at the window, where she had seen Pluma standing with Rex, her husband.

A hand turned the knob of her door.

“Oh, dear me,” cried Gertie, “you are all in the dark. I do not see you. Are you here, Daisy Brooks?”

“Yes,” said Daisy, controlling her voice by a violent effort. “Won’t you sit down? I will light the gas.”

“Oh, no, indeed!” cried Gertie. “I came up to ask you if you would please sew a little on my ball dress to-night. I can not use it just now; still, there is no need of putting it away half finished.”

Sew on a ball dress while her heart was breaking! Oh, how could she do it? Quietly she followed Gertie to her pretty little blue and gold boudoir, making no remonstrance. She was to sew on a ball dress while the heiress of Whitestone Hall was consoling her young husband in his bitter sorrow?

The shimmering billows of silk seemed swimming before her eyes, and the frost-work of seed-pearls to waver through the blinding tears that would force themselves to her eyes. Eve was not there. How pitifully lonely poor Daisy felt! The face, bent so patiently over the lilac silk, had a strange story written upon it. But the two girls, discussing the events of the day, did not glance once in her direction; their thoughts and conversation were of the handsome young heiress and Rex.

“For once in your life you were wrong,” said Bess. “The way affairs appear now does not look much like a broken-off marriage, I can assure you.”

“Those who have seen her say she is peculiarly beautiful and fascinating, though cold, reserved, and as haughty as a queen,” said Gertie.

“Cold and reserved,” sneered Bess. “I guess you would not have thought so if you had been at the drawing-room window to-day and seen her bending over Rex so lovingly. I declare I expected every moment to see her kiss him.”

The box which held the seed-pearls dropped to the floor with a crash, and the white, glistening beads were scattered about in all directions.

“Why, what a careless creature you are, Daisy Brooks!” cried Gertie, in dismay. “Just see what you have done! Half of them will be lost, and what is not lost will be smashed, and I had just enough to finish that lily on the front breadth and

twine among the blossoms for my hair. What do you suppose I'm going to do now, you provoking girl? It is actually enough to make one cry."

"I am so sorry," sighed Daisy, piteously.

"Sorry! Will that bring back my seed-pearls? I have half a mind to make mamma deduct the amount from your salary."

"You may have it all if it will only replace them," said Daisy, earnestly. "I think, though, I have gathered them all up."

A great, round tear rolled off from her long, silky eyelashes and into the very heart of the frosted lily over which she bent, but the lily's petals seemed to close about it, leaving no trace of its presence.

Bessie and Gertie openly discussed their chagrin and keen disappointment, yet admitting what a handsome couple Rex and Pluma made—he so courteous and noble, she so royal and queenly.

"Of course we must call upon her if she is to be Rex's wife," said Gertie, spitefully. "I foresee she will be exceedingly popular."

"We must also invite her to Glengrove," said Bess, thoughtfully. "It is the least we can do, and it is expected of us. I quite forgot to mention one of their servants was telling Jim both Rex and little Birdie intend to accompany Miss Hurlhurst back to Whitestone Hall as soon after the funeral as matters can be arranged."

"Why, that is startling news indeed! Why, then, they will probably leave some time this week!" cried Gertie.

"Most probably," said Bess. "You ought certainly to send over your note this evening—it is very early yet."

"There is no one to send," said Gertie. "Jim has driven over to Natchez, and there is no one else to go."

"Perhaps Daisy will go for you," suggested Bess.

There was no need of being jealous *now* of Daisy's beauty in that direction. Gertie gladly availed herself of the suggestion.

"Daisy," she said, turning abruptly to the quivering little figure, whose face drooped over the lilac silk, "never mind finishing that dress to-night. I wish you to take a note over to the large gray stone house yonder, and be sure to deliver it to Mr. Rex Lyon himself."

CHAPTER XXV.

Gertie Glenn never forgot the despairing cry that broke from Daisy's white lips as she repeated her command:

"I wish you to deliver this note to Mr. Rex Lyon himself."

"Oh, Miss Gertie," she cried, clasping her hands together in an agony of entreaty, "I can not—oh, indeed I can not! Ask anything of me but that and I will gladly do it!"

Both girls looked at her in sheer astonishment.

"What is the reason you can not?" cried Gertie, in utter amazement. "I do not comprehend you."

"I—I can not take the note," she said, in a frightened whisper. "I do not—I—"

She stopped short in utter confusion.

"I choose you shall do just as I bid you," replied Gertie, in her imperious, scornful anger. "It really seems to me you forget your position here, Miss Brooks. How dare you refuse me?"

Opposition always strengthened Gertie's decision, and she determined Daisy should take her note to Rex Lyon at all hazards.

The eloquent, mute appeal in the blue eyes raised to her own was utterly lost on her.

"The pride of these dependent companions is something ridiculous," she went on, angrily. "You consider yourself too fine, I suppose, to be made a messenger of." Gertie laughed aloud, a scornful, mocking laugh. "Pride and poverty do not work very well together. You may go to your room now and get your hat and shawl. I shall have the letter written in a very few minutes. There will be no use appealing to mamma. You ought to know by this time we overrule her objections always."

It was too true, Mrs. Glenn never had much voice in a matter where Bess or Gertie had decided the case.

Like one in a dream Daisy turned from them. She never remembered how she gained her own room. With cold, tremulous fingers she fastened her hat, tucking the bright golden hair carefully beneath her veil, and threw her shawl over her shoulders, just as Gertie approached, letter in hand.

“You need not go around by the main road,” she said, “there is a much nearer path leading down to the stone wall. You need not wait for an answer: there will be none. The servants over there are awkward, blundering creatures—do not trust it to them—you must deliver it to Rex himself.”

“I make one last appeal to you, Miss Gertie. Indeed, it is not pride that prompts me. I could not bear it. Have pity on me. You are gentle and kind to others; please, oh, please be merciful to me!”

“I have nothing more to say upon the subject—I have said you were to go. You act as if I were sending you to some place where you might catch the scarlet fever or the mumps. You amuse me; upon my word you do. Rex is not dangerous, neither is he a Bluebeard; his only fault is being alarmingly handsome. The best advice I can give you is, don’t admire him too much. He should be labeled, ‘Out of the market.’”

Gertie tripped gayly from the room, her crimson satin ribbons fluttering after her, leaving a perceptible odor of violets in the room, while Daisy clutched the note in her cold, nervous grasp, walking like one in a terrible dream through the bright patches of glittering moonlight, through the sweet-scented, rose-bordered path, on through the dark shadows of the trees toward the home of Rex—her husband.

A soft, brooding silence lay over the sleeping earth as Daisy, with a sinking heart, drew near the house. Her soft footfalls on the green mossy earth made no sound.

Silently as a shadow she crept up to the blossom-covered porch; some one was standing there, leaning against the very pillar around which she had twined her arms as she watched Rex’s shadow on the roses.

The shifting moonbeams pierced the white, fleecy clouds that enveloped them, and as he turned his face toward her she saw it was Rex. She could almost have reached out her hand and touched him from where she stood. She was sorely afraid her face or her voice might startle him if she spoke to him suddenly.

“I do not need to speak,” she thought. “I will go up to him and lay the letter in his hand.”

Then a great intense longing came over her to hear his voice and know that he was speaking to her. She had quite decided to pursue this course, when the rustle of a silken garment fell upon her ear. She knew the light tread of the slippared feet but too well—it was Pluma. She went up to him in her usual caressing fashion, laying her white hand on his arm.

“Do you know you have been standing here quite two hours, Rex, watching the shadows of the vine-leaves? I have longed to come up and ask you what interest those dancing shadows had for you, but I could not make up my mind to disturb you. I often fancy you do not know how much time you spend in thought.”

Pluma was wondering if he was thinking of that foolish, romantic fancy that had come so near separating them—his boyish fancy for Daisy Brooks, their overseer’s niece. No, surely not. He must have forgotten her long ago.

“These reveries seem to have grown into a habit with me,” he said, dreamily; “almost a second nature, of late. If you were to come and talk to me at such times, you would break me of it.”

The idea pleased her. A bright flush rose to her face, and she made him some laughing reply, and he looked down upon her with a kindly smile.

Oh! the torture of it to the poor young wife standing watching them, with heart on fire in the deep shadow of the crimson-hearted passion-flowers that quivered on the intervening vines. The letter she held in her hand slipped from her fingers into the bushes all unheeded. She had but one thought—she must get away. The very air seemed to stifle her; her heart seemed numb—an icy band seemed pressing round it, and her poor forehead was burning hot. It did not matter much where she went, nobody loved her, nobody cared for her. As softly as she came, she glided down the path that led to the entrance-gate beyond. She passed through the moonlighted grounds, where the music and fragrance of the summer night was at its height. The night wind stirred the pink clover and the blue-bells beneath her feet. Her eyes were hot and dry; tears would have been a world of relief to her, but none came to her parched eyelids.

She paid little heed to the direction she took. One idea alone took possession of her—she must get away.

“If I could only go back to dear old Uncle John,” she sighed. “His love has never failed me.”

It seemed long years back since she had romped with him, a happy, merry child, over the cotton fields, and he had called her his sunbeam during all those years

when no one lived at Whitestone Hall and the wild ivy climbed riotously over the windows and doors. Even Septima's voice would have sounded so sweet to her. She would have lived over again those happy, childish days, if she only could. She remembered how Septima would send her to the brook for water, and how she sprinkled every flower in the path-way that bore her name; and how Septima would scold her when she returned with her bucket scarce half full; and how she had loved to dream away those sunny summer days, lying under the cool, shady trees, listening to the songs the robins sang as they glanced down at her with their little sparkling eyes.

How she had dreamed of the gallant young hero who was to come to her some day. She had wondered how she would know him, and what were the words he first would say! If he would come riding by, as the judge did when "Maud Muller stood in the hay-fields;" and she remembered, too, the story of "Rebecca at the Well." A weary smile flitted over her face as she remembered when she went to the brook she had always put on her prettiest blue ribbons, in case she might meet her hero.

Oh, those sweet, bright, rosy dreams of girlhood! What a pity it is they do not last forever! Those girlish dreams, where glowing fancy reigns supreme, and the prosaic future is all unknown. She remembered her meeting with Rex, how every nerve in her whole being thrilled, and how she had felt her cheeks grow flaming hot, just as she had read they would do when she met the right one. That was how she had known Rex was the right one when she had shyly glanced up, from under her long eyelashes, into the gay, brown hazel eyes, fixed upon her so quizzically, as he took the heavy basket from her slender arms, that never-to-be-forgotten June day, beneath the blossoming magnolia-tree.

Poor child! her life had been a sad romance since then. How strange it was she was fleeing from the young husband whom she had married and was so quickly parted from!

All this trouble had come about because she had so courageously rescued her letter from Mme. Whitney.

"If he had not bound me to secrecy, I could have have cried out before the whole world I was his wife," she thought.

A burning flush rose to her face as she thought how cruelly he had suspected her, this poor little child-bride who had never known one wrong or sinful thought in her pure, innocent young life.

If he had only given her the chance of explaining how she had happened to be

there with Stanwick; if they had taken her back she must have confessed about the letter and who Rex was and what he was to her.

Even Stanwick's persecution found an excuse in her innocent, unsuspecting little heart.

"He sought to save me from being taken back when he called me his wife," she thought. "He believed I was free to woo and win, because I dared not tell him I was Rex's wife." Yet the thought of Stanwick always brought a shudder to her pure young mind. She could not understand why he would have resorted to such desperate means to gain an unwilling bride.

"Not yet seventeen. Ah, what a sad love-story hers had been. How cruelly love's young dream had been blighted," she told herself; and yet she would not have exchanged that one thrilling, ecstatic moment of rapture when Rex had clasped her in his arms and whispered: "My darling wife," for a whole lifetime of calm happiness with any one else.

On and on she walked through the violet-studded grass, thinking—thinking. Strange fancies came thronging to her overwrought brain. She pushed her veil back from her face and leaned against the trunk of a tree; her brain was dizzy and her thoughts were confused; the very stars seemed dancing riotously in the blue sky above her, and the branches of the trees were whispering strange fancies. Suddenly a horseman, riding a coal-black charger, came cantering swiftly up the long avenue of trees. He saw the quiet figure standing leaning against the drooping branches.

"I will inquire the way," he said to himself, drawing rein beside her. "Can you tell me, madame, if this is the most direct road leading to Glengrove and that vicinity? I am looking for a hostelry near it. I seem to have lost my way. Will you kindly direct me?" he asked, "or to the home of Mr. Rex Lyon?"

The voice sounded strangely familiar to Daisy. She was dimly conscious some one was speaking to her. She raised her face up and gazed at the speaker. The cold, pale moonlight fell full upon it, clearly revealing its strange, unearthly whiteness, and the bright flashing eyes, gazing dreamily past the terror-stricken man looking down on her, with white, livid lips and blanched, horror-stricken face. His eyes almost leaped from their sockets in abject terror, as Lester Stanwick gazed on the upturned face by the roadside.

"My God, do I dream?" he cried, clutching at the pommel of his saddle. "Is this the face of Daisy Brooks, or is it a specter, unable to sleep in the depths of her tomb, come back to haunt me for driving her to her doom?"

CHAPTER XXVI.

Rex and Pluma talked for some time out in the moonlight, then Rex excused himself, and on the plea of having important business letters to write retired to the library.

For some minutes Pluma leaned thoughtfully against the railing. The night was still and clear; the moon hung over the dark trees; floods of silvery light bathed the waters of the glittering sea, the sleeping flowers and the grass, and on the snowy orange-blossoms and golden fruit amid the green foliage.

“I shall always love this fair southern home,” she thought, a bright light creeping into her dark, dazzling eyes. “I am Fortune’s favorite,” she said, slowly. “I shall have the one great prize I covet most on earth. I shall win Rex at last. I wonder at the change in him. There was a time when I believed he loved me. Could it be handsome, refined, courteous Rex had more than a passing fancy for Daisy Brooks—simple, unpretentious Daisy Brooks? Thank God she is dead!” she cried, vehemently. “I would have periled my very soul to have won him.”

Even as the thought shaped itself in her mind, a dark form stepped cautiously forward.

She was not startled; a passing wonder as to who it might be struck her. She did not think much about it; a shadow in the moonlight did not frighten her.

“Pluma!” called a low, cautious voice, “come down into the garden; I must speak with you. It is I, Lester Stanwick.”

In a single instant the soft love-light had faded from her face, leaving it cold, proud, and pitiless. A vague, nameless dread seized her. She was a courageous girl; she would not let him know it.

“The mad fool!” she cried, clinching her white jeweled hands together. “Why does he follow me here? What shall I do? I must buy him off at any cost. I dare not defy him. Better temporize with him.” She muttered the words aloud, and she was shocked to see how changed and hoarse her own voice sounded. “Women have faced more deadly peril than this,” she muttered, “and cleverly outwitted ingenious foes. I *must* win by stratagem.”

She quickly followed the tall figure down the path that divided the little garden from the shrubbery.

“I knew you would not refuse me, Pluma,” he said, clasping her hands and kissing her cold lips. He noticed the glance she gave him had nothing in it but coldness and annoyance. “You do not tell me you are pleased to see me, Pluma, and yet you have promised to be my wife.” She stood perfectly still leaning against an oleander-tree. “Why don’t you speak to me, Pluma?” he cried. “By Heaven! I am almost beginning to mistrust you. You remember your promise,” he said, hurriedly—“if I removed the overseer’s niece from your path you were to reward me with your heart and hand.” She would have interrupted him, but he silenced her with a gesture. “You said your love for Rex had turned to bitter hatred. You found he loved the girl, and that would be a glorious revenge. I did not have to resort to abducting her from the seminary as we had planned. The bird flew into my grasp. I would have placed her in the asylum you selected, but she eluded me by leaping into the pit. I have been haunted by her face night and day ever since. I see her face in crowds, in the depths of the silent forest, her specter appears before me until I fly from it like one accursed.”

She could not stay the passionate torrent of his words.

“Lester, this is all a mistake,” she said; “you have not given me a chance to speak.” Her hands dropped nervously by her side. There were fierce, rebellious thoughts in her heart, but she dare not give them utterance. “What have I done to deserve all this?” she asked, trying to assume a tender tone she was far from feeling.

“What have you done?” he cried, hoarsely. “Why, I left you at Whitestone Hall, feeling secure in the belief that I had won you. Returning suddenly and unexpectedly, I found you had gone to Florida, to the home of Rex Lyon. Do you know what I would have done, Pluma, if I had found you his wife and false to your trust?”

“You forget yourself, Lester,” she said; “gentlemen never threaten women.”

He bit his lip angrily.

“There are extreme cases of desperation,” he made reply. “You must keep your promise,” he said, determinedly. “No other man must dare speak to you of love.”

She saw the angry light flame into his eyes, and trembled under her studied composure; yet not the quiver of an eyelid betrayed her emotion. She had not meant to quarrel with him; for once in her life she forgot her prudence.

“Suppose that, by exercise of any power you think you possess, you could really compel me to be your wife, do you think it would benefit you? I would learn to despise you. What would you gain by it?”

The answer sprung quickly to his lips: “The one great point for which I am striving—possession of Whitestone Hall;” but he was too diplomatic to utter the words. She saw a lurid light in his eyes.

“You shall be my wife,” he said, gloomily. “If you have been cherishing any hope of winning Rex Lyon, abandon it at once. As a last resort, I would explain to him how cleverly you removed the pretty little girl he loved from his path.”

“You dare not!” she cried, white to the very lips. “You have forgotten your own share in that little affair. Who would believe you acted upon a woman’s bidding? You would soon be called to account for it. You forget that little circumstance, Lester; you dare not go to Rex!” He knew what she said was perfectly true. He had not intended going to Rex; he knew it would be as much as his life was worth to encounter him. He was aware his name had been coupled with Daisy’s in the journals which had described her tragic death. He knew Rex had fallen madly, desperately in love with little Daisy Brooks, but he did not dream he had made her his wife. “You have not given me time to explain why I am here.”

“I have heard all about it,” he answered, impatiently; “but I do not understand why they sent for you.”

“Mrs. Lyon requested it,” she replied, quietly. “Rex simply obeyed her wishes.”

“Perhaps she looked upon you as her future daughter-in-law,” sneered Lester, covertly. “I have followed you to Florida to prevent it; I would follow you to the ends of the earth to prevent it! A promise to me can not be lightly broken.”

Not a feature of that proud face quivered to betray the sharp spasm of fear that darted through her heart.

“You should have waited until you had cause to reproach me, Lester,” she said, drawing her wrap closer about her and shivering as if with cold. “I must go back to the house now; some one might miss me.”

He made no reply. The wind bent the reeds, and the waves of the sea dashed up on the distant beach with a long, low wash. He was wondering how far she was to be trusted.

“You may have perfect confidence in me, Lester,” she said; “my word ought to be sufficient,” as if quite divining his thoughts. “You need have no fear; I will be

true to you.”

“I shall remain away until this affair has blown over,” he replied. “I can live as well in one part of the country as another, thanks to the income my father left me.” He laid great stress on the last sentence; he wanted to impress her with the fact that he had plenty of money. “She must never know,” he told himself, “that he had so riotously squandered the vast inheritance that had been left him, and he was standing on the verge of ruin.” A marriage with the wealthy heiress would save him at the eleventh hour. “I will trust you, Pluma,” he continued. “I know, you will keep your vow.”

The false ring of apparent candor did not deceive her; she knew it would be a case of diamond cut diamond.

“That is spoken like your own generous self, Lester,” she said, softly, clasping his hands in her own white, jeweled ones. “You pained me by your distrust.”

He saw she was anxious to get away from him, and he bit his lip with vexation; her pretty, coaxing manner did not deceive him one whit, yet he clasped his arms in a very lover-like fashion around her as he replied:

“Forget that it ever existed, my darling. Where there is such ardent, passionate love, there is always more or less jealousy and fear. Do you realize I am making an alien of myself for your sweet sake? I could never refuse you a request. Your slightest will has been my law. Be kind to me, Pluma.”

She did try to be more than agreeable and fascinating.

“I must remove all doubts from his mind,” she thought. “I shall probably be Rex’s wife when we meet again. Then his threats will be useless; I will scornfully deny it. He has no proofs.”

She talked to him so gracefully, so tenderly, at times, he was almost tempted to believe she actually cared for him more than she would admit. Still he allowed it would do no harm to keep a strict watch of her movements.

“Good-bye, Pluma, dearest,” he said, “I shall keep you constantly advised of my whereabouts. As soon as matters can be arranged satisfactorily, I am coming back to claim you.”

Another moment and she was alone, walking slowly back to the house, a very torrent of anger in her proud, defiant heart.

“I must hurry matters up, delays are dangerous,” she thought, walking slowly up the broad path toward the house.

Slowly the long hours of the night dragged themselves by, yet Daisy did not return to Glengrove. The hours lengthened into days, and days into weeks, still there was no trace of her to be found. Gertie's explanation readily accounted for her absence.

"She preferred to leave us rather than deliver my note," she said, angrily; "and I for one am not sorry she has gone."

"Rex did not mention having received it," said Bess, "when he came with Birdie to bid us good-bye."

"She probably read it and destroyed it," said Gertie, "Well, there was nothing in it very particular. Toward the last of it I mentioned I would send the note over by Daisy Brooks, my mother's companion. More than likely she took umbrage at that."

"That was a very unkind remark," asserted Eve. "You had no business to mention it at all; it was uncalled for."

"Well, she would not have known it if she had not read it," replied Gertie. "You must admit that."

Mrs. Glenn felt sorely troubled. In the short time Daisy had been with her she had put unlimited confidence in her.

No one thought of searching for her; they all accepted the facts as the case presented itself to them. Daisy had certainly left them of her own free will.

Eve alone felt distressed.

"I know everything looks that way, but I shall never believe it," she cried.

She remembered the conversation she had so lately had with Daisy. How she had clasped her loving little arms about her neck, crying out:

"Pray for me, Eve. I am sorely tried. My feet are on the edge of a precipice. No matter what I may be tempted to do, do not lose faith in me, Eve; always believe in me."

Poor little Daisy! what was the secret sorrow that was goading her on to madness? Would she ever know?

Where was she now? Ah, who could tell?

A curious change seemed to come over romping, mischievous, merry Eve; she had grown silent and thoughtful.

“I could never believe any one in this world was true or pure again if I thought for one moment deceit lay brooding in a face so fair as little Daisy Brooks’s.”

CHAPTER XXVII.

The months flew quickly by; the cold winter had slipped away, and the bright green grass and early violets were sprinkling the distant hill-slopes. The crimson-breasted robins were singing in the budding branches of the trees, and all Nature reminded one the glorious spring had come.

Rex Lyon stood upon the porch of Whitestone Hall gazing up at the white, fleecy clouds that scudded over the blue sky, lost in deep thought.

He was the same handsome, debonair Rex, but ah, how changed! The merry, laughing brown eyes looked silent and grave enough now, and the lips the drooping brown mustache covered rarely smiled. Even his voice seemed to have a deeper tone.

He had done the one thing that morning which his mother had asked him to do with her dying breath—he had asked Pluma Hurlhurst to be his wife.

The torture of the task seemed to grow upon him as the weeks rolled by, and in desperation he told himself he must settle the matter at once, or he would not have the strength to do it.

He never once thought what he should do with his life after he married her. He tried to summon up courage to tell her the story of his marriage, that his hopes, his heart, and his love all lay in the grave of his young wife. Poor Rex, he could not lay bare that sweet, sad secret; he could not have borne her questions, her wonder, her remarks, and have lived; his dead love was far too sacred for that; he could not take the treasured love-story from his heart and hold it up to public gaze. It would have been easier for him to tear the living, beating heart from his breast than to do this.

He had walked into the parlor that morning, where he knew he should find Pluma. She was standing before the fire. Although it was early spring the mornings were chilly, and a cheerful fire burned in the grate, throwing a bright, glowing radiance over the room and over the exquisite morning toilet of white cashmere, with its white lace frills, relieved here and there with coquettish dashes of scarlet blossoms, which Pluma wore, setting off her graceful figure to

such queenly advantage.

Rex looked at her, at the imperious beauty any man might have been proud to win, secretly hoping she would refuse him.

“Good-morning, Rex,” she said, holding out her white hands to him. “I am glad you have come to talk to me. I was watching you walking up and down under the trees, and you looked so lonely I half made up my mind to join you.”

A lovely color was deepening in her cheeks, and her eyes drooped shyly. He broke right into the subject at once while he had the courage to do it.

“I have something to say to you, Pluma,” he began, leading her to an adjacent sofa and seating himself beside her. “I want to ask you if you will be my wife.” He looked perhaps the more confused of the two. “I will do my best to make you happy,” he continued. “I can not say that I will make a model husband, but I will say I will do my best.”

There was a minute’s silence, awkward enough for both.

“You have asked me to be your wife, Rex, but you have not said one word of loving me.”

The remark was so unexpected Rex seemed for a few moments to be unable to reply to it. Looking at the eager, expectant face turned toward him, it appeared ungenerous and unkind not to give her one affectionate word. Yet he did not know how to say it; he had never spoken a loving word to any one except Daisy, his fair little child-bride.

He tried hard to put the memory of Daisy away from him as he answered:

“The question is so important that most probably I have thought more of it than of any words which should go with it.”

“Oh, that is it,” returned Pluma, with a wistful little laugh. “Most men, when they ask women to marry them, say something of love, do they not?”

“Yes,” he replied, absently.

“You have had no experience,” laughed Pluma, archly.

She was sorely disappointed. She had gone over in her own imagination this very scene a thousand times, of the supreme moment he would clasp his arms around her, telling her in glowing, passionate words how dearly he loved her and how wretched his life would be without her. He did nothing of the kind.

Rex was thinking he would have given anything to have been able to make love

to her—anything for the power of saying tender words—she looked so loving.

Her dark, beautiful face was so near him, and her graceful figure so close, that he could have wound his arm around her, but he did not. In spite of every resolve, he thought of Daisy the whole time. How different that other love-making had been! How his heart throbbed, and every endearing name he could think of trembled on his lips, as he strained Daisy to his heart when she had bashfully consented to be his wife!

That love-making was real substance; this one only the shadow of love.

“You have not answered my question, Pluma. Will you be my wife?”

Pluma raised her dark, beautiful face, radiant with the light of love, to his.

“If I consent will you promise to love me better than anything else or any one in the wide world?”

“I will devote my whole life to you, study your every wish,” he answered, evasively.

How was she to know he had given all his heart to Daisy?

She held out her hands to him with a charming gesture of affection. He took them and kissed them; he could do neither more nor less.

“I will be your wife, Rex,” she said, with a tremulous, wistful sigh.

“Thank you, Pluma,” he returned, gently, bending down and kissing the beautiful crimson lips; “you shall never regret it. You are so kind, I am going to impose on your good nature. You have promised me you will be my wife—when may I claim you, Pluma?”

“Do you wish it to be soon?” she asked, hesitatingly, wondering how he would answer her.

“Yes,” he said, absently; “the sooner it is over the better I shall be pleased.”

She looked up into his face, at a loss how to interpret the words.

“You shall set the day, Rex,” she replied.

“I have your father’s consent that it may take place just as soon as possible, in case you promised to marry me,” he said. “Suppose it takes place in a fortnight, say—will that be too soon for you?”

She gave a little scream of surprise. “As soon as that?” she murmured; but ended by readily consenting.

He thanked her and kissed her once more. After a few quiet words they parted—she, happy in the glamour of her love-dream; he, praying to Heaven from the depths of his miserable heart, to give him strength to carry out the rash vow which had been wrung from his unwilling lips.

In his heart Rex knew no one but Daisy could ever reign. Dead, he was devoted to her memory.

His life was narrowing down. He was all kindness, consideration and devotion; but the one supreme magnet of all—love—was wanting.

In vain Pluma exerted all her wondrous powers of fascination to win him more completely. How little he dreamed of the depths of love which controlled that passionate heart, every throb of which was for him—that to have won from him one token of warm affection she would have given all she held dear in this world.

“How does it happen, Rex,” she asked, one evening, “you have not asked me to sing to you since you have asked me to be your wife? Music used to be such a bond of sympathy between us.”

There was both love and reproach in her voice. He heard neither. He had simply forgotten it.

“I have been thinking of other things, I presume. Allow me to make up for it at once, however, by asking you if you will sing for me now.”

The tears came to her dark, flashing eyes, but she forced them bravely back. She had hoped he would clasp her in his arms, whispering some sweet compliment, then say to her “Darling, won’t you sing to me now?”

She swept toward the piano with the air of a queen.

“I want you to sit where I can see you, Rex,” she demanded, prettily; “I like to watch your face when I sing you my favorite songs.”

Rex drew his chair up close to the piano, laying his head back dreamily against the crimson cushions. He would not be obliged to talk; for once—just once—he would let his fancies roam where they would. He had often heard Pluma sing before, but never in the way she sung to-night. A low, thrilling, seductive voice full of pleading, passionate tenderness—a voice that whispered of the sweet irresistible power of love, that carried away the hearts of her listeners as a strong current carries a leaflet.

Was it a dream, or was it the night wind breathing the name of Daisy? The tears rose in his eyes, and he started to his feet, pale and trembling with agitation. Suddenly the music ceased.

“I did not think such a simple little melody had power to move you,” she said.

“Is it a new song?” he asked. “I do not remember having heard it before. What is the title of it?”

He did not notice her face had grown slightly pale under the soft, pearly light of the gleaming lamps, as she held the music out toward him.

“It is a pretty title,” she said, in her low, musical voice, “‘Daisies Growing o’er my Darling’s Grave.’”

In the terrible look of agony that swept over his handsome face, Pluma read the secret of his life; the one secret she had dreaded stood as clearly revealed to her as though it had been stamped in glowing letters upon his brow. She would have stood little chance of being Rex’s wife if Daisy Brooks had lived.

Who would have dreamed the beautiful, proud young heiress could have cursed the very memory of the young girl whom she believed to be dead—lying all uncared for in a neglected, lonely grave?

Rex felt sorely disturbed. He never remembered how the remainder of the evening passed. Ah, heavens! how his mind wandered back to that sweet love-dream so cruelly broken. A mist as of tears spread before his eyes, and shut the whole world from him as he glanced out of the window and up at the star-gemmed sky—that was his Daisy’s home.

“I hope my little song has not cast a gloom over you, Rex?” she said, holding out

her hands to him as she arose to bid him good-night—those small white hands upon one of which his engagement-ring glowed with a thousand prismatic hues.

“Why should it?” he asked, attempting to laugh lightly. “I admired it perhaps more than any other I have ever heard you sing.”

Pluma well knew why.

“It was suggested to me by a strange occurrence. Shall I relate it to you, Rex?”

He made some indistinct answer, little dreaming of how wofully the little anecdote would affect him.

“I do not like to bring up old, unpleasant subjects, Rex. But do you remember what the only quarrel we ever had was about, or rather *who* it was about?”

He looked at her in surprise; he had not the least idea of what she alluded to.

“Do you remember what a romantic interest you once took in our overseer’s niece—the one who eloped with Lester Stanwick from boarding-school—the one whose death we afterward read of? Her name was Daisy—Daisy Brooks.”

If she had suddenly plunged a dagger into his heart with her white jeweled hands he could not have been more cruelly startled. He could have cried aloud with the sharp pain of unutterable anguish that memory brought him. His answer was a bow; he dared not look up lest the haggard pain of his face should betray him.

“Her uncle (he was no relation, I believe, but she called him that) was more fond of her than words can express. I was driving along by an unfrequented road to-day when I came across a strange, pathetic sight. The poor old man was putting the last touches to a plain wooden cross he had just erected under a magnolia-tree, which bore the simple words: ‘To the memory of Daisy Brooks, aged sixteen years.’ Around the cross the grass was thickly sown with daisies.

“‘She does not rest here,’ the old man said, drawing his rough sleeve across his tear-dimmed eyes; ‘but the poor little girl loved this spot best of any.’”

Pluma wondered why Rex took her just then in his arms for the first time and kissed her. He was thanking her in his heart; he could have knelt to her for the kind way she had spoken of Daisy.

A little later he was standing by the open window of his own room in the moonlight.

“My God!” he cried, burying his face in his hands, “this poor John Brooks did what I, her husband, should have done; but it is not too late now. I shall honor

your memory, my darling; I shall have a costly marble monument erected to your memory, bearing the inscription: 'Sacred to the memory of Daisy, beloved wife of Rex Lyon, aged sixteen years.' Not Daisy Brooks, but Daisy Lyon. Mother is dead, what can secrecy avail now?"

He would not tell Pluma until the last moment. Straightway he ordered a magnificent monument from Baltimore—one of pure unblemished white, with an angel with drooping wings overlooking the tall white pillar.

When it arrived he meant to take Pluma there, and, reverently kneeling down before her, tell her all the story of his sweet, sad love-dream with his face pressed close against the cold, pulseless marble—tell her of the love-dream which had left him but the ashes of dead hope. He sealed the letter and placed it with the out-going morning mail.

"Darling, how I wish I had not parted from you that night!" he sighed.

How bitterly he regretted he could not live that one brief hour of his past life over again—how differently he would act!

CHAPTER XXVIII.

While Rex was penning his all-important letter in his room, Pluma was walking restlessly to and fro in her boudoir, conning over in her mind the events of the evening.

Rex had asked her to be his wife, but she stood face to face with the truth at last—he did not love her. It was not only a blow of the keenest and cruelest kind to her affection, but it was the cruelest blow her vanity could possibly have received.

To think that she, the wealthy, petted heiress, who counted her admirers by the score, should have tried so hard to win the love of this one man and have failed; that her beauty, her grace, her wit, and her talent had been lavished upon him, and lavished in vain. “Was that simple girl, with her shy, timid, shrinking manner, more lovable than I?” she asked herself, incredulously.

She could not realize it—she, whose name was on the lips of men, who praised her as the queen of beauty, and whom fair women envied as one who had but to will to win.

It seemed to her a cruel mockery of fate that she, who had everything the world could give—beauty and fortune—should ask but this one gift, and that it should be refused her—the love of the man who had asked her to be his wife.

Was it impossible that he should learn to love her?

She told herself that she should take courage, that she would persevere, that her great love must in time prevail.

“I must never let him find me dull or unhappy,” she thought. “I must carefully hide all traces of pique or annoyance.”

She would do her best to entertain him, and make it the study of her life to win his love.

She watched the stars until they faded from the skies, then buried her face in her pillow, falling into an uneasy slumber, through which a beautiful, flower-like, girlish face floated, and a slight, delicate form knelt at her feet holding her arms

out imploringly, sobbing out:

“Do not take him from me—he is my world—I love him!”

And with a heart racked by terrible jealousy, Pluma turned uneasily on her pillow and opened her eyes. The stars were still glimmering in the moonlighted sky.

“Is the face of Daisy Brooks ever to haunt me thus?” she cried out, impatiently. “How was I to know she was to die?” she muttered, excitedly. “I simply meant to have Stanwick abduct her from the seminary that Rex might believe him her lover and turn to me for sympathy. I will not think of it,” she cried; “I am not one to flinch from a course of action I have marked out for myself, no matter what the consequences may be, if I only gain Rex’s love.”

And Pluma, the bride soon to be, turned her flushed face again to the wall to dream again of Daisy Brooks.

She little dreamed Rex, too, was watching the stars, as wakeful as she, thinking of the past.

Then he prayed Heaven to help him, so that no unworthy thought should enter his mind. After that he slept, and one of the most painful days of his life was ended.

The days at Whitestone Hall flew by on rapid wings in a round of gayety. The Hall was crowded with young folks, who were to remain until after the marriage. Dinner parties were followed by May-pole dances out on the green lawns, and by charades and balls in the evening. The old Hall had never echoed with such frolicsome mirth before. Rex plunged into the excitement with strange zest. No one guessed that beneath his winning, careless smile his heart was almost breaking.

One morning Pluma was standing alone on the vine-covered terrace, waiting for Rex, who had gone out to try a beautiful spirited horse that had just been added to the stables of Whitestone Hall. She noticed he had taken the unfrequented road the magnolia-trees shaded. That fact bore no significance, certainly; still there was a strong feeling of jealousy in her heart as she remembered that little wooden cross he would be obliged to pass. Would he stop there? She could not tell.

“How I love him—and how foolish I am!” she laughed, nervously. “I have no rival, yet I am jealous of his very thoughts, lest they dwell on any one else but myself. I do not see how it is,” she said, thoughtfully, to herself, “why people

laugh at love, and think it weakness or a girl's sentimental folly. Why, it is the strongest of human passions!"

She heard people speak of her approaching marriage as "a grand match"—she heard him spoken of as a wealthy Southerner, and she laughed a proud, happy, rippling laugh. She was marrying Rex for love; she had given him the deepest, truest love of her heart.

Around a bend in the terrace she heard approaching footsteps and the rippling of girlish laughter.

"I can not have five minutes to myself to think," she said to herself, drawing hastily back behind the thick screen of leaves until they should pass. She did not feel in the humor just then to listen to Miss Raynor's chatter or pretty Grace Alden's gossip.

"Of course every one has a right to their own opinion," Grace was saying, with a toss of her pretty nut-brown curls, "and I, for one, do not believe he cares for her one whit."

"It is certainly very strange," responded Miss Raynor, thoughtfully. "Every one can see she is certainly in love with Rex; but I am afraid it is quite a one-sided affair."

"Yes," said Grace, laughing shyly, "a *very* one-sided affair. Why, have you ever noticed them together—how Pluma watches his face and seems to live on his smiles? And as for Rex, he always seems to be looking over her head into the distance, as though he saw something there far more interesting than the face of his bride-to-be. That doesn't look much like love or a contented lover."

"If you had seen him this morning you might well say he did not look contented," replied Miss Raynor, mysteriously. "I was out for a morning ramble, and, feeling a little tired, I sat down on a moss-covered stone to rest. Hearing the approaching clatter of a horse's hoofs, I looked up and saw Rex Lyon coming leisurely down the road. I could not tell you what prompted me to do it, but I drew quietly back behind the overhanging alder branches that skirted the brook, admiring him all unseen."

"Oh, dear!" cried Grace, merrily, "this is almost too good to keep. Who would imagine dignified Miss Raynor peeping admiringly at handsome Rex, screened by the shadows of the alders!"

"Now don't be ridiculous, Grace, or I shall be tempted not to tell you the most interesting part," returned Miss Raynor, flushing hotly.

“Oh, that would be too cruel,” cried Grace, who delighted on anything bordering on mystery. “Do tell it.”

“Well,” continued Miss Raynor, dropping her voice to a lower key, “when he was quite opposite me, he suddenly stopped short and quickly dismounted from his horse, and picked up from the roadside a handful of wild flowers.”

“What in the world could he want with them?” cried Grace, incredulously.

“Want with them!” echoed Miss Raynor. “Why, he pressed them to his lips, murmuring passionate, loving words over them. For one brief instant his face was turned toward me, and I saw there were tears standing in his eyes, and there was a look on his face I shall never forget to my dying day. There was such hopeless woe upon it—indeed one might have almost supposed, by the expression of his face, he was waiting for his death-sentence to be pronounced instead of a marriage ceremony, which was to give him the queenly heiress of Whitestone Hall for a bride.”

“Perhaps there is some hidden romance in the life of handsome Rex the world does not know of,” suggested Grace, sagely.

“I hope not,” replied Miss Raynor. “I would hate to be a rival of Pluma Hurlhurst’s. I have often thought, as I watched her with Rex, it must be terrible to worship one person so madly. I have often thought Pluma’s a perilous love.”

“Do not speak so,” cried Grace. “You horrify me. Whenever I see her face I am afraid those words will be ringing in my ears—a perilous love.”

Miss Raynor made some laughing rejoinder which Pluma, white and trembling behind the ivy vines, did not catch, and still discussing the affair, they moved on, leaving Pluma Hurlhurst standing alone, face to face with the truth, which she had hoped against hope was false. Rex, who was so soon to be her husband, was certainly not her lover.

Her keen judgment had told her long ago all this had come about through his mother’s influence.

Every word those careless lips had uttered came back to her heart with a cruel stab.

“Even my guests are noticing his coldness,” she cried, with a hysterical little sob. “They are saying to each other, ‘He does not love me’—I, who have counted my triumphs by the scores. I have revealed my love in every word, tone and glance, but I can not awaken one sentiment in his proud, cold heart.”

When she remembered the words, “He pressed them to his lips, murmuring passionate, loving words over them,” she almost cried aloud in her fierce, angry passion. She knew, just as well as though she had witnessed him herself, that those wild flowers were daisies, and she knew, too, why he had kissed them so passionately. She saw the sun shining on the trees, the flower-beds were great squares and circles of color, the fountains sparkled in the sunlight, and restless butterflies flitted hither and thither.

For Pluma Hurlhurst, after that hour, the sunshine never had the same light, the flowers the same color, her face the same smile, or her heart the same joyousness.

Never did “good and evil” fight for a human heart as they struggled in that hour in the heart of the beautiful, willful heiress. All the fire, the passion, and recklessness of her nature were aroused.

“I will make him love me or I will die!” she cried, vehemently. “The love I long for shall be mine. I swear it, cost what it may!”

She was almost terribly beautiful to behold, as that war of passion raged within her.

She saw a cloud of dust arising in the distance. She knew it was Rex returning, but no bright flush rose to her cheek as she remembered what Miss Raynor had said of the wild flowers he had so rapturously caressed—he had given a few rank wild flowers the depths of a passionate love which he had never shown to her, whom he had asked to be his wife.

She watched him as he approached nearer and nearer, so handsome, so graceful, so winning, one of his white hands carelessly resting on the spirited animal’s proudly arched, glossy neck, and with the other raising his hat from his brown curls in true courtly cavalier fashion to her, as he saw her standing there, apparently awaiting him on the rose-covered terrace.

He looked so handsome and lovable Pluma might have forgotten her grievance had she not at that moment espied, fastened to the lapel of his coat, a cluster of golden-hearted daisies.

That sight froze the light in her dark, passionate eyes and the welcome that trembled on her scarlet lips.

He leaped lightly from the saddle, and came quickly forward to meet her, and then drew back with a start.

“What is the matter, Pluma?” he asked, in wonder.

“Nothing,” she replied, keeping her eyes fastened as if fascinated on the offending daisies he wore on his breast.

“I left you an hour ago smiling and happy. I find you white and worn. There are strange lights in your eyes like the slumbrous fire of a volcano; even your voice seems to have lost its tenderness. What is it, Pluma?”

She raised her dark, proud face to his. There was a strange story written on it, but he could not tell what it was.

“It—it is nothing. The day is warm, and I am tired, that is all.”

“You are not like the same Pluma who kissed me when I was going away,” he persisted. “Since I left this house something has come between you and me. What is it, Pluma?”

She looked up to him with a proud gesture that was infinitely charming.

“Is anything likely to come between us?” she asked.

“No; not that I know of,” he answered, growing more and more puzzled.

“Then why imagine it?” she asked.

“Because you are so changed, Pluma,” he said. “I shall never perhaps know the cause of your strange manner toward me, but I shall always feel sure it is something which concerns myself. You look at me as though you were questioning me,” he said. “I wish you would tell me what is on your mind?”

“I do not suppose it could make the least difference,” she answered, passionately. “Yes, I will tell you, what you must have been blind not to notice long ago. Have you not noticed how every one watches us with a peculiar smile on their lips as we come among them; and how their voices sink to a whisper lest we should overhear what they say? What is commented upon by my very guests, and the people all about us? Listen, then, it is this: Rex Lyon does not love the woman he has asked to be his wife. The frosts of Iceland could not be colder than his manner toward her. They say, too, that I have given you the truest and deepest love of my heart, and have received nothing in return. Tell me that it is all false, my darling. You do care for me, do you not, Rex? Tell me,” she implored.

“Good heavens!” cried Rex, almost speechless in consternation; “do they dare say such things? I never thought my conduct could give rise to one reproach, one unkind thought.”

“Tell me you do care for me, Rex,” she cried. “I have been almost mad with doubt.”

There was something in the lovely face, in the tender, pleading eyes, and quivering, scarlet mouth, that looked as if it were made for kisses—that Rex would have had to have been something more than mortal man to have resisted her pleading with sighs and tears for his love, and refuse it, especially as she had every reason to expect it, as he had asked her to be his wife. There was such a look of unutterable love on her face it fairly bewildered him. The passion in her voice startled him. What was he to do with this impetuous girl? Rex looked as if he felt exceedingly uncomfortable.

He took her in his arms and kissed her mechanically; he knew that was what she wanted and what she expected him to do.

“This must be my answer, dear,” he said, holding her in a close embrace.

In that brief instant she had torn the daisies from the lapel of his coat with her white, jeweled fingers, tossed them to the earth, and stamped her dainty feet upon them, wishing in the depths of her soul she could crush out all remembrance from his heart of the young girl for whose memory this handsome lover of hers wore these wild blossoms on his breast.

As Rex looked down into her face he missed them, and quickly unclasped his arms from around her with a little cry.

Stooping down he instantly recovered his crushed treasures and lifted them reverently in his hand with a sigh.

“I can not say that I admire your taste, Rex,” she said, with a short, hard laugh, that somehow grated harshly on her lover’s ears. “The conservatories are blooming with rare and odorous flowers, yet you choose these obnoxious plants; they are no more or less than a species of weeds. Never wear them again, Rex—I despise them—throw them away, and I will gather you a rare bouquet of white hyacinths and starry jasmine and golden-rod bells.”

The intense quiver in her voice pained him, and he saw her face wore the pallor of death, and her eyes were gleaming like restless fire.

“I will not wear them certainly if you dislike them, Pluma,” he said, gravely, “but I do not care to replace them by any other; daisies are the sweetest flowers on earth for me.”

He did not fasten them on his coat again, but transferred them to his breast-

pocket. She bit her scarlet lips in impotent rage.

In the very moment of her supreme triumph and happiness he had unclasped his arms from about her to pick up the daisies she had crushed with her tiny heel—those daisies which reminded him of that other love that still reigned in his heart a barrier between them.

CHAPTER XXIX.

“I do think it is a perfect shame those horrid Glenn girls are to be invited up here to Rex’s wedding,” cried little Birdie Lyon, hobbling into the room where Mrs. Corliss sat, busily engaged in hemming some new table-linen, and throwing herself down on a low hassock at her feet, and laying down her crutch beside her—“it is perfectly awful.”

“Why,” said Mrs. Corliss, smoothing the nut-brown curls back from the child’s flushed face, “I should think you would be very pleased. They were your neighbors when you were down in Florida, were they not?”

“Yes,” replied the little girl, frowning, “but I don’t like them one bit. Bess and Gertie—that’s the two eldest ones, make me think of those stiff pictures in the gay trailing dresses in the magazines. Eve is nice, but she’s a Tom-boy.”

“A wh—at!” cried Mrs. Corliss.

“She’s a Tom-boy, mamma always said; she romps, and has no manners.”

“They will be your neighbors when you go South again—so I suppose your brother thought of that when he invited them.”

“He never dreamed of it,” cried Birdie; “it was Miss Pluma’s doings.”

“Hush, child, don’t talk so loud,” entreated the old housekeeper; “she might hear you.”

“I don’t care,” cried Birdie. “I don’t like her anyhow, and she knows it. When Rex is around she is as sweet as honey to me, and calls me ‘pretty little dear,’ but when Rex isn’t around she scarcely notices me, and I *hate* her—yes, I do.”

Birdie clinched her little hands together venomously, crying out the words in a shrill scream.

“Birdie,” cried Mrs. Corliss, “you *must not* say such hard, cruel things. I have heard you say, over and over again, you liked Mr. Hurlhurst, and you must remember Pluma is his daughter, and she is to be your brother’s wife. You must learn to speak and think kindly of her.”

“I never shall like her,” cried Birdie, defiantly, “and I am sure Mr. Hurlhurst don’t.”

“Birdie!” ejaculated the good lady in a fright, dropping her scissors and spools in consternation; “let me warn you not to talk so again; if Miss Pluma was to once hear you, you would have a sorry enough time of it all your after life. What put it into your head Mr. Hurlhurst did not like his own daughter?”

“Oh, lots of things,” answered Birdie. “When I tell him how pretty every one says she is, he groans, and says strange things about fatal beauty, which marred all his young life, and ever so many things I can’t understand, and his face grows so hard and so stern I am almost afraid of him.”

“He is thinking of Pluma’s mother,” thought Mrs. Corliss—but she made no answer.

“He likes to talk to me,” pursued the child, rolling the empty spools to and fro with her crutch, “for he pities me because I am lame.”

“Bless your dear little heart,” said Mrs. Corliss, softly stroking the little girl’s curls; “it is seldom poor old master takes to any one as he has to you.”

“Do I look anything like the little child that died?” questioned Birdie.

A low, gasping cry broke from Mrs. Corliss’s lips, and her face grew ashen white. She tried to speak, but the words died away in her throat.

“He talks to me a great deal about her,” continued Birdie, “and he weeps such bitter tears, and has such strange dreams about her. Why, only last night he dreamed a beautiful, golden-haired young girl came to him, holding out her arms, and crying softly: ‘Look at me, father; I am your child. I was never laid to rest beneath the violets, in my young mother’s tomb. Father, I am in sore distress—come to me, father, or I shall die!’ Of course it was only a dream, but it makes poor Mr. Hurlhurst cry so; and what do you think he said?”

The child did not notice the terrible agony on the old housekeeper’s face, or that no answer was vouchsafed her.

“‘My dreams haunt me night and day,’ he cried. ‘To still this wild, fierce throbbing of my heart I must have that grave opened, and gaze once more upon all that remains of my loved and long-lost bride, sweet Evalia and her little child.’ He was—”

Birdie never finished her sentence.

A terrible cry broke from the housekeeper's livid lips.

"My God!" she cried, hoarsely, "after nearly seventeen years the sin of my silence is about to find me out at last."

"What is the matter, Mrs. Corliss? Are you ill?" cried the startled child.

A low, despairing sob answered her, as Mrs. Corliss arose from her seat, took a step or two forward, then fell headlong to the floor in a deep and death-like swoon.

Almost any other child would have been terrified, and alarmed the household.

Birdie was not like other children. She saw a pitcher of ice-water on an adjacent table, which she immediately proceeded to sprinkle on the still, white, wrinkled face; but all her efforts failed to bring the fleeting breath back to the cold, pallid lips.

At last the child became fairly frightened.

"I must go and find Rex or Mr. Hurlhurst," she cried, grasping her crutch, and limping hurriedly out of the room.

The door leading to Basil Hurlhurst's apartments stood open—the master of Whitestone Hall sat in his easy-chair, in morning-gown and slippers, deeply immersed in the columns of his account-books.

"Oh, Mr. Hurlhurst," cried Birdie, her little, white, scared face peering in at the door, "won't you please come quick? Mrs. Corliss, the housekeeper, has fainted ever so long ago, and I can't bring her to!"

Basil Hurlhurst hurriedly arose and followed the now thoroughly frightened child quickly to the room where the old housekeeper lay, her hands pressed close to her heart, the look of frozen horror deepening on her face.

Quickly summoning the servants, they raised her from the floor. It was something more than a mere fainting fit. The poor old lady had fallen face downward on the floor, and upon the sharp point of the scissors she had been using, which had entered her body in close proximity to her heart. The wound was certainly a dangerous one. The surgeon, who was quickly summoned, shook his head dubiously.

"The wound is of the most serious nature," he said. "She can not possibly recover."

"I regret this sad affair more than I can find words to express," said Basil

Hurlhurst, gravely. "Mrs. Corliss's whole life almost has been spent at Whitestone Hall. You tell me, doctor, there is no hope. I can scarcely realize it."

Every care and attention was shown her; but it was long hours before Mrs. Corliss showed signs of returning consciousness, and with her first breath she begged that Basil Hurlhurst might be sent for at once.

He could not understand why she shrunk from him, refusing his proffered hand.

"Tell them all to leave the room," she whispered. "No one must know what I have to say to you."

Wondering a little what she had to say to him, he humored her wishes, sending them all from the room.

"Now, Mrs. Corliss," he said, kindly drawing his chair up close by the bedside, "what is it? You can speak out without reserve; we are all alone."

"Is it true that I can not live?" she asked, eagerly scanning his face. "Tell me truthfully, master, is the wound a fatal one?"

"Yes," he said, sympathetically, "I—I—am afraid it is."

He saw she was making a violent effort to control her emotions. "Do not speak," he said, gently; "it distresses you. You need perfect rest and quiet."

"I shall never rest again until I make atonement for my sin," she cried, feebly. "Oh, master, you have ever been good and kind to me, but I have sinned against you beyond all hope of pardon. When you hear what I have to say you will curse me. Oh, how can I tell it! Yet I can not sleep in my grave with this burden on my soul."

He certainly thought she was delirious, this poor, patient, toil-worn soul, speaking so incoherently of sin; she, so tender-hearted—she could not even have hurt a sparrow.

"I can promise you my full pardon, Mrs. Corliss," he said, soothingly; "no matter on what grounds the grievance may be."

For a moment she looked at him incredulously.

"You do not know what you say. You do not understand," she muttered, fixing her fast-dimming eyes strangely upon him.

"Do not give yourself any uneasiness upon that score, Mrs. Corliss," he said, gently; "try to think of something else. Is there anything you would like to have done for you?"

“Yes,” she replied, in a voice so hoarse and changed he could scarcely recognize it was her who had spoken; “when I tell you all, promise me you will not curse me; for I have sinned against you so bitterly that you will cry out to Heaven asking why I did not die long years ago, that the terrible secret I have kept so long might have been wrung from my lips.”

“Surely her ravings were taking a strange freak,” he thought to himself; “yet he would be patient with her and humor her strange fancy.”

The quiet, gentle expression did not leave his face, and she took courage.

“Master,” she said, clasping her hands nervously together, “would it pain you to speak of the sweet, golden-haired young girl-bride who died on that terrible stormy night nearly seventeen years ago?”

She saw his care-worn face grow white, and the lines of pain deepen around his mouth.

“That is the most painful of all subjects to me,” he said, slowly. “You know how I have suffered since that terrible night,” he said shudderingly. “The double loss of my sweet young wife and her little babe has nearly driven me mad. I am a changed man, the weight of the cross I have had to bear has crushed me. I live on, but my heart is buried in the grave of my sweet, golden-haired Evalia and her little child. I repeat, it is a painful subject, still I will listen to what you have to say. I believe I owe my life to your careful nursing, when I was stricken with the brain fever that awful time.”

“It would have been better if I had let you die then, rather than live to inflict the blow which my words will give you. Oh, master!” she implored, “I did not know then what I did was a sin. I feared to tell you lest the shock might cost you your life. As time wore on, I grew so deadly frightened I dared not undo the mischief my silence had wrought. Remember, master, when you looked upon me in your bitterest, fiercest moments of agony, what I did was for *your* sake; to save your bleeding heart one more pang. I have been a good and faithful woman all my life, faithful to your interests.”

“You have indeed,” he responded, greatly puzzled as to what she could possibly mean.

She tried to raise herself on her elbows, but her strength failed her, and she sunk back exhausted on the pillow.

“Listen, Basil Hurlhurst,” she said, fixing her strangely bright eyes upon his noble, care-worn face; “this is the secret I have carried in this bosom for nearly

seventeen years: ‘Your golden-haired young wife died on that terrible stormy night you brought her to Whitestone Hall;’ but listen, Basil, ‘*the child did not!*’ It was stolen from our midst on the night the fair young mother died.”

CHAPTER XXX.

“My God!” cried Basil Hurlhurst, starting to his feet, pale as death, his eyes fairly burning, and the veins standing out on his forehead like cords, “you do not know what you say, woman! My little child—Evalia’s child and mine—not dead, but stolen on the night its mother died! My God! it can not be; surely you are mad!” he shrieked.

“It is true, master,” she moaned, “true as Heaven.”

“You knew my child, for whom I grieved for seventeen long years, was stolen—not dead—and dared to keep the knowledge from me?” he cried, passionately, beside himself with rage, agony and fear. “Tell me quickly, then, where I shall find my child!” he cried, breathlessly.

“I do not know, master,” she moaned.

For a few moments Basil Hurlhurst strode up and down the room like a man bereft of reason.

“You will not curse me,” wailed the tremulous voice from the bed; “I have your promise.”

“I can not understand how Heaven could let your lips remain silenced all these long, agonizing years, if your story be true. Why, yourself told me my wife and child had both died on that never-to-be-forgotten night, and were buried in one grave. How could you dare steep your lips with a lie so foul and black? Heaven could have struck you dead while the false words were yet warm on your lips!”

“I dared not tell you, master,” moaned the feeble voice, “lest the shock would kill you; then, after you recovered, I grew afraid of the secret I had dared to keep, and dared not tell you.”

“And yet you knew that somewhere in this cruel world my little child was living—my tender, little fair-haired child—while I, her father, was wearing my life out with the grief of that terrible double loss. Oh, woman, woman, may God forgive you, for I never can, if your words be true.”

“I feared such anger as this; that is why I dared not tell you,” she whispered,

faintly. "I appeal to your respect for me in the past to hear me, to your promise of forgiveness to shield me, to your love for the little child to listen calmly while I have strength to speak."

He saw she was right. His head seemed on fire, and his heart seemed bursting with the acute intensity of his great excitement.

He must listen while she had strength to tell him of his child.

"Go on—go on!" he cried, hoarsely, burying his face in the bed-clothes; "tell me of my child!"

"You remember the terrible storm, master, how the tree moaned, and without against the western wing—where your beautiful young wife lay dead, with the pretty, smiling, blue-eyed babe upon her breast?"

"Yes, yes—go on—you are driving me mad!" he groaned.

"You remember how you fell down senseless by her bedside when we told you the terrible news—the young child-bride was dead?"

She knew, by the quivering of his form, he heard her.

"As they carried you from the room, master, I thought I saw a woman's form gliding stealthily on before, through the dark corridors. A blaze of lightning illumined the hall for one brief instant, and I can swear I saw a woman's face—a white, mocking, gloriously beautiful face—strangely like the face of your first wife, master, Pluma's mother. I knew it could not be her, for she was lying beneath the sea-waves. It was not a good omen, and I felt sorely afraid and greatly troubled. When I returned to the room from which they had carried you—there lay your fair young wife with a smile on her lips—but the tiny babe that had slumbered on her breast was gone."

"Oh, God! if you had only told me this years ago," cried the unhappy father. "Have you any idea who could have taken the child? It could not have been for gain, or I should have heard of it long ago. I did not know I had an enemy in the wide world. You say you saw a woman's face?" he asked, thoughtfully.

"It was the ghost of your first wife," asserted the old housekeeper, astutely. "I never saw her face but once; but there was something about it one could not easily forget."

Basil Hurlhurst was not a superstitious man, yet he felt a strange, unaccountable dread stealing over him at the bare mention of such a thing. It was more than he could endure to hear the name of the wife he had loved, and the wife who slept

beneath the wild sea-waves, coupled in one breath—the fair young wife he had idolized, and the dark, sparkling face of the wife who had brought upon him such wretched folly in his youth!

“Have you not some clew to give me?” he cried out in agony—“some way by which I can trace her and learn her fate?”

She shook her head.

“This is unbearable!” he cried, pacing up and down the room like one who had received an unexpected death-blow. “I am bewildered! Merciful Heaven! which way shall I turn? This accounts for my restlessness all these years, when I thought of my child—my restless longing and fanciful dreams! I thought her quietly sleeping on Evalia’s breast. God only knows what my tender little darling has suffered, or in what part of the world she lives, or if she lives at all!”

It had been just one hour since Basil Hurlhurst had entered that room, a placid-faced, gray-haired man. When he left it his hair was white as snow from the terrible ordeal through which he had just passed.

He scarcely dared hope that he should yet find her—where or how he should find her, if ever.

In the corridor he passed groups of maidens, but he neither saw nor heard them. He was thinking of the child that had been stolen from him in her infancy—the sweet little babe with the large blue eyes and shining rings of golden hair.

He saw Pluma and Rex greeting some new arrivals out on the flower-bordered terrace, but he did not stop until he had reached his own apartments.

He did not send for Pluma, to divulge the wonderful discovery he had made. There was little sympathy or confidence between the father and daughter.

“I can never sleep again until I have some clew to my child!” he cried, frantically wringing his hands.

Hastily he touched the bell-rope.

“Mason,” he said to the servant who answered the summons, “pack my valise at once. I am going to take the first train to Baltimore. You have no time to lose.”

He did not hear the man’s ejaculation of surprise as his eyes fell on the face of the master who stood before him with hair white as snow—so utterly changed in one short hour.

“You couldn’t possibly make the next train, sir; it leaves in a few moments.”

“I tell you you *must* make it!” cried Basil Hurlhurst. “Go and do as I bid you at once! Don’t stand there staring at me; you are losing golden moments. Fly at once, I tell you!”

Poor old Mason was literally astounded. What had come over his kind, courteous master?

“I have nothing that could aid them in the search,” he said to himself, pacing restlessly up and down the room. “Ah! stay!—there is Evalia’s portrait! The little one must look like her mother if she is living yet!”

He went to his writing-desk and drew from a private drawer a little package tied with a faded ribbon, which he carefully untied with trembling fingers.

It was a portrait on ivory of a beautiful, girlish, dimpled face, with shy, upraised blue eyes, a smiling rosebud mouth, soft pink cheeks, and a wealth of rippling, sunny-golden hair.

“She must look like this,” he whispered. “God grant that I may find her!”

“Mr. Rex Lyon says, please may he see you a few moments, sir,” said Mason, popping his black head in at the door.

“No; I do not wish to see any one, and I will not see any one. Have you that satchel packed, I say?”

“Yes, sir; it will be ready directly, sir,” said the man, obediently.

“Don’t come to me with any more messages—lock everybody out. Do you hear me, Mason? I *will* be obeyed!”

“Yes, sir, I hear. No one shall disturb you.”

Again Basil Hurlhurst turned to the portrait, paying little attention to what was transpiring around him. “I shall put it at once in the hands of the cleverest detectives,” he mused; “surely they will be able to find some trace of my lost darling.”

Seventeen years! Ah, what might have happened her in that time? The master of Whitestone Hall always kept a file of the Baltimore papers; he rapidly ran his eye down the different columns.

“Ah, here is what I want,” he exclaimed, stopping short. “Messrs. Tudor, Peck & Co., Experienced Detectives, — Street, Baltimore. They are noted for their skill. I will give the case into their hands. If they restore my darling child alive and well into my hands I will make them wealthy men—if she is dead, the blow will surely kill me.”

He heard voices debating in the corridor without.

“Did you tell him I wished particularly to see him?” asked Rex, rather discomfited at the refusal.

“Yes, sir,” said Mason, dubiously.

“Miss Pluma, his daughter, wishes me to speak with him on a very important matter. I am surprised that he so persistently refuses to see me,” said Rex, proudly, wondering if Pluma’s father had heard that gossip—among the guests—that he did not love his daughter. “I do not know that I have offended the old gentleman in any way,” he told himself. “If it comes to that,” he thought, “I can do no more than confess the truth to him—the whole truth about poor little Daisy—no matter what the consequences may be.”

Fate was playing at cross-purposes with handsome Rex, but no subtle warning came to him.

CHAPTER XXXI.

The preparations for the wedding went steadily on. It was to be a magnificent affair. Inside and outside of Whitestone Hall fairly glowed with brilliancy and bloom.

Rex's deportment toward his promised bride was exemplary; he did his best to show her every possible attention and kindness in lieu of the love which should have been hers.

There seemed to be no cloud in Pluma Hurlhurst's heaven.

She had no warning of the relentless storm-cloud that was gathering above her head and was so soon to burst upon her in all its fury.

She walked among her guests with a joyous, happy smile and the air of a queen. Why should she not? On the morrow she would gain the prize she coveted most on earth—she would be Rex's wife.

Her father had gone unexpectedly to Baltimore, and the good old housekeeper had been laid to rest, but in the excitement and bustle attending the great coming event these two incidents created little comment.

Mirth and gayety reigned supreme, and the grim old halls resounded with laughter and song and gay young voices from morning until night.

Pluma, the spoiled, petted, willful heiress, was fond of excitement and gay throngs.

"Our marriage must be an event worthy of remembrance, Rex," she said, as they walked together through the grounds the morning before the wedding. "We must have something new and novel. I am tired of brilliant parlors and gas-light. I propose we shall have a beautiful platform built, covered with moss and roses, beneath the blossoming trees, with the birds singing in their boughs, upon which we shall be united. What do you think of my idea—is it not a pretty one?"

"Your ideas are always poetical and fanciful," said Rex, glancing down into the beautiful brilliant face beside him. "My thoughts are so dull and prosy compared with yours, are you not afraid you will have a very monotonous life-

companion?”

“I am going to try my best to win you from that cold reserve. There must not be one shadow between us; do you know, Rex, I have been thinking, if anything should ever happen to take your love from me I should surely die. I—I am jealous of your very thoughts. I know I ought not to admit it, but I can not help it.”

Rex flushed nervously; it was really embarrassing to him, the tender way in which she looked up to him—her black eyelids coyly drooping over her dark, slumbrous eyes, inviting a caress. He was certainly wooed against his will, but there was no help for it; he was forced to take up his part and act it out gracefully.

“You need not be jealous of my thoughts, Pluma,” he replied, “for they were all of you.”

“I wonder if they were pleasant thoughts?” she asked, toying with the crimson flower-bells she holds in her white hands. “I have heard you sigh so much of late. Are you quite happy, Rex?” she inquired, hesitatingly.

The abruptness of the question staggered him: he recovered his composure instantly, however.

“How can you ask me such a question, Pluma?” he asked, evasively; “any man ought to be proud of winning so peerless a treasure as you are. I shall be envied by scores of disappointed lovers, who have worshiped at your shrine. I am not as demonstrative as some might be under similar circumstances, but my appreciation is none the less keen.”

She noticed he carefully avoided the word—love.

In after years Rex liked to remember that, yielding to a kindly impulse, he bent down and kissed her forehead.

It was the first time he had caressed her voluntarily; it was not love which prompted the action—only kindness.

“Perhaps you will love me some day with your whole heart, Rex?” she asked.

“You seem quite sure that I do not do that now?” he remarked.

“Yes,” she said, clasping his arm more closely, “I often fear you do not, but as time passes you will give me all your affection. Love must win love.”

Other young girls could not have made such an open declaration without rosy

blushes suffusing their cheeks; they would have been frightened at their free-spoken words, even though the morrow *was* their wedding-day.

She stood before him in her tall, slim loveliness, as fair a picture as any man's eyes could rest on. She wore a most becoming dress, and a spring blossom was in her hair. Almost any other man's heart would have warmed toward her as she raised her dark eyes to his and the white fingers trembled on his arm.

Rex was young, impulsive, and mortal; tender words from such lovely lips would have intoxicated any man. Yet from that faithful heart of his the words did not take one thought that belonged to Daisy; he did his utmost to forget that sunny, golden memory.

To Pluma, handsome, courtly Rex was an enigma. In her own mind she liked him all the better because he had not fallen down and worshiped her at once. Most men did that.

For several moments they walked along in utter silence—until they had reached the brink of the dark pool, which lay quite at the further end of the inclosure.

Pluma gave a little shuddering scream:

“I did not mean to bring you here,” she cried. “I always avoid this path; the waters of the pool have always had a great dread for me.”

“It should be filled up,” said Rex, “or fenced around; it is certainly a dangerous locality.”

“It can not be filled up,” she returned, laughingly; “it is said to be bottomless. I do not like to think of it; come away, Rex.”

The magnificent bridal costume, ordered expressly from Paris, had arrived—perfect even to the last detail. The bride-maids' costumes were all ready; and to everything in and about the Hall the last finishing touches had been given.

All the young girls hovered constantly around Pluma, in girl-fashion admiring the costume, the veil, the wreath, and above all the radiantly beautiful girl who was to wear them. Even the Glenn girls and Grace Alden were forced to admit the willful young heiress would make the most peerless bride they had ever beheld.

Little Birdie alone held aloof, much to Rex's amusement and Pluma's intense mortification.

“Little children often take such strange freaks,” she would say to Rex, sweetly.

“I really believe your little sister intends never to like me; I can not win one smile from her.”

“She is not like other children,” he replied, with a strange twinkle in his eye. “She forms likes and dislikes to people from simply hearing their name. Of course I agree with you it is not right to do so, but Birdie has been humored more or less all her life. I think she will grow to love you in time.”

Pluma’s lips quivered like the lips of a grieving child.

“I shall try so hard to make her love me, because she is your sister, Rex.”

He clasped the little jeweled hands that lay so confidingly within his own still closer, saying he knew she could not help but succeed.

The whole country-side was ringing with the coming marriage. No one could be more popular than handsome Rex Lyon, no one admired more than the young heiress of Whitestone Hall. The county papers were in ecstasies; they discussed the magnificent preparations at the Hall, the number of bride-maids, the superb wedding-presents, the arrangements for the marriage, and the ball to be given in the evening.

The minister from Baltimore who was to perform the ceremony was expected to arrive that day. That all preparations might be completed for the coming morrow, Rex had gone down to meet the train, and Pluma strolled into the conservatory, to be alone for a few moments with her own happy thoughts.

Out on the green lawns happy maidens were tripping here and there, their gay laughter floating up to her where she stood.

Every one seemed to be making the most of the happy occasion. Lawn-tennis parties here and croquet-parties there, and lovers strolling under the blossoming trees or reclining on the rustic benches—it was indeed a happy scene.

Pluma leaned her dark head against the fragrant roses. The breeze, the perfume of the flowers, all told one story to the impassioned girl—the story of her triumph and her mad, reckless love.

She gathered a spray of the fairest flowers, and fastened them in the bodice of her dress.

“To-morrow I shall have won the one great prize I covet,” she murmured, half aloud. “After to-morrow I can defy Lester Stanwick to bring one charge against me. I shall be Rex’s wife—it will avail him nothing.”

“Speaking of angels, you often hear ‘the rustle of their wings.’ I believe there is an old adage of that sort, or something similar,” said a deep voice beside her, and turning around with a low cry she saw Lester Stanwick himself standing before her.

For one moment her lips opened as though to utter a piercing cry, but even the very breath seemed to die upon them, they were so fixed and still.

The flowers she held in her hand fell into the fountain against which she leaned, but she did not heed them.

Like one fascinated, her eyes met the gaze of the bold, flashing dark ones bent so steadily upon her.

“You thought you would escape me,” he said. “How foolish and blind you are, my clever plotter. Did you think I did not see through your clever maneuverings? There shall be a wedding to-morrow, but you shall marry me, instead of handsome, debonair Rex. You can not fly from your fate.”

She set her lips firmly together. She had made a valiant struggle. She would defy him to the bitter end. She was no coward, this beautiful, imperious girl. She would die hard. Alas! she had been too sanguine, hoping Lester Stanwick would not return before the ceremony was performed.

The last hope died out of that proud, passionate heart—as well hope to divert a tiger from its helpless prey as expect Lester Stanwick to relinquish any plans he had once formed.

“I have fought my fight,” she said to herself, “and have failed on the very threshold of victory, still, I know how to bear defeat. What do you propose to do?” she said, huskily. “If there is any way I can buy your silence, name your price, keeping back the truth will avail me little now. I love Rex, and no power on earth shall prevent me from becoming his wife.”

Lester Stanwick smiled superciliously—drawing from his pocket a package of letters.

“Money could not purchase these charming *billets-doux* from me,” he said. “This will be charming reading matter for the Honorable Rex Lyon, and the general public to discuss.”

She raised her flashing eyes unflinchingly to his face, but no word issued from her white lips.

“A splendid morsel for the gossips to whisper over. The very refined and

exclusive heiress of Whitestone Hall connives to remove an innocent rival from her path, by providing money for her to be sent off secretly to boarding-school, from which she is to be abducted and confined in a mad-house. Your numerous letters give full instructions; it would be useless to deny these accusations. I hold proof positive.”

“That would not screen you,” she said, scornfully.

“I did not carry out your plans. No matter what the intentions were, the points in the case are what actually happened. I can swear I refused to comply with your nefarious wishes, even though you promised me your hand and fortune if I succeeded,” he answered, mockingly.

“Will not money purchase your silence?” she said, with a deep-drawn breath. “I do not plead with you for mercy or compassion,” she said, haughtily.

Lester Stanwick laughed a mocking laugh.

“Do not mistake me, Miss Pluma,” he said, making no attempt at love-making; “I prefer to wrest you from Rex Lyon. I have contemplated with intense satisfaction the blow to his pride. It will be a glorious revenge, also giving me a charming bride, and last, but not least, the possession at some future day of Whitestone Hall and the Hurlhurst Plantations. A pleasing picture, is it not, my dear?”

CHAPTER XXXII.

Pluma Hurlhurst never quailed beneath the cold, mocking glance bent upon her.

There was no hope for her; disgrace and ruin stared her in the face; she would defy even Fate itself to the bitter end with a heroism worthy of a better cause. In that hour and that mood she was capable of anything.

She leaned against a tall palm-tree, looking at him with a strange expression on her face, as she made answer, slowly:

“You may depend upon it, I shall never marry you, Lester Stanwick. If I do not marry Rex I shall go unmarried to the grave. Ah, no!” she cried desperately; “Heaven will have more mercy, more pity than to take him from me.”

“What mercy or pity did you feel in thrusting poor little Daisy Brooks from his path?” asked Stanwick, sarcastically. “Your love has led you through dangerous paths. I should call it certainly a most perilous love.”

She recoiled from him with a low cry, those words again still ringing in her ears, “A perilous love.”

She laughed with a laugh that made even Stanwick’s blood run cold—a horrible laugh.

“I do not grieve that she is dead,” she said. “You ought to understand by this time I shall allow nothing to come between Rex and me.”

“You forget the fine notions of honor your handsome lover entertains; it may not have occurred to you that he might object at the eleventh hour.”

“He will not,” she cried, fiercely, her bosom rising and falling convulsively under its covering of filmy lace and the diamond brooch which clasped it. “You do not know the indomitable will of a desperate woman,” she gasped. “I will see him myself and confess all to him, if you attempt to reveal the contents of those letters. He will marry me and take me abroad at once. If I have Rex’s love, what matters it what the whole world knows or says?”

She spoke rapidly, vehemently, with flushed face and glowing eyes; and even in

her terrible anger Stanwick could not help but notice how gloriously beautiful she was in her tragic emotion.

“I have asked you to choose between us,” he said, calmly, “and you have chosen Rex regardless of all the promises of the past. The consequences rest upon your own head.”

“So be it,” she answered, haughtily.

With a low bow Stanwick turned and left her.

“*Au revoir*, my dear Pluma,” he said, turning again toward her on the threshold. “Not farewell—I shall not give up hope of winning the heiress of Whitestone Hall.”

For several moments she stood quite still among the dark-green shrubs, and no sound told of the deadly strife and despair. Would he see Rex and divulge the crime she had planned? Ah! who would believe she, the proud, petted heiress had plotted so cruelly against the life of an innocent young girl because she found favor in the eyes of the lover she had sworn to win? Ah! who could believe she had planned to confine that sweet young life within the walls of a mad-house until death should release her?

What if the plan had failed? The intention still remained the same. She was thankful, after all, the young girl was dead.

“I could never endure the thought of Rex’s intense anger if he once imagined the truth; he would never forgive duplicity,” she cried, wildly.

The proud, beautiful girl, radiant with love and happiness a short time since, with a great cry flung herself down among the ferns, the sunlight gleaming on the jewels, the sumptuous morning dress, the crushed roses, and the white, despairing face.

Any one who saw Pluma Hurlhurst when she entered the drawing-room among her merry-hearted guests, would have said that she had never shed a tear or known a sigh. Could that be the same creature upon whose prostrate figure and raining tears the sunshine had so lately fallen? No one could have told that the brightness, the smiles, and the gay words were all forced. No one could have guessed that beneath the brilliant manner there was a torrent of dark, angry passions and an agony of fear.

It was pitiful to see how her eyes wandered toward the door. Hour after hour passed, and still Rex had not returned.

The hum of girlish voices around her almost made her brain reel. Grace Alden and Miss Raynor were singing a duet at the piano. The song they were singing fell like a death-knell upon her ears; it was “‘He Cometh Not,’ She Said.”

Eve Glenn, with Birdie upon her lap, sat on an adjoining sofa flirting desperately with the two or three devoted beaux; every one was discussing the prospect of the coming morrow.

Her father had returned from Baltimore some time since. She was too much engrossed with her thoughts of Rex to notice the great change in him—the strange light in his eyes, or the wistful, expectant expression of his face, as he kissed her more fondly than he had ever done in his life before.

She gave appropriate answers to her guests grouped around her, but their voices seemed afar off. Her heart and her thoughts were with Rex. Why had he not returned? What was detaining him? Suppose anything should happen—it would kill her now—yet nothing could go wrong on the eve of her wedding-day. She would not believe it. Stanwick would not dare go to Rex with such a story—he would write it—and all those things took time. With care and caution and constant watching she would prevent Rex from receiving any communications whatever until after the ceremony; then she could breathe freely, for the battle so bravely fought would be won.

“If to-morrow is as bright as to-day, Pluma will have a glorious wedding-day,” said Bessie Glenn, smiling up into the face of a handsome young fellow who was fastening a rosebud she had just given him in the lapel of his coat with one hand, and with the other tightly clasping the white fingers that had held the rose.

He did not notice that Pluma stood in the curtained recesses of an adjoining window as he answered, carelessly enough:

“Of course, I hope it will be a fine, sunshiny day, but the indications of the weather don’t look exactly that way, if I am any judge.”

“Why, you don’t think it is going to rain, do you? Why, it will spoil the rose-bower she is to be married in and all the beautiful decoration. Oh, please don’t predict anything so awfully horrible; you make me feel nervous; besides, you know what everybody says about weddings on which the rain falls.”

“Would you be afraid to experiment on the idea?” asked the impulsive young fellow, who always acted on the spur of the moment. “If to-morrow were a rainy day, and I should say to you, ‘Bess, will you marry me to-day or never?’ what would your answer be?”

“I should say, just now, I do not like ‘ifs and ands.’ Supposing a case, and standing face to face with it, are two different things. I like people who say what they mean, and mean what they say.”

Pluma saw the dazzling light flame into the bashful young lover’s eyes as he bent his head lower over the blushing girl who had shown him the right way to capture a hesitating heart.

“*That* is love,” sighed Pluma. “Ah, if Rex would only look at me like that I would think this earth a heaven.” She looked up at the bright, dazzling clouds overhead; then she remembered the words she had heard—“It looked like rain on the morrow.”

Could those white, fleecy clouds darken on the morrow that was to give her the only treasure she had ever coveted in her life?

She was not superstitious. Even if it did rain, surely a few rain-drops could not make or mar the happiness of a lifetime. She would not believe it.

“Courage until to-morrow,” she said, “and my triumph will be complete. I will have won Rex.” The little ormolu clock on the mantel chimed the hour of five. “Heavens!” she cried to herself, “Rex has been gone over two hours. I feel my heart must be bursting.”

No one noticed Pluma’s anxiety. One moment hushed and laughing, the queen of mirth and revelry, then pale and silent, with shadowed eyes, furtively glancing down the broad, pebbled path that led to the entrance gate.

Yet, despite her bravery, Pluma’s face and lips turned white when she heard the confusion of her lover’s arrival.

Perhaps Pluma had never suffered more suspense in all her life than was crowded into those few moments.

Had he seen Lester Stanwick? Had he come to denounce her for her treachery, in his proud, clear voice, and declare the marriage broken off?

She dared not step forward to greet him, lest the piercing glance of his eyes would cause her to fall fainting at his feet.

“A guilty conscience needs no accuser.” Most truly the words were exemplified in her case. Yet not one pang of remorse swept across her proud heart when she thought of the young girl whose life she had so skillfully blighted.

What was the love of Daisy Brooks, an unsophisticated child of nature, only the

overseer's niece, compared to her own mighty, absorbing passion?

The proud, haughty heiress could not understand how Rex, polished, courteous and refined, could have stooped to such a reckless folly. He would thank her in years to come for sparing him from such a fate. These were the thoughts she sought to console herself with.

She stood near the door when he entered, but he did not see her; a death-like pallor swept over her face, her dark eyes had a wild, perplexing look.

She was waiting in terrible suspense for Rex to call upon her name; ask where she was, or speak some word in which she could read her sentence of happiness or despair in the tone of his voice.

She could not even catch the expression of his face; it was turned from her. She watched him so eagerly she hardly dared draw her breath.

Rex walked quickly through the room, stopping to chat with this one or that one a moment; still, his face was not turned for a single instant toward the spot where she stood.

Was he looking for her? She could not tell. Presently he walked toward the conservatory, and a moment later Eve Glenn came tripping toward her.

"Oh, here you are!" she cried, flinging her arms about her in regular school-girl *abandon*, and kissing the cold, proud mouth, that deigned no answering caress. "Rex has been looking for you everywhere, and at last commissioned me to find you and say he wants to speak to you. He is out on the terrace."

How she longed to ask if Rex's face was smiling or stern, but she dared not.

"Where did you say Rex was, Miss Glenn?"

"I said he was out on the terrace; but don't call me Miss Glenn, for pity's sake—it sounds so freezingly cold. Won't you please call me Eve," cried the impetuous girl—"simply plain Eve? That has a more friendly sound, you know."

Another girl less proud than the haughty heiress would have kissed Eve's pretty, piquant, upturned, roguish face.

"What did Rex have to say to her?" she asked herself, in growing dread.

The last hope seemed withering in her proud, passionate heart. She rose haughtily, and walked with the dignity of a queen through the long drawing-room toward the terrace. Her heart almost stopped beating as she caught sight of Rex leaning so gracefully against the trunk of an old gnarled oak tree, smoking a

cigar. That certainly did not look as if he meant to greet her with a kiss.

She went forward hesitatingly—a world of anxiety and suspense on her face—to know her fate. The color surged over her face, then receded from it again, as she looked at him with a smile—a smile that was more pitiful than a sigh.

“Rex,” she cried, holding out her hands to him with a fluttering, uncertain movement that stirred the perfumed laces of the exquisite robe she wore, and the jewels on her white, nervous hands—“Rex, I am here!”

CHAPTER XXXIII.

We must now return to Daisy, whom we left standing in the heart of the forest, the moonlight streaming on her upturned face, upon which the startled horseman gazed.

He had not waited for her to reply, but, touching his horse hastily with his riding-whip, he sped onward with the speed of the wind.

In that one instant Daisy had recognized the dark, sinister, handsome face¹⁶³ of Lester Stanwick.

“They have searched the pit and found I was not there. He is searching for me; he has tracked me down!” she cried, vehemently, pressing her little white hands to her burning head.

Faster, faster flew the little feet through the long dew-damp grasses.

“My troubles seem closing more darkly around me,” she sobbed. “I wish I had never been born, then I could never have spoiled Rex’s life. But I am leaving you, my love, my darling, so you can marry Pluma, the heiress. You will forget me and be happy.”

Poor little, neglected, unloved bride, so fair, so young, so fragile, out alone facing the dark terrors of the night, fleeing from the young husband who was wearing his life out in grief for her. Ah, if the gentle winds sighing above her, or the solemn, nodding trees had only told her, how different her life might have been!

“No one has ever loved me but poor old Uncle John!” She bent her fair young head and cried out to Heaven: “Why has no mercy been shown to me? I have never done one wrong, yet I am so sorely tried. Oh, mother, mother!” she cried, raising her blue eyes up to the starry sky, “if you could have foreseen the dark, cruel shadows that would have folded their pitiless wings over the head of your child, would you not have taken me with you down into the depths of the seething waters?” She raised up her white hands pleadingly as though she would fain pierce with her wrongs the blue skies, and reach the great White Throne. “I must be going mad,” she said. “Why did Rex seek me out?” she cried, in

anguish. “Why did Heaven let me love him so madly, and my whole life be darkened by living apart from him if I am to live? I had no thought of suffering and sorrow when I met him that summer morning. Are the summer days to pass and never bring him? Are the flowers to bloom, the sun to shine, the years to come and go, yet never bring him once to me? I can not bear it—I do not know how to live!”

If she could only see poor old, faithful John Brooks again she would kneel at his feet just as she had done when she was a little child, lay her weary head down on his toil-hardened hand, tell him how she had suffered, and ask him how she could die and end it all.

She longed so hungrily for some one to caress her, murmuring tender words over her. She could almost hear his voice saying as she told him her pitiful story: “Come to my arms, pet, my poor little trampled Daisy! You shall never want for some one to love you while poor old Uncle John lives. Bless your dear little heart!”

The longing was strongly upon her. No one would recognize her—she *must* go and see poor old John. She never thought what would become of her life after that.

At the station she asked for a ticket for Allendale. No one seemed to know of such a place. After a prolonged search on the map the agent discovered it to be a little inland station not far from Baltimore.

“We can sell you a ticket for Baltimore,” he said, “and there you can purchase a ticket for the other road.”

And once again poor little Daisy was whirling rapidly toward the scene of her first great sorrow.

Time seemed to slip by her unheeded during all that long, tedious journey of two nights and a day.

“Are you going to Baltimore?” asked a gentle-faced lady, who was strangely attracted to the beautiful, sorrowful young girl, in which all hope, life, and sunshine seemed dead.

“Yes, madame,” she made answer, “I change cars there; I am going further.”

The lady was struck by the peculiar mournful cadence of the young voice.

“I beg your pardon for my seeming rudeness,” she said, looking long and earnestly at the fair young face; “but you remind me so strangely of a young

school-mate of my youth; you are strangely like what she was then. We both attended Madame Whitney's seminary. Perhaps you have heard of the institution; it is a very old and justly famous school." She wondered at the beautiful flush that stole into the girl's flower-like face—like the soft, faint tinting of a sea-shell. "She married a wealthy planter," pursued the lady, reflectively; "but she did not live long to enjoy her happy home. One short year after she married Evalia Hurlhurst died." The lady never forgot the strange glance that passed over the girl's face, or the wonderful light that seemed to break over it. "Why," exclaimed the lady, as if a sudden thought occurred to her, "when you bought your ticket I heard you mention Allendale. That was the home of the Hurlhursts. Is it possible you know them? Mr. Hurlhurst is a widower—something of a recluse, and an invalid, I have heard; he has a daughter called Pluma."

"Yes, madame," Daisy made answer, "I have met Miss Hurlhurst, but not her father."

How bitterly this stranger's words seemed to mock her! Did she know Pluma Hurlhurst, the proud, haughty heiress who had stolen her young husband's love from her?—the dark, sparkling, willful beauty who had crossed her innocent young life so strangely—whom she had seen bending over *her* husband in the pitying moonlight almost caressing him? She thought she would cry out with the bitterness of the thought. How strange it was! The name, Evalia Hurlhurst, seemed to fall upon her ears like the softest, sweetest music. Perhaps she wished she was like that young wife, who had died so long ago, resting quietly beneath the white daisies that bore her name.

"That is Madame Whitney's," exclaimed the lady, leaning forward toward the window excitedly. "Dear me! I can almost imagine I am a young girl again. Why, what is the matter, my dear? You look as though you were about to faint."

The train whirled swiftly past—the broad, glittering Chesapeake on one side, and the closely shaven lawn of the seminary on the other. It was evidently recess. Young girls were flitting here and there under the trees, as pretty a picture of happy school life as one would wish to see. It seemed to poor hapless Daisy long ages must have passed since that morning poor old John Brooks had brought her, a shy, blushing, shrinking country lassie, among those daintily attired, aristocratic maidens, who had laughed at her coy, timid mannerism, and at the clothes poor John wore, and at his flaming red cotton neckerchief.

She had not much time for further contemplation. The train steamed into the Baltimore depot, and she felt herself carried along by the surging crowd that

alighted from the train.

She did not go into the waiting-room; she had quite forgotten she was not at the end of her journey.

She followed the crowds along the bustling street, a solitary, desolate, heart-broken girl, with a weary white face whose beautiful, tender eyes looked in vain among the throngs that passed her by for one kindly face or a sympathetic look.

Some pushed rudely by her, others looked into the beautiful face with an ugly smile. Handsomely got-up dandies, with fine clothes and no brains, nodded familiarly as Daisy passed them. Some laughed, and others scoffed and jeered; but not one—dear Heaven! not one among the vast throng gave her a kindly glance or a word. Occasionally one, warmer hearted than the others, would look sadly on that desolate, beautiful, childish face.

A low moan she could scarcely repress broke from her lips. A handsomely dressed child, who was rolling a hoop in front of her, turned around suddenly and asked her if she was ill.

“Ill?” She repeated the word with a vague feeling of wonder. What was physical pain to the torture that was eating away her young life? Ill? Why, all the illness in the world put together could not cause the anguish she was suffering then—the sting of a broken heart.

She was not ill—only desolate and forsaken.

Poor Daisy answered in such a vague manner that she quite frightened the child, who hurried away as fast as she could with her hoop, pausing now and then to look back at the white, forlorn face on which the sunshine seemed to cast such strange shadows.

On and on Daisy walked, little heeding which way she went. She saw what appeared to be a park on ahead, and there she bent her steps. The shady seats among the cool green grasses under the leafy trees looked inviting. She opened the gate and entered. A sudden sense of dizziness stole over her, and her breath seemed to come in quick, convulsive gasps.

“Perhaps God has heard my prayer, Rex, my love,” she sighed. “I am sick and weary unto death. Oh, Rex—Rex—”

The beautiful eyelids fluttered over the soft, blue eyes, and with that dearly loved name on her lips, the poor little child-bride sunk down on the cold, hard earth in a death-like swoon.

“Oh, dear me, Harvey, who in the world is this?” cried a little, pleasant-voiced old lady, who had witnessed the young girl enter the gate, and saw her stagger and fall. In a moment she had fluttered down the path, and was kneeling by Daisy’s side.

“Come here, Harvey,” she called; “it is a young girl; she has fainted.”

Mr. Harvey Tudor, the celebrated detective, threw away the cigar he had been smoking, and hastened to his wife’s side.

“Isn’t she beautiful?” cried the little lady, in ecstasy. “I wonder who she is, and what she wanted.”

“She is evidently a stranger, and called to consult me professionally,” responded Mr. Tudor; “she must be brought into the house.”

He lifted the slight, delicate figure in his arms, and bore her into the house.

“I am going down to the office now, my dear,” he said; “we have some important cases to look after this morning. I will take a run up in the course of an hour or so. If the young girl should recover and wish to see me very particularly, I suppose you will have to send for me. Don’t get me away up here unless you find out the case is imperative.”

And with a good-humored nod, the shrewd detective, so quiet and domesticated at his own fireside, walked quickly down the path to the gate, whistling softly to himself—thinking with a strange, puzzled expression in his keen blue eyes, of Daisy. Through all of his business transactions that morning the beautiful, childish face was strangely before his mind’s eye.

“Confound it!” he muttered, seizing his hat, “I must hurry home and find out at once who that pretty little creature is—and what she wants.”

CHAPTER XXXIV.

The sunny summer days came and went, lengthening themselves into long weeks before Daisy Brooks opened her eyes to consciousness. No clue could be found as to who the beautiful young stranger was.

Mr. Tudor had proposed sending her to the hospital—but to this proposition his wife would not listen.

“No, indeed, Harvey,” she exclaimed, twisting the soft, golden curls over her white fingers, “she shall stay here where I can watch over her myself, poor little dear.”

“You amaze me, my dear,” expostulated her husband, mildly. “You can not tell who you may be harboring.”

“Now, Harvey,” exclaimed the little woman, bending over the beautiful, still, white face resting against the crimson satin pillow, “don’t insinuate there could be anything wrong with this poor child. My woman’s judgment tells me she is as pure as those lilies in yonder fountain’s bed.”

“If you had seen as much of the world as I have, my dear, you would take little stock in the innocence of beautiful women; very homely women are rarely dangerous.”

“There is no use in arguing the point, Harvey. I have determined she shall not be sent to the hospital, and she shall stay here.”

Mrs. Tudor carried the point, as she always did in every argument.

“Well, my dear, if any ill consequences arise from this piece of folly of yours, remember, I shirk all responsibility.”

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“When a woman will, she will, you may depend on’t,
And when she won’t—she won’t, and there’s an end on’t,”

he quoted, dryly. “I sincerely hope you will not rue it.”

“Now, you would be surprised, my dear, to find out at some future time you had been entertaining an angel unawares.”

“I should be *extremely* surprised; you have put it mildly, my dear—nay, I may say dumbfounded—to find an angel dwelling down here below among us sinners. My experience has led me to believe the best place for angels is up above where they belong. I am glad that *you* have such pretty little notions, though, my dear. It is not best for women to know too much of the ways of the world.”

“Harvey, you shock me!” cried the little lady, holding up her hands in horror at her liege lord’s remarks.

Still she had her own way in the matter, and Daisy stayed.

Every day the detective grew more mystified as to who in the world she could be. One thing was certain, she had seen some great trouble which bid fair to dethrone her reason.

At times she would clasp his hands, calling him Uncle John, begging him piteously to tell her how she could die. And she talked incoherently, too, of a dark, handsome woman’s face, that had come between her and some lost treasure.

Then a grave look would come into the detective’s face. He had seen many such cases, and they always ended badly, he said to himself. She had such an innocent face, so fair, so childish, he could not make up his mind whether she was sinned against or had been guilty of a hidden sin herself.

Love must have something to do with it, he thought, grimly. Whenever he saw such a hopeless, despairing look on a young and beautiful face he always set it down as a love case in his own mind, and in nine cases out of ten he was right.

“Ah! it is the old, old story,” he muttered. “A pretty, romantic school-girl, and some handsome, reckless lover,” and something very much like an imprecation broke from his lips, thorough man of the world though he was, as he ruminated on the wickedness of men.

Two days before the marriage of Rex and Pluma was to be solemnized, poor little Daisy awoke to consciousness, her blue eyes resting on the joyous face of Mrs. Tudor, who bent over her with bated breath, gazing into the upraised eyes, turned so wonderingly upon her.

“You are to keep perfectly quiet, my dear,” said Mrs. Tudor, pleasantly, laying her hands on Daisy’s lips as she attempted to speak. “You must not try to talk or to think; turn your face from the light, and go quietly to sleep for a bit, then you shall say what you please.”

Daisy wondered who the lady was, as she obeyed her like an obedient, tired child—the voice seemed so motherly, so kind, and so soothing, as she lay there, trying to realize how she came there. Slowly all her senses struggled into life, her memory came back, her mind and brain grew clear. Then she remembered walking into the cool, shady garden, and the dizziness which seemed to fall over her so suddenly. “I must have fainted last night,” she thought. She also remembered Pluma bending so caressingly over her young husband in the moonlight, and that the sight had almost driven her mad, and, despite her efforts to suppress her emotion, she began to sob aloud.

Mrs. Tudor hurried quickly to the bedside. She saw at once the ice from the frozen fountain of memory had melted.

“If you have any great sorrow on your mind, my dear, and wish to see Mr. Tudor, I will call him at once. He is in the parlor.”

“Please don’t,” sobbed Daisy. “I don’t want to see anybody. I must go home to Uncle John at once. Have I been here all night?”

“Why, bless your dear little heart, you have been here many a night and many a week. We thought at one time you would surely die.”

“I wish I had,” moaned Daisy. In the bitterness of her sorely wounded heart she said to herself that Providence had done everything for her without taking her life.

“We thought,” pursued Mrs. Tudor, gently, “that perhaps you desired to see my husband—he is a detective—upon some matter. You fainted when you were just within the gate.”

“Was it your garden?” asked Daisy, surprisedly. “I thought it was a park!”

“Then you were not in search of Mr. Tudor, my dear?” asked his wife, quite mystified.

“No,” replied Daisy. “I wanted to get away from every one who knew me, or every one I knew, except Uncle John.”

“I shall not question her concerning herself to-day,” Mrs. Tudor thought. “I will wait a bit until she is stronger.” She felt delicate about even asking her name. “She will seek my confidence soon,” she thought. “I must wait.”

Mrs. Tudor was a kind-hearted little soul. She tried every possible means of diverting Daisy’s attention from the absorbing sorrow which seemed consuming her.

She read her choice, sparkling paragraphs from the papers, commenting upon them, in a pretty, gossiping way.

Nothing seemed to interest the pretty little creature, or bring a smile to the quivering, childish lips.

“Ah! here is something quite racy!” she cried, drawing her chair up closer to the bedside. “*A scandal in high life*. This is sure to be entertaining.”

Mrs. Tudor was a good little woman, but, like all women in general, she delighted in a spicy scandal.

A handsome stranger had married a beautiful heiress. For a time all went merry as a marriage-bell. Suddenly a second wife appeared on the scene, of which no one previously knew the existence. The husband had sincerely believed himself separated by law from wife number one, but through some technicality of the law, the separation was pronounced illegal, and the beautiful heiress bitterly realized to her cost that she was no wife.

“It must be a terrible calamity to be placed in such a predicament,” cried Mrs. Tudor, energetically. “I blame the husband for not finding out beyond a doubt that he was free from his first wife.”

A sudden thought seemed to come to Daisy, so startling it almost took her breath away.

“Supposing a husband left his wife, and afterward thought her dead, even though she were not, and he should marry again, would it not be legal? Supposing the poor, deserted wife knew of it, but allowed him to marry that some one else, because she believed he was unhappy with herself, would it not be legal?” she repeated in an intense voice, striving to appear calm.

“I can scarcely understand the question, my dear. I should certainly say, if the first wife knew her husband was about to remarry, and she knew she was not separated from him by law or death, she was certainly a criminal in allowing the ceremony to proceed. Why, did you ever hear of such a peculiar case, my dear?”

“No,” replied Daisy, flushing crimson. “I was thinking of Enoch Arden.”

“Why, there is scarcely a feature in Enoch Arden’s case resembling the one you have just cited. You must have made a mistake?”

“Yes; you are right. I have made a mistake,” muttered Daisy, growing deadly pale. “I did not know. I believed it was right.”

“You believed what was right?” asked Mrs. Tudor, in amazement.

“I believed it was right for the first wife to go out of her husband’s life if she had spoiled it, and leave him free to woo and win the bride he loved,” replied Daisy, pitifully embarrassed.

“Why, you innocent child,” laughed Mrs. Tudor, “I have said he would *not* be free as long as the law did not separate him from his first wife, and she was alive. It is against the law of Heaven for any man to have two wives; and if the first wife remained silent and saw the sacred ceremony profaned by that silence, she broke the law of Heaven—a sin against God beyond pardon. Did you speak?” she asked, seeing Daisy’s white lips move.

She did not know a prayer had gone up to God from that young tortured heart for guidance.

Had she done wrong in letting Rex and the whole world believe her dead? Was it ever well to do a wrong that good should come from it?

And the clear, innocent, simple conscience was quick to answer, “No!”

Poor Daisy looked at the position in every possible way, and the more she reflected the more frightened she became.

Poor, little, artless child-bride, she was completely bewildered. She could find no way out of her difficulty until the idea occurred to her that the best person to help her would be John Brooks; and her whole heart and soul fastened eagerly on this.

She could not realize she had lain ill so long. Oh, Heaven, what might have happened in the meantime, if Rex should marry Pluma? She would not be his wife because *she*—who was a barrier between them—lived.

CHAPTER XXXV.

Daisy had decided the great question of her life. Yes, she would go to John Brooks with her pitiful secret, and, kneeling at his feet, tell him all, and be guided by his judgment.

“I can never go back to Rex,” she thought, wearily. “I have spoiled his life; he does not love me; he wished to be free and marry Pluma.”

“You must not think of the troubles of other people, my dear,” said Mrs. Tudor, briskly, noting the thoughtful expression of the fair young face. “Such cases as I have just read you are fortunately rare. I should not have read you the scandals. Young girls like to hear about the marriages best. Ah! here is one that is interesting—a grand wedding which is to take place at Whitestone Hall, in Allendale, to-morrow night. I have read of it before; it will be a magnificent affair. The husband-to-be, Mr. Rexford Lyon, is very wealthy; and the bride, Miss Pluma Hurlhurst, is quite a society belle—a beauty and an heiress.”

Poor Daisy! although she had long expected it, the announcement seemed like a death-blow to her loving little heart; in a single instant all her yearning, passionate love for her handsome young husband awoke into new life.

She had suddenly awakened to the awful reality that her husband was about to marry another.

“Oh, pitiful Heaven, what shall I do?” she cried, wringing her hands. “I will be too late to warn them. Yet I must—I must! It must not be!” she cried out to herself; “the marriage would be wrong.” If she allowed it to go on, she would be guilty of a crime; therefore, she must prevent it.

Pluma was her mortal enemy. Yet she must warn her that the flower-covered path she was treading led to a precipice. The very thought filled her soul with horror.

She wasted no more time in thinking, she must act.

“I can not go to poor old Uncle John first,” she told herself. “I must go at once to Pluma. Heaven give me strength to do it. Rex will never know, and I can go

quietly out of his life again.”

The marriage must not be! Say, think, argue with herself as she would, she could not help owning to herself that it was something that must be stopped at any price. She had not realized it in its true light before. She had had a vague idea that her supposed death would leave Rex free to marry Pluma. That wrong could come of it, in any way, she never once dreamed.

The terrible awakening truth had flashed upon her suddenly; she might hide herself forever from her husband, but it would not lessen the fact; she, and she only, was his lawful wife before God and man. From Heaven nothing could be hidden.

Her whole heart seemed to go out to her young husband and cling to him as it had never done before.

“What a fatal love mine was!” she said to herself; “how fatal, how cruel to me!”

To-morrow night! Oh, Heaven! would she be in time to save him? The very thought seemed to arouse all her energy.

“Why, what are you going to do, my dear?” cried Mrs. Tudor, in consternation, as Daisy staggered, weak and trembling, from her couch.

“I am going away,” she cried. “I have been guilty of a great wrong. I can not tell you all that I have done, but I must atone for it if it is in my power while yet there is time. Pity me, but do not censure me;” and sobbing as if her heart would break, she knelt at the feet of the kind friend Heaven had given her and told her all.

Mrs. Tudor listened in painful interest and amazement. It was a strange story this young girl told her; it seemed more like a romance than a page from life’s history.

“You say you must prevent this marriage at Whitestone Hall.” She took Daisy’s clasped hands from her weeping face, and holding them in her own looked into it silently, keenly, steadily. “How could you do it? What is Rexford Lyon to you?”

Lower and lower drooped the golden bowed head, and a voice like no other voice, like nothing human, said:

“I am Rex Lyon’s wife, his wretched, unhappy, abandoned wife.”

Mrs. Tudor dropped her hands with a low cry of dismay.

“You will keep my secret,” sobbed Daisy; and in her great sorrow she did not

notice the lady did not promise.

In vain Mrs. Tudor pleaded with her to go back to her husband and beg him to hear her.

“No,” said Daisy, brokenly. “He said I had spoiled his life, and he would never forgive me. I have never taken his name, and I never shall. I will be Daisy Brooks until I die.”

“Daisy Brooks!” The name seemed familiar to Mrs. Tudor, yet she could not tell where she had heard it before.

Persuasion was useless. “Perhaps Heaven knows best,” sighed Mrs. Tudor, and with tears in her eyes (for she had really loved the beautiful young stranger, thrown for so many long weeks upon her mercy and kindness) she saw Daisy depart.

“May God grant you may not be too late!” she cried, fervently, clasping the young girl, for the last time, in her arms.

Too late! The words sounded like a fatal warning to her. No, no; she could not, she must not, be too late!

At the very moment Daisy had left the detective’s house, Basil Hurlhurst was closeted with Mr. Tudor in his private office, relating minutely the disappearance of his infant daughter, as told him by the dying housekeeper, Mrs. Corliss.

“I will make you a rich man for life,” he cried, vehemently, “if you can trace my long-lost child, either dead or alive!”

Mr. Tudor shook his head. “I am inclined to think there is little hope, after all these years.”

“Stranger things than that have happened,” cried Basil Hurlhurst, tremulously. “You must give me hope, Mr. Tudor. You are a skillful, expert detective; you will find her, if any one can. If my other child were living,” he continued, with an effort, “you know it would make considerable difference in the distribution of my property. On the night my lost child was born I made my will, leaving Whitestone Hall and the Hurlhurst Plantations to the child just born, and the remainder of my vast estates I bequeathed to my daughter Pluma. I believed my little child buried with its mother, and in all these years that followed I never changed that will—it still stands. My daughter Pluma is to be married to-morrow night. I have not told her of the startling discovery I have made; for if anything should come of it, her hopes of a lifetime would be dashed. She believes herself

sole heiress to my wealth. I have made up my mind, however," he continued, eagerly, "to confide in the young man who is to be my future son-in-law. If nothing ever comes of this affair, Pluma need never know of it."

"That would be a wise and safe plan," assented the detective.

"Wealth can have no influence over him," continued the father, reflectively; "for Mr. Rex Lyon's wealth is sufficient for them, even if they never had a single dollar from me; still, it is best to mention this matter to him."

Rex Lyon! Ah! the detective remembered him well—the handsome, debonair young fellow who had sought his services some time since, whose wife had died such a tragic death. He remembered how sorry he had been for the young husband; still he made no comment. He had little time to ruminate upon past affairs. It was his business now to glean from Mr. Hurlhurst all the information possible to assist him in the difficult search he was about to commence. If he gave him even the slightest clew, he could have had some definite starting point. The detective was wholly at sea—it was like looking for a needle in a hay-stack.

"You will lose no time," said Basil Hurlhurst, rising to depart. "Ah!" he exclaimed, "I had forgotten to leave you my wife's portrait. I have a fancy the child, if living, must have her mother's face."

At that opportune moment some one interrupted them. Mr. Tudor had not time to open the portrait and examine it then, and, placing it securely in his private desk, he courteously bade Mr. Hurlhurst good-afternoon; adding, if he *should* find a possible clew, he would let him know at once, or, perhaps, take a run up to Whitestone Hall to look around a bit among the old inhabitants of that locality.

It was almost time for quitting the office for the night, when the detective thought of the portrait. He untied the faded blue ribbon, and touched the spring; the case flew open, revealing a face that made him cry out in amazement:

"Pshaw! people have a strange trick of resembling each other very often," he muttered; "I must be mistaken."

Yet the more he examined the fair, bewitching face of the portrait, with its childish face and sunny, golden curls, the more he knit his brow and whistled softly to himself—a habit he had when thinking deeply.

He placed the portrait in his breast-pocket, and walked slowly home. A brilliant idea was in his active brain.

"I shall soon see," he muttered.

His wife met him at the door, and he saw that her eyes were red with weeping.

“What is the commotion, my dear?” he asked, hanging his hat and coat on the hat-rack in the hall. “What’s the difficulty?”

“Our protégée has gone, Harvey; she—”

“Gone!” yelled the detective, frantically, “where did she go? How long has she been gone?”

Down from the rack came his hat and coat.

“Where are you going, Harvey?”

“I am going to hunt that girl up just as fast as I can.”

“She did not wish to see you, my dear.”

“I haven’t the time to explain to you,” he expostulated. “Of course, you have no idea where she went, have you?”

“Wait a bit, Harvey,” she replied, a merry twinkle in her eye. “You have given me no time to tell you. I do know where she went. Sit down and I will tell you all about it.”

“You will make a long story out of nothing,” he exclaimed, impatiently; “and fooling my time here may cost me a fortune.”

Very reluctantly Mr. Tudor resumed his seat at his wife’s earnest persuasion.

“Skim lightly over the details, my dear; just give me the main points,” he said.

Like the good little wife she was, Mrs. Tudor obediently obeyed.

It was not often the cool, calculating detective allowed himself to get excited, but as she proceeded he jumped up from his seat, and paced restlessly up and down the room. He was literally astounded.

“Rex Lyon’s wife,” he mused, thoughtfully. “Well, in all the years of my experience I have never come across anything like this. She has gone to Whitestone Hall, you say, to stop the marriage?” he questioned, eagerly.

“Yes,” she replied, “the poor child was almost frantic over it. You seem greatly agitated, Harvey. Have you some new case connected with her?”

“Yes,” he answered, grimly. “I think I have two cases.”

Mr. Tudor seldom brought his business perplexities to his fireside. His little wife knew as little of business matters as the sparrows twittering on the branches of

the trees out in the garden.

He made up his mind not to mention certain suspicions that had lodged in his mind until he saw his way clearly out of the complicated affair.

He determined it would do no harm to try an experiment, however. Suiting the action to the thought, he drew out the portrait from his pocket.

“I do not think I shall have as much trouble with this affair as I anticipated.”

Mrs. Tudor came and leaned over his shoulder.

“Whose picture have you there, Harvey? Why, I declare,” she cried, in amazement, “if it isn’t Daisy Brooks!”

“Mrs. Rex Lyon, you mean,” said the detective, with a sly twinkle in his eye. “But for once in your life you are at sea—and far from shore; this portrait represents a different person altogether. Come, come, wife, get me a cup of tea—quick—and a biscuit,” he cried, leading the way to the kitchen, where the savory supper was cooking. “I haven’t time to wait for tea, I must overtake that girl before she reaches Whitestone Hall.”

CHAPTER XXXVI.

The shade of night was wrapping its dusky mantle over the earth as Daisy, flushed and excited, and trembling in every limb, alighted from the train at Allendale.

Whitestone Hall was quite a distance from the station; she had quite a walk before her.

Not a breath of air seemed to stir the branches of the trees, and the inky blackness of the sky presaged the coming storm.

Since dusk the coppery haze seemed to gather itself together; great purple masses of clouds piled themselves in the sky; a lurid light overspread the heavens, and now and then the dense, oppressive silence was broken by distant peals of thunder, accompanied by great fierce rain-drops.

Daisy drew her cloak closer about her, struggling bravely on through the storm and the darkness, her heart beating so loudly she wondered it did not break.

Poor child! how little she knew she was fast approaching the crisis of her life!

She remembered, with a little sob, the last time she had traversed that road—she was seated by John Brooks's side straining her eyes toward the bend in the road, watching eagerly for the first glimpse of the magnolia-tree, and the handsome young husband waiting there.

Coy blushes suffused Daisy's cheeks as she struggled on through the pouring rain. She forgot she was a wretched, unpitied, forsaken little bride, on a mission of such great importance. She was only a simple child, after all, losing sight of all the whole world, as her thoughts dwelt on the handsome young fellow, her husband in name only, whom she saw waiting for her at the trysting-place, looking so cool, so handsome and lovable in his white linen suit and blue tie; his white straw hat, with the blue-dotted band around it, lying on the green grass beside him, and the sunshine drifting through the green leaves on his smiling face and brown, curling hair.

“If Rex had only known I was innocent, he could not have judged me so harshly.

Oh, my love—my love!” she cried out. “Heaven must have made us for each other, but a fate more cruel than death has torn us asunder. Oh, Rex, my love, if you had only been more patient with me!”

She crept carefully along the road through the intense darkness and the down-pouring rain. She knew every inch of the ground. She could not lose her way. She reached the turn in the road which was but a few feet distant from the magnolia-tree where first she had met Rex and where she had seen him last—a few steps more and she would reach it.

A blinding glare of lightning lighted up the scene for one brief instant; there was the tree, but, oh! was it only a fancy of her imagination? she thought she saw a man’s figure kneeling under it.

“Who was he, and what was he doing there?” she wondered. She stood rooted to the spot. “Perhaps he had taken refuge there from the fury of the storm.”

Daisy was a shrinking, timid little creature; she dared not move a step further, although the golden moments that flitted by were as precious as her life-blood.

She drew back, faint with fear, among the protecting shadows of the trees. Another flash of light—the man was surely gathering wild flowers from the rain-drenched grass.

“Surely the man must be mad,” thought Daisy, with a cold thrill of horror.

Her limbs trembled so from sheer fright they refused to bear her slight weight, and with a shudder of terror she sunk down in the wet grass, her eyes fixed as one fascinated on the figure under the tree, watching his every movement, as the lurid lightning illumined the scene at brief intervals.

The great bell from the turret of Whitestone Hall pealed the hour of seven, and in the lightning’s flash she saw the man arise from his knees; in one hand he held a small bunch of flowers, the other was pressed over his heart.

Surely there was something strangely familiar in that graceful form; then he turned his face toward her.

In that one instantaneous glance she had recognized him—it was Rex, her husband—as he turned hastily from the spot, hurrying rapidly away in the direction of Whitestone Hall.

“Why was Rex there alone on his wedding-night under the magnolia-tree in the terrible storm?” she asked herself, in a strange, bewildered way. “What could it mean?” She had heard the ceremony was to be performed promptly at half past

eight, it was seven already. "What could it mean?"

She had been too much startled and dismayed when she found it was Rex to make herself known. Ah, no, Rex must never know she was so near him; it was Pluma she must see.

"Why had he come to the magnolia-tree?" she asked herself over and over again. A moment later she had reached the self-same spot, and was kneeling beneath the tree, just as Rex had done. She put out her little white hand to caress the grass upon which her husband had knelt, but it was not grass which met her touch, but a bed of flowers; that was strange, too.

She never remembered flowers to grow on that spot. There was nothing but the soft carpet of green grass, she remembered.

One or two beneath her touch were broken from the stem. She knew Rex must have dropped them, and the poor little soul pressed the flowers to her lips, murmuring passionate, loving words over them. She did not know the flowers were daisies; yet they seemed so familiar to the touch.

She remembered how she had walked home from the rectory with Rex in the moonlight, and thought to herself how funny it sounded to hear Rex call her his wife, in that rich melodious voice of his. Septima had said it was such a terrible thing to be married. She had found it just the reverse, as she glanced up into her pretty young husband's face, as they walked home together; and how well she remembered how Rex had taken her in his arms at the gate, kissing her rosy, blushing face, until she cried out for mercy.

A sudden, blinding flash of lightning lighted up the spot with a lurid light, and she saw a little white cross, with white daisies growing around it, and upon the cross, in that one meteoric flash, she read the words, "Sacred to the memory of Daisy Brooks."

She did not faint, or cry out, or utter any word. She realized all in an instant why Rex had been there. Perhaps he felt some remorse for casting her off so cruelly. If some tender regret for her, whom he supposed dead, was not stirring in his heart, why was he there, kneeling before the little cross which bore her name, on his wedding-night?

Could it be that he had ever loved her? She held out her arms toward the blazing lights that shone in the distance from Whitestone Hall, with a yearning, passionate cry. Surely, hers was the saddest fate that had ever fallen to the lot of a young girl.

A great thrill of joy filled her heart, that she was able to prevent the marriage.

She arose from her knees and made her way swiftly through the storm and the darkness, toward the distant cotton fields. She did not wish to enter the Hall by the main gate; there was a small path, seldom used, that led to the Hall, which she had often taken from John Brooks's cottage; that was the one she chose to-night.

Although the storm raged in all its fury without, the interior of Whitestone Hall was ablaze with light, that streamed with a bright, golden glow from every casement.

Strains of music, mingled with the hum of voices, fell upon Daisy's ear, as she walked hurriedly up the path. The damp air that swept across her face with the beating rain was odorous with the perfume of rare exotics.

The path up which she walked commanded a full view of Pluma Hurlhurst's boudoir.

The crimson satin curtains, for some reason, were still looped back, and she could see the trim little maid arranging her long dark hair; she wore a silver-white dressing-robe, bordered around with soft white swan's-down and her dainty white satin-slipped feet rested on a crimson velvet hassock.

"How beautiful she is!" thought the poor little child-wife, wistfully gazing at her fair, false enemy. "I can not wonder Rex is dazzled by her peerless, royal beauty. I was mad to indulge the fatal, foolish dream that he could ever love me, poor, plain little Daisy Brooks."

Daisy drew her cloak closer about her, and her thick veil more securely over her face. As she raised the huge brass knocker her heart beat pitifully, yet she told herself she must be brave to the bitter end.

One, two, three minutes passed. Was no one coming to answer the summons? Yes—some one came at last, a spruce little French maid, whom Daisy never remembered having seen before.

She laughed outright when Daisy falteringly stated her errand.

"You are mad to think mademoiselle will see you to-night," she answered, contemptuously. "Do you not know this is her wedding-night?"

"She is not married *yet*?" cried Daisy, in a low, wailing voice. "Oh, I must see her!"

With a quizzical expression crossing her face the girl shrugged her shoulders, as she scanned the little dark, dripping figure, answering mockingly:

“The poor make one grand mistake, insisting on what the rich must do. I say again, my lady will not see you—you had better go about your business.”

“Oh, I *must* see her! indeed, I must!” pleaded Daisy. “Your heart, dear girl, is human, and you can see my anguish is no light one.”

Her courage and high resolve seemed to give way, and she wept—as women weep only once in a lifetime—but the heart of the French maid was obdurate.

“Mademoiselle would only be angry,” she said; “it would be as much as my place is worth to even mention you to her.”

“But my errand can brook no delay,” urged Daisy. “You do not realize,” she gasped, brokenly, while her delicate frame was shaken with sobs, and the hot tears fell like rain down her face.

“All that you say is useless,” cried the girl, impatiently, as she purposely obstructed the passage-way, holding the doorknob in her hand; “all your speech is in vain—she will not see you, I say—I will not take her your message.”

“Then I will go to her myself,” cried Daisy, in desperate determination.

“What’s the matter, Marie?” cried a shrill voice from the head of the rose-lighted stairway; “what in the world keeps you down there so long? Come here instantly.”

Daisy knew too well the handsome, impatient face and the imperious, commanding voice.

“Miss Hurlhurst,” she called out, piteously, “I must see you for a few minutes. I shall die if you refuse me. My errand is one of almost life and death; if you knew how vitally important it was you would not refuse me,” she panted.

Pluma Hurlhurst laughed a little hard laugh that had no music in it.

“What would a hundred lives or deaths matter to me?” she said, contemptuously. “I would not listen to you ten minutes to-night if I actually knew it was to save your life,” cried the haughty beauty, stamping her slippered foot impatiently.

“It is for your own sake,” pleaded Daisy. “See, I kneel to you, Miss Hurlhurst. If you would not commit a crime, I implore you by all you hold sacred, to hear me—grant me but a few brief moments.”

“Not an instant,” cried Pluma, scornfully; “shut the door, Marie, and send that

person from the house.”

“Oh, what shall I do!” cried Daisy, wringing her hands. “I am driven to the very verge of madness! Heaven pity me—the bitter consequence must fall upon your own head.”

She turned away with a low, bitter cry, as the maid slammed the heavy oaken door in her face.

“There is no other way for me to do,” she told herself, despairingly, “but to see Rex. I do not know how I am going to live through the ordeal of entering his presence—listening to his voice—knowing I bring him such a burden of woe—spoiling his life for the second time.”

She did not hear the door quietly reopen.

“I have heard all that has just passed, young lady,” said a kind voice close beside her. “I am extremely sorry for you—your case seems a pitiful one. I am sorry my daughter refused to see you; perhaps I can be of some assistance to you. I am Miss Hurlhurst’s father.”

CHAPTER XXXVII.

For a moment Daisy stood irresolute. "Follow me into my study, and tell me your trouble. You say it concerns my daughter. Perhaps I can advise you."

Ah, yes! he above all others could help her—he was Pluma's father—he could stop the fatal marriage. She would not be obliged to face Rex.

Without another word Daisy turned and followed him. Although Daisy had lived the greater portion of her life at John Brooks' cottage on the Hurlhurst plantation, this was the first time she had ever gazed upon the face of the recluse master of Whitestone Hall. He had spent those years abroad; and poor Daisy's banishment dated from the time the lawn fête had been given in honor of their return.

Daisy glanced shyly up through her veil with a strange feeling of awe at the noble face, with the deep lines of suffering around the mouth, as he opened his study door, and, with a stately inclination of the head, bade her enter.

"His face is not like Pluma's," she thought, with a strange flutter at her heart. "He looks good and kind. I am sure I can trust him."

Daisy was quite confused as she took the seat he indicated. Mr. Hurlhurst drew up his arm-chair opposite her, and waited with the utmost patience for her to commence.

She arose and stood before him, clasping her trembling little white hands together supplicatingly. He could not see her face, for she stood in the shadow, and the room was dimly lighted; but he knew that the sweet, pathetic voice was like the sound of silvery bells chiming some half-forgotten strain.

"I have come to tell you this wedding can not—must not—go on to-night!" she cried, excitedly.

Basil Hurlhurst certainly thought the young girl standing before him must be mad.

"I do not understand," he said, slowly, yet gently. "Why do you, a stranger, come to me on my daughter's wedding-night with such words as these? What reason

can you offer why this marriage should not proceed?"

He could not tell whether she had heard his words or not, she stood before him so silent, her little hands working nervously together. She looked wistfully into his face, and she drew her slender figure up to its full height, as she replied, in a low, passionate, musical voice:

"Mr. Lyon can not marry your daughter, sir, for he has a living wife."

"Mr. Lyon has a wife?" repeated Basil Hurlhurst, literally dumbfounded with amazement. "In Heaven's name, explain yourself!" he cried, rising hastily from his chair and facing her.

The agitation on his face was almost alarming. His grand old face was as white as his linen. His eyes were full of eager, painful suspense and excitement. With a violent effort at self-control he restrained his emotions, sinking back in his arm-chair like one who had received an unexpected blow.

Daisy never remembered in what words she told him the startling truth. He never interrupted her until she had quite finished.

"You will not blame Rex," she pleaded, her sweet voice choking with emotion; "he believes me dead."

Basil Hurlhurst did not answer; his thoughts were too confused. Yes, it was but too true—the marriage could not go on. He reached hastily toward the bell-rope.

"You will not let my—Rex know until I am far away," she cried, piteously, as she put her marriage certificate in Mr. Hurlhurst's hand.

"I am going to send for Rex to come here at once," he made answer.

With a low, agonized moan, Daisy grasped his outstretched hand, scarcely knowing what she did.

"Oh, please do not, Mr. Hurlhurst," she sobbed. "Rex must not see me; I should die if you sent for him; I could not bear it—indeed, I could not." She was looking at him, all her heart in her eyes, and, as if he felt magnetically the power of her glance, he turned toward her, meeting the earnest gaze of the blue, uplifted eyes.

The light fell full upon her fair, flushed face, and the bonnet and veil she wore had fallen back from the golden head.

A sudden mist seemed to come before his eyes, and he caught his breath with a sharp gasp.

“What did you say your name was before you were married?” he asked, in a low, intense voice. “I—I—did not quite understand.”

“Daisy Brooks, your overseer’s niece,” she answered, simply.

She wondered why he uttered such a dreary sigh as he muttered, half aloud, how foolish he was to catch at every straw of hope.

Carefully he examined the certificate. It was too true. It certainly certified Rexford Lyon and Daisy Brooks were joined together in the bonds of matrimony nearly a year before. And then he looked at the paper containing the notice of her tragic death, which Daisy had read and carefully saved. Surely no blame could be attached to Rex, in the face of these proofs.

He was sorry for the beautiful, haughty heiress, to whom this terrible news would be a great shock; he was sorry for Rex, he had grown so warmly attached to him of late, but he felt still more sorry for the fair child-bride, toward whom he felt such a yearning, sympathetic pity.

The great bell in the tower slowly pealed the hour of eight, with a dull, heavy clang, and he suddenly realized what was to be done must be done at once.

“I must send for both Rex and Pluma,” he said, laying his hands on the beautiful, bowed head; “but, if it will comfort you to be unobserved during the interview, you shall have your wish.” He motioned her to one of the curtained recesses, and placed her in an easy-chair. He saw she was trembling violently.

It was a hard ordeal for him to go through, but there was no alternative.

He touched the bell with a shaking hand, thrusting the certificate and paper into his desk.

“Summon my daughter Pluma to me at once,” he said to the servant who answered the summons, “and bid Mr. Lyon come to me here within half an hour.”

He saw the man held a letter in his hand.

“If you please, sir,” said the man, “as I was coming to answer your bell I met John Brooks, your overseer, in the hall below. A stranger was with him, who requested me to give you this without delay.”

Basil Hurlhurst broke open the seal. There were but a few penciled words, which ran as follows:

“MR. HURLHURST,—Will you kindly grant me an immediate interview? I shall detain you but a

few moments.

“Yours, hastily,

“HARVEY TUDOR,

“Of Tudor, Peck & Co, Detectives, Baltimore.”

The man never forgot the cry that came from his master’s lips as he read those brief words.

“Yes, tell him to come up at once,” he cried; “I will see him here.”

He forgot the message he had sent for Pluma and Rex—forgot the shrinking, timid little figure in the shadowy drapery of the curtains—even the gay hum of the voices down below, and the strains of music, or that the fatal marriage moment was drawing near.

He was wondering if the detective’s visit brought him a gleam of hope. Surely he could have no other object in calling so hurriedly on this night above all other nights.

A decanter of wine always sat on the study table. He turned toward it now with feverish impatience, poured out a full glass with his nervous fingers, and drained it at a single draught.

A moment later the detective and John Brooks, looking pale and considerably excited, were ushered into the study.

For a single instant the master of Whitestone Hall glanced into the detective’s keen gray eyes for one ray of hope, as he silently grasped his extended hand.

“I see we are alone,” said Mr. Tudor, glancing hurriedly around the room—“we three, I mean,” he added.

Suddenly Basil Hurlhurst thought of the young girl, quite hidden from view.

“No,” he answered, leading the way toward an inner room, separated from the study by a heavy silken curtain; “but in this apartment we shall certainly be free from interruption. Your face reveals nothing,” he continued, in an agitated voice, “but I believe you have brought me news of my child.”

Basil Hurlhurst had no idea the conversation carried on in the small apartment to which he had conducted them could be overheard from the curtained recess in which Daisy sat. But he was mistaken; Daisy could hear every word of it.

She dared not cry out or walk forth from her place of concealment lest she should come suddenly face to face with Rex.

As the light had fallen on John Brooks' honest face, how she had longed to spring forward with a glad little cry and throw herself into his strong, sheltering arms! She wondered childishly why he was there with Mr. Tudor, the detective, whose voice she had instantly recognized.

"I have two errands here to-night," said the detective, pleasantly. "I hope I shall bring good news, in one sense; the other we will discuss later on."

The master of Whitestone Hall made no comments; still he wondered why the detective had used the words "one sense." Surely, he thought, turning pale, his long-lost child could not be dead.

Like one in a dream, Daisy heard the detective go carefully over the ground with Basil Hurlhurst—all the incidents connected with the loss of his child. Daisy listened out of sheer wonder. She could not tell why.

"I think we have the right clew," continued the detective, "but we have no actual proof to support our supposition; there is one part still cloudy."

There were a few low-murmured words spoken to John Brooks. There was a moment of silence, broken by her uncle John's voice. For several moments he talked rapidly and earnestly, interrupted now and then by an exclamation of surprise from the master of Whitestone Hall.

Every word John Brooks uttered pierced Daisy's heart like an arrow. She uttered a little, sharp cry, but no one heard her. She fairly held her breath with intense interest. Then she heard the detective tell them the story of Rex Lyon's marriage with her, and he had come to Whitestone Hall to stop the ceremony about to be performed.

Basil Hurlhurst scarcely heeded his words. He had risen to his feet with a great, glad cry, and pushed aside the silken curtains that led to the study. As he did so he came face to face with Daisy Brooks, standing motionless, like a statue, before him. Then she fell, with a low, gasping cry, senseless at Basil Hurlhurst's feet.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

Pluma Hurlhurst received her father's summons with no little surprise. "What can that foolish old man want, I wonder?" she soliloquized, clasping the diamond-studded bracelets on her perfect arms. "I shall be heartily glad when I am Rex Lyon's wife. I shall soon tell him, then, in pretty plain words, I am not at his beck and call any longer. Come to him instantly, indeed! I shall certainly do no such thing," she muttered.

"Did you speak, mademoiselle?" asked the maid.

"No," replied Pluma, glancing at the little jeweled watch that glittered in its snow-white velvet case. She took it up with a caressing movement. "How foolish I was to work myself up into such a fury of excitement, when Rex sent for me to present me with the jewels!" she laughed, softly, laying down the watch, and taking up an exquisite jeweled necklace, admired the purity and beauty of the soft, white, gleaming stones.

The turret-bell had pealed the hour of eight; she had yet half an hour.

She never could tell what impulse prompted her to clasp the shining gems around her white throat, even before she had removed her dressing-robe.

She leaned back dreamily in her cushioned chair, watching the effect in the mirror opposite.

Steadfastly she gazed at the wondrous loveliness of the picture she made, the dark, lustrous eyes, gleaming with unwonted brilliancy, with their jetty fringe; the rich, red lips, and glowing cheeks.

“There are few such faces in the world,” she told herself triumphantly.

Those were the happiest moments proud, peerless Pluma Hurlhurst was ever to know—“before the hour should wane the fruition of all her hopes would be attained.”

No feeling of remorse stole over her to imbitter the sweets of her triumphant thoughts.

She had lived in a world of her own, planning and scheming, wasting her youth, her beauty, and her genius, to accomplish the one great ultimatum—winning Rex Lyon’s love.

She took from her bosom a tiny vial, containing a few white, flaky crystals. “I shall not need this now,” she told herself. “If Lester Stanwick had intended to interfere he would have done so ere this; he has left me to myself, realizing his threats were all in vain; yet I have been sore afraid. Rex will never know that I lied and schemed to win his love, or that I planned the removal of Daisy Brooks from his path so cleverly; he will never know that I have deceived him, or the wretched story of my folly and passionate, perilous love. I could not have borne the shame and the exposure; there would have been but one escape”—quite unconsciously she slid the vial into the pocket of her silken robe—“I have lived a coward’s life; I should have died a coward’s death.”

“It is time to commence arranging your toilet, mademoiselle,” said the maid, approaching her softly with the white glimmering satin robe, and fleecy veil over her arm. “My fingers are deft, but you have not one moment to spare.”

Pluma waved her off with an imperious gesture.

“Not yet,” she said. “I suppose I might as well go down first as last to see what in the world he wants with me; he should have come to me if he had wished to see me so very particularly;” and the dutiful daughter, throwing the train of her dress carelessly over her arm, walked swiftly through the brilliantly lighted corridor toward Basil Hurlhurst’s study. She turned the knob and entered. The room was apparently deserted. “Not here!” she muttered, with surprise. “Well, my dear, capricious father, I shall go straight back to my apartments. You shall come to me hereafter.” As she turned to retrace her steps a hand was laid upon her shoulder, and a woman’s voice whispered close to her ear:

“I was almost afraid I should miss you—fate is kind.”

Pluma Hurlhurst recoiled from the touch, fairly holding her breath, speechless

with fury and astonishment.

“You insolent creature!” she cried. “I wonder at your boldness in forcing your presence upon me. Did I not have you thrust from the house an hour ago, with the full understanding I would not see you, no matter who you were or whom you wanted.”

“I was not at the door an hour ago,” replied the woman, coolly; “it must have been some one else. I have been here—to Whitestone Hall—several times before, but you have always eluded me. You shall not do so to-night. You shall listen to what I have come to say to you.”

For once in her life the haughty, willful heiress was completely taken aback, and she sunk into the arm-chair so lately occupied by Basil Hurlhurst.

“I shall ring for the servants, and have you thrown from the house; such impudence is unheard of, you miserable creature!”

She made a movement toward the bell-rope, but the woman hastily thrust her back into her seat, crossed over, turned the key in the lock, and hastily removed it. Basil Hurlhurst and John Brooks were about to rush to her assistance, but the detective suddenly thrust them back, holding up his hand warningly.

“Not yet,” he whispered; “we will wait until we know what this strange affair means. I shall request you both to remain perfectly quiet until by word or signal I advise you to act differently.”

And, breathless with interest, the three, divided only by the silken hanging curtains, awaited eagerly further developments of the strange scene being enacted before them.

Pluma’s eyes flashed like ebony fires, and unrestrained passion was written on every feature of her face, as the woman took her position directly in front of her with folded arms, and dark eyes gleaming quite as strangely as her own. Pluma, through sheer astonishment at her peculiar, deliberate manner, was hushed into strange expectancy.

For some moments the woman gazed into her face, coolly—deliberately—her eyes fastening themselves on the diamond necklace which clasped her throat, quivering with a thousand gleaming lights.

“You are well cared for,” she said, with a harsh, grating laugh, that vibrated strangely on the girl’s ear. “You have the good things of life, while I have only the hardships. I am a fool to endure it. I have come to you to-night to help me—

and you must do it.”

“Put the key in that door instantly, or I shall cry out for assistance. I have heard of insolence of beggars, but certainly this is beyond all imagination. How dare you force your obnoxious presence upon me? I will not listen to another word; you shall suffer for this outrage, woman! Open the door instantly, I say.”

She did not proceed any further in her breathless defiance of retort; the woman coolly interrupted her with that strange, grating laugh again, as she answered, authoritatively:

“I shall not play at cross-purposes with you any longer; it is plainly evident there is little affection lost between us. You will do exactly as I say, Pluma; you may spare yourself a great deal that may be unpleasant—if you not only listen but quietly obey me. Otherwise—”

Pluma sprung wildly to her feet.

“Obey you! obey you!”

She would have screamed the words in her ungovernable rage, had not a look from this woman’s eyes, who used her name with such ill-bred familiarity, actually frightened her.

“Be sensible and listen to what I intend you shall hear, and, as I said and repeat, obey. You have made a slight mistake in defying me, young lady. I hoped and intended to be your friend and adviser; but since you have taken it into your head to show such an aversion to me, it will be so much the worse for you, for I fully intend you shall act hereafter under my instructions; it has spoiled you allowing you to hold the reins in your own hands unchecked.”

“Oh, you horrible creature! I shall have you arrested and—”

The woman interrupted her gasping, vindictive words again, more imperiously than before.

“Hush! not another word; you will not tell any one a syllable of what has passed in this room.”

“Do you dare threaten me in my own house,” cried Pluma, fairly beside herself with passion. “I begin to believe you are not aware to whom you are speaking. You shall not force me to listen. I shall raise the window and cry out to the guests below.”

“Very well, then. I find I am compelled to tell you something I never intended

you should know—something that, unless I am greatly mistaken in my estimate of you, will change your high and mighty notions altogether.”

The woman was bending so near her, her breath almost scorched her cheek.

“I want money,” she said, her thin lips quivering in an evil smile, “and it is but right that you should supply me with it. Look at the diamonds, representing a fortune, gleaming on your throat, while I am lacking the necessaries of life.”

“What is that to me?” cried Pluma, scornfully. “Allow me to pass from the room, and I will send my maid back to you with a twenty-dollar note. My moments are precious; do not detain me.”

The woman laughed contemptuously.

“Twenty dollars, indeed!” she sneered, mockingly. “Twenty thousand will not answer my purpose. From this time forth I intend to live as befits a lady. I want that necklace you are wearing, as security that you will produce the required sum for me before to-morrow night.”

The coarse proposal amazed Pluma.

“I thought Whitestone Hall especially guarded against thieves,” she said, steadily. “You seem to be a desperate woman; but I, Pluma Hurlhurst, do not fear you. We will pass over the remarks you have just uttered as simply beyond discussion.”

With a swift, gliding motion she attempted to reach the bell-rope. Again the woman intercepted her.

“Arouse the household if you dare!” hissed the woman, tightening her hold upon the white arm upon which the jewels flashed and quivered. “If Basil Hurlhurst knew what I know you would be driven from this house before an hour had passed.”

“I—I—do not know what you mean,” gasped Pluma, her great courage and fortitude sinking before this woman’s fearlessness and defiant authority.

“No, you don’t know what I mean; and little you thank me for carrying the treacherous secret since almost the hour of your birth. It is time for you to know the truth at last. You are not the heiress of Whitestone Hall—you are not Basil Hurlhurst’s child!”

Pluma’s face grew deathly white; a strange mist seemed gathering before her.

“I can not—seem—to—grasp—what you mean, or who you are to terrify me

so.”

A mocking smile played about the woman’s lips as she replied, in a slow, even, distinct voice:

“I am your mother, Pluma!”

CHAPTER XXXIX.

At the self-same moment that the scene just described was being enacted in the study Rex Lyon was pacing to and fro in his room, waiting for the summons of Pluma to join the bridal-party in the corridor and adjourn to the parlors below, where the guests and the minister awaited them.

He walked toward the window and drew aside the heavy curtains. The storm was beating against the window-pane as he leaned his feverish face against the cool glass, gazing out into the impenetrable darkness without.

Try as he would to feel reconciled to his marriage he could not do it. How could he promise at the altar to love, honor, and cherish the wife whom he was about to wed?

He might honor and cherish her, but love her he could not, no matter for all the promises he might make. The power of loving was directed from Heaven above—it was not for mortals to accept or reject at will.

His heart seemed to cling with a strange restlessness to Daisy, the fair little child-bride, whom he had loved so passionately—his first and only love, sweet little Daisy!

From the breast-pocket of his coat he took the cluster of daisies he had gone through the storm on his wedding-night to gather. He was waiting until the monument should arrive before he could gather courage to tell Pluma the sorrowful story of his love-dream.

All at once he remembered the letter a stranger had handed him outside of the entrance gate. He had not thought much about the matter until now. Mechanically he picked it up from the mantel, where he had tossed it upon entering the room, glancing carelessly at the superscription. His countenance changed when he saw it; his lips trembled, and a hard, bitter light crept into his brown eyes. He remembered the chirography but too well.

“From Stanwick!” he cried, leaning heavily against the mantel.

Rex read the letter through with a burning flush on his face, which grew white as

with the pallor of death as he read; a dark mist was before his eyes, the sound of surging waters in his ears.

“OLD COLLEGE CHUM,”—it began,—“For the sake of those happy hours of our school-days, you will please favor me by reading what I have written to the end.

“If you love Pluma Hurlhurst better than your sense of honor this letter is of no avail. I can not see you drifting on to ruin without longing to save you. You have been cleverly caught in the net the scheming heiress has set for you. It is certainly evident she loves you with a love which is certainly a perilous one. There is not much safety in the fierce, passionate love of a desperate, jealous woman. You will pardon me for believing at one time your heart was elsewhere. You will wonder why I refer to that; it will surprise you to learn, that one subject forms the basis of this letter. I refer to little Daisy Brooks.

“You remember the night you saw little Daisy home, burning with indignation at the cut direct—which Pluma had subjected the pretty little fairy to? I simply recall that fact, as upon that event hangs the terrible sequel which I free my conscience by unfolding. You had scarcely left the Hall ere Pluma called me to her side.

“‘Do not leave me, Lester,’ she said; ‘I want to see you; remain until after all the guests have left.’

“I did so. You have read the lines:

“‘Heaven has no rage like love to hatred turned,
Nor hell a fury like a woman scorned’?

“They were too truly exemplified in the case of Pluma Hurlhurst when she found you preferred little golden-haired Daisy Brooks to her own peerless self. ‘What shall I do, Lester,’ she cried, ‘to strike his heart? What shall I do to humble his mighty pride as he has humbled mine?’ Heaven knows, old boy, I am ashamed to admit the shameful truth. I rather enjoyed the situation of affairs. ‘My love is turned to hate!’ she cried, vehemently. ‘I must strike him through his love for that little pink-and-white baby-faced creature he is so madly infatuated with. Remove her from his path, Lester,’ she cried, ‘and I shall make it worth your while. You asked me once if I would marry you. I answer *now*: remove that girl from his path, by fair means or foul, and I give you my hand as the reward, I, the heiress of Whitestone Hall.’

“She knew the temptation was dazzling. For long hours we talked the matter over. She was to furnish money to send the girl to school, from which I was

shortly to abduct her. She little cared what happened the little fair-haired creature. Before I had time to carry out the design fate drifted her into my hands. I rescued her, at the risk of my own life, from a watery grave. I gave out she was my wife, that the affair might reach your ears, and you would believe the child willfully eloped with me. I swear to you no impure thought ever crossed that child's brain. I gave her a very satisfactory explanation as to why I had started so false a report. In her innocence—it seemed plausible—she did not contradict my words.

“Then you came upon the scene, charging her with the report and demanding to know the truth.

“At that moment she saw the affair in its true light. Heaven knows she was as pure as a spotless lily; but appearances were sadly against the child, simply because she had not contradicted the report that I had circulated—that she was my wife. Her lips were dumb at the mere suspicion you hurled against her, and she could not plead with you for very horror and amazement.

“When you left her she was stricken with a fever that was said to have cost her her life. She disappeared from sight, and it was said she had thrown herself into the pit.

“I give you this last and final statement in all truth. I was haunted day and night by her sad, pitiful face; it almost drove me mad with remorse, and to ease my mind I had the shaft searched a week ago, and learned the startling fact—it revealed no trace of her ever having been there.

“The shaft does not contain the remains of Daisy Brooks, and I solemnly affirm (although I have no clew to substantiate the belief) that Daisy Brooks is not dead, but living, and Pluma Hurlhurst's soul is not dyed with the blood which she would not have hesitated to shed to remove an innocent rival from her path. I do not hold myself guiltless, still the planner of a crime is far more guilty than the tool who does the work in hope of reward.

“The heiress of Whitestone Hall has played me false, take to your heart your fair, blushing bride, but remember hers is a perilous love.”

The letter contained much more, explaining each incident in detail, but Rex had caught at one hope, as a drowning man catches at a straw.

“Merciful Heaven!” he cried, his heart beating loud and fast. “Was it not a cruel jest to frighten him on his wedding-eve? Daisy alive! Oh, just Heaven, if it could only be true!” He drew his breath, with a long, quivering sigh, at the bare

possibility. "Little Daisy was as pure in thought, word and deed as an angel. God pity me!" he cried. "Have patience with me for my harshness toward my little love. I did not give my little love even the chance of explaining the situation," he groaned. Then his thoughts went back to Pluma.

He could not doubt the truth of the statement Stanwick offered, and the absolute proofs of its sincerity. He could not curse her for her horrible deceit, because his mother had loved her so, and it was done through her blinding, passionate love for him; and he buried his face in his hands, and wept bitterly. It was all clear as noonday to him now why Daisy had not kept the tryst under the magnolia-tree, and the cottage was empty. She must certainly have attempted to make her escape from the school in which they placed her to come back to his arms.

"Oh, dupe that I have been!" he moaned. "Oh, my sweet little innocent darling!" he cried. "I dare not hope Heaven has spared you to me!"

Now he understood why he had felt such a terrible aversion to Pluma all along. She had separated him from his beautiful, golden-haired child-bride.

His eyes rested on the certificate which bore Pluma's name, also his own. He tore it into a thousand shreds.

"It is all over between us now," he cried. "Even if Daisy were dead, I could never take the viper to my bosom that has dealt me such a death-stinging blow. If living, I shall search the world over till I find her; if dead, I shall consecrate my life to the memory of my darling, my pure, little, injured *only* love."

He heard a low rap at the door. The servant never forgot the young man's haggard, hopeless face as he delivered Basil Hurlhurst's message.

"Ah, it is better so," cried Rex to himself, vehemently, as the man silently and wonderingly closed the door. "I will go to him at once, and tell him I shall never marry his daughter. Heaven help me! I will tell him all."

Hastily catching up the letter, Rex walked, with a firm, quick tread, toward the study, in which the strangest tragedy which was ever enacted was about to transpire.

"I am your mother, Pluma," repeated the woman, slowly. "Look into my face, and you will see every lineament of your own mirrored there. But for me you would never have enjoyed the luxuries of Whitestone Hall, and this is the way you repay me! Is there no natural instinct in your heart that tells you you are standing in your mother's presence?"

“Every instinct in my heart tells me you are a vile impostor, woman. I wonder that you dare intimate such a thing. You are certainly an escaped lunatic. My mother was lost at sea long years ago.”

“So every one believed. But my very presence here is proof positive such was not the case.”

Pluma tried to speak, but no sound issued from her white lips. The very tone of the woman’s voice carried positive conviction with it. A dim realization was stealing over her that this woman’s face, and the peculiar tone of her voice, were strangely mixed up with her childhood dreams; and, try as she would to scoff at the idea, it seemed to be gaining strength with every moment.

“You do not believe me, I see,” pursued the woman, calmly. “There is nothing but the stern facts that will satisfy you. You shall have them. They are soon told: Years ago, when I was young and fair as you are now, I lived at the home of a quiet, well-to-do spinster, Taiza Burt. She had a nephew, an honest, well-to-do young fellow, who worshiped me, much to the chagrin of his aunt; and out of pique one day I married him. I did not love the honest-hearted fellow, and I lived with him but a few brief months. I hated him—yes, hated him, for I had seen another—young, gay and handsome—whom I might have won had it not been for the chains which bound me. He was a handsome, debonair college fellow, as rich as he was handsome. This was Basil Hurlhurst, the planter’s only son and heir. Our meeting was romantic. I had driven over to the village in which the college was situated, on an errand for Taiza. Basil met me driving through the park. He was young, reckless and impulsive. He loved me, and the knowledge of his wealth dazzled me. I did not tell him I was a wife, and there commenced my first sin. My extreme youth and ignorance of the world must plead for me—my husband or the world would never know of it. I listened to his pleading, and married him—that is, we went through the ceremony. He had perfect faith in its sincerity. I alone knew the guilty truth. Yet enormous as was my crime, I had but a dim realization of it.

“For one brief week I was dazzled with the wealth and jewels he lavished upon me; but my conscience would not let me rest when I thought of my honest-hearted husband, from whom I had fled and whom I had so cruelly deceived.

“My love for Basil was short lived; I was too reckless to care much for any one. My conscience bade me fly from him. I gathered up what money and jewels I could, and fled. A few months after you were born; and I swear to you, by the proofs I can bring you, beyond all shadow of a doubt, you were my lawful

husband's child, not Basil's.

“Soon after this event a daring thought came to me. I could present you, ere long, with myself, at Whitestone Hall. Basil Hurlhurst would never know the deception practiced upon him; and you, the child of humble parentage, should enjoy and inherit his vast wealth. My bold plan was successful. We had a stormy interview, and it never occurred to him there could be the least deception—that I was not his lawful wife, or you his child.

“I found Basil had learned to despise even more fiercely than he had ever loved me.

“He took us abroad, refusing to speak or look upon my face, even though he escorted us. In a fit of desperation I threw myself into the sea, but I was rescued by another vessel. A strong inclination seized me to again visit Whitestone Hall and see what disposition he had made of you. Years had passed; you were then a child of five years.

“One terrible stormy night—as bad a night as this one—I made my way to the Hall. It was brilliantly lighted up, just as it is to-night.

“I saw the gate was locked; and through the flashes of lightning I saw a little girl sobbing wildly, flung face downward in the grass, heedless of the storm.

“I knew you, and called you to me. I questioned you as to why the house was lighted, and learned the truth. Basil Hurlhurst had remarried; he had been abroad with his wife, and to-night he was bringing home his young wife.

“My rage knew no bounds. I commanded you to bring me the key of the gate. You obeyed. That night a little golden-haired child was born at Whitestone Hall, and I knew it would live to divide the honors and wealth of Whitestone Hall with you—my child.

“The thought maddened me. I stole the child from its mother's arms, and fled. I expected to see the papers full of the terrible deed, or to hear you had betrayed me, a stranger, wanting the key of the gate.”

“My surprise knew no bounds when I found it was given out the child had died, and was buried with its young mother. I never understood why Basil Hurlhurst did not attempt to recover his child.

“I took the child far from here, placing it in a basket on the river brink, with a note pinned to it saying that I, the mother, had sinned and had sought a watery grave beneath the waves. I screened myself, and watched to see what would

become of the child, as I saw a man's form approaching in the distance.

"I fairly caught my breath as he drew near. I saw it was my own husband, whom I had so cruelly deserted years ago—your father, Pluma, who never even knew or dreamed of your existence.

"Carefully he lifted the basket and the sleeping babe. How he came in that locality I do not know. I found, by some strange freak of fate, he had taken the child home to his aunt Taiza, and there the little one remained until the spinster died.

"Again, a few years later, I determined to visit Whitestone Hall, when a startling and unexpected surprise presented itself. Since then I have believed in fate. All unconscious of the strange manner in which these two men's lives had crossed each other, I found Basil Hurlhurst had engaged my own husband, and your father, John Brooks, for his overseer."

Pluma gave a terrible cry, but the woman did not heed her.

"I dared not betray my identity then, but fled quickly from Whitestone Hall; for I knew, if all came to light, it would be proved without a doubt you were not the heiress of Whitestone Hall.

"I saw a young girl, blue-eyed and golden-haired, singing like a lark in the fields. One glance at her face, and I knew she was Basil Hurlhurst's stolen child fate had brought directly to her father's home. I questioned her, and she answered she had lived with Taiza Burt, but her name was Daisy Brooks."

"It is a lie—a base, ingenious lie!" shrieked Pluma. "Daisy Brooks the heiress of Whitestone Hall! Even if it were true," she cried, exultingly, "she will never reign here, the mistress of Whitestone Hall. She is dead."

"Not exactly!" cried a ringing voice from the rear; and before the two women could comprehend the situation, the detective sprung through the silken curtains, placing his back firmly against the door. "You have laid a deep scheme, with a cruel vengeance; but your own weapons are turned against you. Bring your daughter forward, Mr. Hurlhurst. Your presence is also needed, Mr. Brooks," he called.

CHAPTER XL.

Not a muscle of Pluma Hurlhurst's face quivered, but the woman uttered a low cry, shrinking close to her side.

"Save me, Pluma!" she gasped. "I did it for your sake!"

Basil Hurlhurst slowly put back the curtain, and stepped into the room, clasping his long-lost daughter to his breast. Daisy's arms were clinging round his neck, and her golden head rested on his shoulder. She was sobbing hysterically, John Brooks, deeply affected, following after.

Like a stag at bay, the woman's courage seemed to return to her, as she stood face to face after all those years with the husband whom she had so cruelly deceived—and the proud-faced man who stood beside him—whose life she had blighted with the keenest and most cruel blow of all.

Basil Hurlhurst was the first to break the ominous silence.

"It is unnecessary to tell you we have heard all," he said, slowly. "I shall not seek redress for your double crime. Leave this locality at once, or I may repent the leniency of my decision. I hold you guiltless, Pluma," he added, gently. "You are not my child, yet I have not been wanting in kindness toward you. I shall make every provision for your future comfort with your father," he said, indicating John Brooks, who stood pale and trembling at his side.

"Pluma, my child," cried John Brooks, brokenly, extending his arms.

But the scornful laugh that fell from her lips froze the blood in his veins.

"Your child!" she shrieked, mockingly; "do not dare call me that again. What care I for your cotton fields, or for Whitestone Hall?" she cried, proudly, drawing herself up to her full height. "You have always hated me, Basil Hurlhurst," she cried, turning haughtily toward him. "This is your triumph! Within the next hour I shall be Rex Lyon's wife."

She repeated the words with a clear, ringing laugh, her flaming eyes fairly scorching poor little Daisy's pale, frightened face.

“Do you hear me, Daisy Brooks!” she screamed. “You loved Rex Lyon, and I have won him from you. You can queen it over Whitestone Hall, but I shall not care. I shall be queen of Rex’s heart and home! Mine is a glorious revenge!”

She stopped short for want of breath, and Basil Hurlhurst interrupted her.

“I have to inform you you are quite mistaken there,” he replied, calmly. “Mr. Rexford Lyon will not marry you to-night, for he is already married to my little daughter Daisy.” He produced the certificate as he spoke, laying it on the table. “Rex thought her dead,” he continued, simply. “I have sent for him to break the startling news of Daisy’s presence, and I expect him here every moment.”

“Pluma,” cried Daisy, unclasping her arms from her father’s neck, and swiftly crossing over to where her rival stood, beautifully, proudly defiant, “forgive me for the pain I have caused you unknowingly. I did not dream I was—an—an—heiress—or that Mr. Hurlhurst was my father. I don’t want you to go away, Pluma, from the luxury that has been yours; stay and be my sister—share my home.”

“My little tender-hearted angel!” cried Basil Hurlhurst, moved to tears.

John Brooks hid his face in his hands.

For a single instant the eyes of these two girls met—whose lives had crossed each other so strangely—Daisy’s blue eyes soft, tender and appealing, Pluma’s hard, flashing, bitter and scornful.

She drew herself up to her full height.

“Remain in your house?” she cried, haughtily, trembling with rage. “You mistake me, girl: do you think I could see you enjoying the home that I have believed to be mine—see the man I love better than life itself lavish caresses upon you—kiss your lips—and bear it calmly? Live the life of a pauper when I have been led to believe I was an heiress! Better had I never known wealth than be cast from luxury into the slums of poverty,” she wailed out, sharply. “I shall not touch a dollar of your money, Basil Hurlhurst. I despise you too much. I have lived with the trappings of wealth around me—the petted child of luxury—all in vain—all in vain.”

Basil Hurlhurst was struck with the terrible grandeur of the picture she made, standing there in her magnificent, scornful pride—a wealth of jewels flashing on her throat and breast and twined in the long, sweeping hair that had become loosened and swept in a dark, shining mass to her slender waist, her flashing eyes far outshining the jewels upon which the softened gas-light streamed. Not

one gleam of remorse softened her stony face in its cruel, wicked beauty. Her jeweled hand suddenly crept to the pocket of her dress where she had placed the vial.

“Open that door!” she commanded.

The key fell from her mother’s nerveless grasp. The detective quietly picked it up, placed it in the lock, and opened the door. And just at that instant, Rex Lyon, with the letter in his hand, reached it.

Pluma saw him first.

“Rex!” she cried, in a low, hoarse voice, staggering toward him; but he recoiled from her, and she saw Stanwick’s letter in his hands; and she knew in an instant all her treachery was revealed; and without another word—pale as death—but with head proudly erect, she swept with the dignity of a princess from the scene of her bitter defeat, closely followed by her cowering mother.

Rex did not seek to detain her; his eyes had suddenly fallen upon the golden-haired little figure kneeling by Basil Hurlhurst’s chair.

He reached her side at a single bound.

“Oh, Daisy, my darling, my darling!” he cried, snatching her in his arms, and straining her to his breast, as he murmured passionate, endearing words over her.

Suddenly he turned to Mr. Hurlhurst.

“I must explain—”

“That is quite unnecessary, Rex, my boy,” said Mr. Tudor, stepping forward with tears in his eyes; “Mr. Hurlhurst knows all.”

It never occurred to handsome, impulsive Rex to question what Daisy was doing there. He only knew Heaven had restored him his beautiful, idolized child-bride.

“You will forgive my harshness, won’t you, love?” he pleaded. “I will devote my whole life to blot out the past. Can you learn to love me, sweetheart, and forget the cloud that drifted between us?”

A rosy flush suffused the beautiful flower-like face, as Daisy shyly lifted her radiantly love-lighted blue eyes to his face with a coy glance that fairly took his breath away for rapturous ecstasy.

Daisy’s golden head nestled closer on his breast, and two little soft, white arms, whose touch thrilled him through and through, stole round his neck—that was all the answer she made him.

John Brooks had quietly withdrawn from the room; and while Basil Hurlhurst with a proudly glowing face went down among the waiting and expectant guests to unfold to them the marvelous story, and explain why the marriage could not take place, the detective briefly acquainted Rex with the wonderful story.

“I sought and won you when you were simple little Daisy Brooks, and now that you are a wealthy heiress in your own right, you must not love me less.”

Daisy glanced up into her handsome young husband’s face as she whispered, softly:

“Nothing can ever change my love, Rex, unless it is to love you more and more.”

And for answer Rex clasped the little fairy still closer in his arms, kissing the rosy mouth over and over again, as he laughingly replied he was more fortunate than most fellows, being lover and husband all in one.

The announcement created an intense *furor* among the fluttering maidens down in the spacious parlors. Nobody regretted Pluma’s downfall, although Basil Hurlhurst carefully kept that part of the narrative back.

“Oh, it is just like a romance,” cried Eve Glenn, rapturously; “but still we must not be disappointed, girls; we must have a wedding all the same. Rex and Daisy must be married over again.”

Every one was on the tiptoe of expectancy to see the beautiful little heroine of a double romance.

Eve Glenn, followed by Birdie, found her out at once in the study.

“Oh, you darling!” cried Eve, laughing and crying in one breath, as she hugged and kissed Daisy rapturously; “and just to think you were married all the time, and to Rex, too; above all other fellows in the world, he was just the one I had picked out for you.”

Rex was loath to let Daisy leave him even for a moment. Eve was firm.

“I shall take her to my room and convert her in no time at all into a veritable Cinderella.”

“She is the pretty young girl that carried me from the stone wall, and I have loved her so much ever since, even if I couldn’t remember her name,” cried Birdie, clapping her hands in the greatest glee.

In the din of the excitement, Pluma Hurlhurst shook the dust of Whitestone Hall forever from her feet, muttering maledictions at the happy occupants. She had

taken good care to secure all the valuables that she could lay her hands on, which were quite a fortune in themselves, securing her from want for life. She was never heard from more.

Eve Glenn took Daisy to her own room, and there the wonderful transformation began. She dressed Daisy in her own white satin dress, and twined deep crimson passion-roses in the golden curls, clapping her hands—at Daisy's wondrous beauty—kissing her, and petting her by turns.

“There never was such a little fairy of a bride!” she cried, exultantly leading Daisy to the mirror. “True, you haven't any diamonds, and I haven't any to loan you; but who would miss such trifles, gazing at such a bewitching, blushing face and eyes bright as stars? Oh, won't every one envy Rex, though!”

“Please don't, Eve,” cried Daisy. “I'm so happy, and you are trying to make me vain.”

A few moments later there was a great hush in the vast parlors below, as Daisy entered the room, leaning tremblingly on Rex's arm, who looked as happy as a king, and Basil Hurlhurst, looking fully ten years younger than was his wont, walking proudly beside his long-lost daughter.

The storm had died away, and the moon broke through the dark clouds, lighting the earth with a silvery radiance, as Rex and Daisy took their places before the altar, where the ceremony which made them man and wife was for the second time performed.

Heaven's light never fell on two such supremely happy mortals as were Rex and his bonny blushing bride.

Outside of Whitestone Hall a motley throng was gathering with the rapidity of lightning—the story had gone from lip to lip—the wonderful story of the long-lost heiress and the double romance.

Cheer after cheer rent the air, and telegraph wires were busy with the startling revelations.

The throng around the Hall pressed forward to catch a glimpse of the pretty little bride. Young girls laughed and cried for very joy. Mothers, fathers, and sweethearts fervently cried: “God bless her!”

All night long the bells rang from the church belfries, bonfires were lighted on all the surrounding hills. A telegram was sent to a Baltimore marble firm countermanding a certain order.

All night long the young people danced to the chime of merry music, and all night long the joy-bells pealed from the turrets of Whitestone Hall, and they seemed to echo the chorus of the people. "God bless sweet little Daisy Lyon, the long-lost heiress of Whitestone Hall!"

THE END

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