

MAGGIE

AND

HER LOVERS.



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CHAPTER I.

"MOTHER, you had better have an eye on Maggie; *I* think the little witch is in love."

"In *love*, Harry! what are you thinking of? The child is only sixteen."

"Can't help it, mother, it's my opinion she is in love, if I know anything of the symptoms,"—and the precocious youth, with a comical leer at the glass, softly caressed an imaginary moustache. Why, think how she has changed. Whenever I came in, she would run to meet me, so bright. She was the jolliest little sis in the whole world. Do you remember, mother, that day when she met me at the door, all tricked out as Di Vernon, your best black silk doing duty as riding dress, and how pretty she looked with the Governor's hat over her long curls,—and how she snapped her whip at me, and really queened it over the whole house, till even you, mother, could not scold for laughing? But now she isn't game at all. She hasn't a word to say to one, and goes about with her eyes half shut, or mopes in corners; and yesterday I found her with her face buried in an enormous bouquet, Rush Howard sent her,—

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talking to herself all the time, saying sweet things, I suppose. What a muff she is to go on so; it is positively sickening. I say, mother, you had better look out or you will have them running away together. Maggie is just romantic enough for that, with her everlasting novel-reading."

"Harry, my son, stop. Don't rattle on so; you have given me such a fright." And, horrified, Mrs. Brent gathered up the crowing baby that Harry was tossing to the ceiling, and called Betty to the screaming twins; who, taking advantage of the mother's abstraction, had pulled over a large vase of brilliant flowers and found it a chilly shower-bath instead.

With a little chuckle at the sensation he had caused, Harry strode off to enjoy a quiet smoke in the Park and whatever other amusement this country town might afford. Being a jolly freshman, home on vacation, he pronounced it "slow, duced slow."

Betty soon restored quiet and order; and having taken the little Bertie and Agnes to be dried, and dressed for their daily walk, Mrs. Brent hugged her babe close in her matronly arms, and asked herself if there were really any truth in Harry's nonsense. Was her little girl stepping into womanhood? had she already found the fatal key to unlock its pains and pleasures? She was her oldest girl; she had no experience; had she erred in letting her follow her innocent fancies so freely? Ought she to have taught her hard, dry lessons from her own wisdom, culled from bitter herbs in life's experience? That imagination, which had made her so happy at home, ought she to have trained it more? That novel-reading Harry spoke of,—she had been so innocently proud of all her daughter's little acquirements, her love of books, her bright sayings—was she wrong in letting her read so indiscriminately? Ought she to have taken away the love stories, and satisfied that desire to know something of the world, by giving her *real* heroes,—historical men and women?

Poor Mrs. Brent, she was sorely troubled; all she could remember seemed to confirm Harry's saucy warning. She had noticed that Maggie was growing quiet, but noticed it only as one of the moods of budding girlhood, as charming, often, as the unthinking gaiety of childhood. She had not connected it with Rush Howard's attentions. Mothers are not quick to find their children growing old; to them it is so lately they were babes in their arms, their worst pains soothed by mother's kiss, their saddest troubles driven off by mother's story. And now her darling had outgrown her; she had no power to drive off life's troubles; kisses and caresses would go so little way to help her bear them,—and good motherly Mrs. Brent could not keep the tears from falling on the sleeping babe in her lap. She knew very well that Rush Howard would be no true husband for Maggie. Of an old family, as old families go in this country; meaning, *generally*, that for two generations, possibly three, there had been money enough and to spare, which, in the last had developed a tendency to idleness, and much deification of self had thus come down bequeathed, with the family acres and bank-stock. A family noted for beauty, a certain grace and chivalric devotion, after their manner, to women, which made them irresistible to some, and had given the sons of the house the reputation of fops and flirts. She knew that, unstable and selfish, there were no qualities in that family to make a wife happy, and she wondered if Maggie, with the firm principle and love of right she felt sure was implanted in her, would ever find it out for herself. Mrs. Brent sighed, fearing her judgment might be so perverted with unreal pictures of life, she would desire to possess this fair apple of Sodom, even if it turned to ashes in the mouth. Then thinking, after all, it might be Harry's *foolish talk*, she said, "I will do nothing now, I will watch and wait."

Mr. Brent, active partner of a large manufacturing company,—for that he was, much more than Mrs. Brent's husband

and Maggie's father,—was a hale, stout, hearty man, entirely engrossed with his business, his mills and investments. It was not always so; there had been a time—Mrs. Brent well remembered it—when a smile from her would weigh more than gold, and a whispered word of endearment lift him from the mill-pond itself. But that was a long time ago, when the marriage was new and fresh. Perhaps he loved her as much now, I dare say he thought he did, and would have sworn to it before a court. But some way, the love had got to be such a rare thing, it was only brought out on rare occasions, like valuable old china locked up for fear of breakage, and only used in sickness, or in some other great family event. Mrs. Brent, warm-hearted, living in her affections, had complained, had wept, had entreated; but finding tears only irritated, and complaints were heard in silence, had closed her heart in despair, until rosy baby fingers and milk loving mouths, coming quickly and often, had sucked away the bitterness and left it all sweet. But often defrauded nature was too strong, and Mrs. Brent rebelled, wildly asking, what right had this man, who vowed “to love, honor and protect,” to make his home but a restaurant, his wife but a mistress and a housekeeper? Mr. Brent, sitting at the head of his well-ordered table, little dreamt how insubordinate was the quiet woman opposite, or how often his reign tottered to its fall; but sense of duty and force of habit conquered at last, and Mrs. Brent became, that not unfrequent character, a faithful wife to an engrossed, indifferent, husband.



CHAPTER II.

MEANWHILE, Maggie Brent, all unconscious of the busy marplots who were threatening her happiness, had ran away from all the house, and was sitting in a little arbor, at the far end of the garden. She made a pretty picture there; the vine-leaves framing her, and throwing a flickering light and shade on her golden hair. Her sweet face was fastened on the love-letter in her hand; the cheeks all rosy, the red lips parted, the blue eyes filled with soft delight, while the little frock she was braiding slipped unnoticed from her lap. Truly, womanhood had come to Maggie, with all the deliciousness of “love’s young dream.”

Truly, all of God’s children, some time in their lives, walk in the garden of Eden, with whose fruits, with whose roses, naught else can compare; and happy are they who meet no serpent walking therein. Maggie looks up from those sweet words she knows by heart, and the half-closed eyes gaze dreamily out, seeing nothing around, while she lives over last evening’s happy hours. She had met Rush Howard at the post office, and as it was moonlight, she had gone with him to the Park. Ah, how plainly she saw it all over again, and heard him speak! how her heart fluttered and throbbed as she remembered what he said when she asked him to look at the moon, it was so bright. “Ah!” he whispered, “here is something far more beautiful for *me*,” and persisted in looking right down into her blushing face, that the little jocky hat would not shade a bit; and when she said, “It isn’t me at all, it’s Bell Morgan you like,” only to hear him say it over again.

It was all new and strange, but delicious, she was sure of *that*, Rush was so splendid. She thought over all her favorite heroes and a warmer glow came to her cheek, a brighter light to her eye, as she lifted her head proudly, and said aloud, "he is more noble than 'Ivanhoe,' handsomer than 'Leicester,' more lovely than 'John Halifax,' and a great deal better than 'Rochester'; I don't believe Jane Eyre loved him half so well; and laying her head down again on her hands, she wondered if the angels in Heaven could be happy without Rush to love. And, so the girl sat and dreamed on; the afternoon sun sending his golden arrows through the trees, the little birds triumphantly singing, another day is gone; the noises from the house, the baby voices, the mother's anxious tones, the busy servants, all floated down to her, and still she dreamed on, hearing nothing, knowing nothing but her own sweet thoughts.



CHAPTER III.

AFTER that moonlight night, Rush Howard had gone to his room, and feeling too excited for sleep, sat down by the window to think. He really did love Maggie; her single mindedness, her earnestness, made her always fresh and piquant, while her merry heart was ever bubbling up to her lips like the waters of some limpid spring. To be idolized by such a dear little girl was very attractive to him, and his black eyes flashed in the moonlight, as he thought how pretty she looked, and how graceful she was. Being a bit of a poet, he strung it all together in rhyme, walking up and down the room, and reciting to himself, feeling much complacency, as the words flowed smoothly. Fervid and passionate they were, a strange contrast to the boy's cool manner, fully absorbed in his task of coining a pretty piece of poetry out of this night's love-making. And so was written Maggie Brent's love letter. There was something irresistibly attractive to him in Maggie's unselfishness, and, as far as in him lay, he appreciated her, and was sincere in his protestations. Yet, had he gone away from the shadow of his native Green Mountains, though he might have written Maggie every day, yet no feeling for her, however deep, would prevent his making love to every fair girl he met, and receiving their admiration as though fully entitled to it by the right of true love. Such was his instability of character, his shallow nature, his love of admiration. I know of no phrases in homely old Saxon, just suited to analyze the genus, male flirt.

The experienced ones of the earth, as age brings them wis-

dom, tell us with heavy emphasis, that beauty is nothing; *to be good* is all. Yet you know, and I know, and they know, that grace and beauty are the natural born sovereigns of the world, that bow us down to do them homage, in spite, it may be, of our judgment or our good sense, so strong has God made in us the love of the beautiful.

In spite of Harry's merciless railings, which he said kept her in a chronic state of blushes, Maggie lived in a magical world, which threw a halo all around. Mrs. Brent, finding the mischief already done, contented herself with forbidding any engagement, but let them meet thinking there could be no *lasting* attachment between natures apparently opposite.

But Mr. Brent, more arbitrary, perhaps, than wise, was not disposed to be so indulgent, and at dinner one day, surprised Maggie by keeping his eyes fixed on hers, and as they rose from the table, he bade her come with him into the parlor, cool and darkened from the summer heat.

"Maggie, child, what is this I hear about you and Rush Howard? Is it true you have thoughts of being engaged?"

"Yes, papa;" and Maggie's eyes drooped, and the blood rushed to her face.

"But, Maggie, you must have seen I don't like him."

"Don't like him, papa! what has Rush done? I am sure you would like him if you would only talk with him, and see how good he is, and how smart; he can write, father, beautifully. I am sure he is very talented."

"Nonsense, child, any boy can write poetry. I don't approve of him for you, because he has no industry, never has been taught to apply himself to anything. Why, he can neither earn money nor keep what he has, and such a man is not for my daughter." The usually cold father passed his hand caressingly over the bowed head, finding a new beauty in the expressive face.

"But he has enough money now, father," pleaded the girl,

"and he says we will live on the farm, and oh! father, we shall be so happy!" and the smiles all came back, and she clasped her hands and raised her face, brilliant with hope at the fond picture.

"But, my child, Mr. Howard knows no more about taking care of money than Rush does, and by the time Rush is of age there may be no farm nor money, either."

"But father, you didn't have any money when you married mother; I am sure she has told me how little you had to keep house with, only what you earned from day to day, and *you* did well enough."

"Yes, child,"—and Mr. Brent gazed at her absently, his memory going back to the time when Maggie's mother was as young and fair as she, and stood blushing before him in her girlish beauty. Bringing himself back from the old dream—"no, child, I had no money, but I had what is better, the will and the determination to get some. None of those Howards have a faculty for business: they are an idle, useless race; I don't like the family, I don't like the blood." And Mr. Brent's sturdy independence asserted itself as he straightened his massive form, with a hearty contempt of those cumberers of the land.

"Don't think any more about him, Maggie, he's not worth your caring. I never can consent for you to marry him; so, try to forget all about him."

"But I can't, father, and I don't want to," stammered Maggie, and the sobs choked her, and the tears came down like rain.

"Maggie, Maggie, child, don't cry so,"—and poor Mr. Brent walked around her, sadly perplexed. No will nor determination nor business rules would apply to the present emergency; he didn't know what to do; he felt his utter impotency, and started to call his wife; then remembering he had decided upon this interview in opposition to her, he came back, looking

at the weeping girl in futile dismay. At last a bright thought struck him,—he would compromise,

“Maggie, hush my child, stop crying and listen to me. You are only sixteen now, much too young to think of marrying anybody, but I will promise you, that if Rush Howard, in four years has kept steady, applied himself to business, either for making money or managing it, and you still want each other, I will give my consent.” Then, as the girl lifted her face, already brightened with smiles, he added quickly, “but remember, there must be no nonsense in the meantime, no love-making. You can find enough to do helping your mother, sewing, and being with the children, without seeing Rush. I don’t want him coming here until he can come a smart man of business, to claim you.” He saw the look of dismay come over her face, at the *four years*, an eternity to youth, and said, coaxingly, “The time will soon pass, and next summer we shall go away journeying, and you shall make your aunt a visit,” and bending over her, he kissed her, a very unusual act for him; then taking his hat, he hurried off to his office, glad to leave such perplexities to go, where he was equal to whatever might happen. He felt it had been a very blundering kind of a talk, and that he did not succeed quite as well in managing hearts as he did mills, water powers, and bank stock.

She sent for Rush Howard, that evening, and then nerving herself for the effort, and forgetting that, familiar as it had been to her from thinking of it, it was all strange to him, she told him what her father had said, of his disapproval, of his final rejection, except upon the hard condition of his becoming an attentive man of business in four years. Feeling she could never command herself to say it if she looked up and saw one sad, reproachful look in those black eyes, Maggie told it all without stopping, then paused, expecting him to come to her, to comfort her, to tell her to have courage, to trust him, he would do anything for her,—but not a word, and when at last,

she looked up timidly, there stood the boy, all the rich bloom gone from his cheek, white with rage and mortification; angry with her, with her father, with anybody who dared to refuse him and impose conditions, or insinuate that he was not deserving of everybody or everything. At last she grew calmer, and the words came coldly and as if he were a great way off—

“And you agree with your father, do you?” And Rush stole his arm around her, whispering sweet words.

“You love me and I love you, isn’t it so, Maggie?”

Maggie’s heart kept beating “it is, it is.” It was very pleasant to give up to him once more. But Maggie, with all her innocent loving, had a true monitor within, that told her this was wrong now, and drawing away she said, “No, Rush, I must mind my father, you know he has not separated us forever, it is only four years,” and she tried to speak bravely.

The boy shook his head unconvinced.

“But, Rush, I cannot disobey my father. Don’t you know what the Bible says,—don’t you know it is one of the commandments? I shouldn’t be a good wife to you,”—and the sweet voice faltered,—“if I came to you sinning. No, Rush, you must go now and promise me that you will try to be a man, and then come for me one of these days; and Rush, all of the time I will think of you, and pray for you.”

“You needn’t *pray* for me, Maggie, I don’t believe in prayer, as you do. No,”—as the girl looked up shocked and horrified,—“I think whoever created this world has something else to do than to be always listening or changing his plans for us.”

“But Christ said so.”

“And who was Christ? you can’t prove that he ever lived. I have often thought, when you were talking in your pretty Puritanical way that suits you so charmingly, that I ought to tell you, I don’t feel or believe at all as you do, but some way I hated to shock you. But it’s no use for me to try to believe all those notions you have. My will rebels against it. It does

very well for girls and women that like to do as they are bid;" and Rush walked up and down with all the precocious dignity of manhood.

"Rush, do you really mean all these dreadful things you are saying? don't you believe the Bible?"

"Hardly, love, at least I think I can do very well without it."

"But Christ, our Saviour,"

"Christ is a myth, Maggie."

For a moment, the room swam around the drooping girl, a cold, death-like feeling clutched her very heart; then, with a great effort, driving it all away, she rose, and clasping the little hands, said solemnly, "Rush, I sent for you to talk of something else. I did not know, never imagined you felt like this, or could ever stand there and talk to me so; but you must go now, and when I've had time to think I will write to you." Her pale face and forced calmness frightened the boy, and he besought her to talk to him, before she bid him good-bye. But Maggie was too full for words. His own dropped to the floor unheeded, and she could speak no more. And so they parted, and Maggie went to her room rigidly, stonily calm in her despair. And this was what had come of it—her "Love's young dream." She realized now all her mother had said of him; like the hand-writing on the wall, she saw her father's judgment of him; she felt heart-sick as she recalled what he had said to her. The conversation was a bitter disappointment, a terrible letting down of her idol from the Olympus of her fancy; Rush had fallen from his pedestal. She had thought him so manly and protecting, she had only found him boyish. She had dreamed he would strengthen and help her, he had only tempted and shocked. Poor Maggie, she had not lived to know this was a very common phase in the lives of boys, or men even; that there often comes a time, when they question its mysteries with merciless inquisitiveness; a time when nought in the heavens above, or the earth below, contains half so much wis-

dom as swells proudly in their own callow brains. When to owe allegiance, or give obedience, to any intelligence higher than their own, is scorned as an absurdity; when the idea of their will being fettered by Omnipotence even, is rebelled against as an impossibility. Some, who have the most common sense, perhaps, come out of this "Slough of Despond" and emerge into the clearer atmosphere of faith; a faith stronger perhaps for the dark clouds that precede it; but some never seem to come out of it, never seem to outlive the conceit of youth; some seem not to be able to see in this whole wonderful creation, a mind more cunning, more powerful than their own; who limit the Infinite by their own reason and insight—their feeble intellect never perceiving that, if they could comprehend all cause and effect they would be Infinite Gods themselves.



CHAPTER IV.

AND so Maggie's dream was rudely broken; and she wrestled alone with her trouble. Her first-impulse was to go to her mother and tell her all about it; then she thought she could not let her blame Rush, and so alone she sorrowed, and thought she might, long. She must give him up, not only for four years, but forever; that was the one thought that forced itself upon her. Never could she join herself in the most solemn act of her life with one who himself had no feelings of religion or reverence. All his winning ways, all his bright beauty, all his loving words came back to her in merciless sweetness. She must give him up forever! The throbbing heart and aching head beat, "forever, forever, give him up forever." Her life might be miserable without him, but she had no right to be happy without God in her world; Christ demanded of her this sacrifice; falteringly but surely would she lay this love on His altar. And so morning came and found Maggie where night had left her—at the window, with only God and the stars to listen to her sad grievings.

Sorrowfully she went about the house, wearily did life press upon her. All the elasticity of youth, all its bounding joy, its overflow, its surplus was dried and scorched. The routine of every day seemed an overpowering burthen, she could not comprehend how everything had once been so pleasant and delightful. But not at once, did she relinquish all hope of saving Rush. With her father's consent, she wrote him long letters. With all the eloquence she could muster, all the learning she could gather from wise men, who proved what they believed,

she strove to change him from his false notions. But it was of no use, proofs or arguments were of little avail when Rush gloried in his infidelity, and thought it a proof of manly independence. And at last, wearied by her importunity, piqued by her continued refusal to meet him, he wrote, requesting her to say nothing more upon the subject. She bored him, and he was sure she didn't love him if she thought him so wicked. Henceforth they were as strangers to each other.

Poor Maggie! only sixteen, and her woman's heart sorely troubling her. Mrs. Brent watched her with anxious eyes, as she thought if Maggie's nature had not developed so prematurely in that hot-bed of novel reading, she might have been spared all this, for some years at least. Maggie drooped like a plant in the shade, it was so little while ago she revelled in the sunshine. Months passed, and even the year came round again, before the smiles came easily to her lips. It was strange what a hold on her young life that love had taken, and how hard it was to wrench it away. All her girlish romance had centered on Rush Howard, and a long weary time it was before she realized how little there was there to love. But at last her natural energy reasserted itself; her spirit refused to be so completely the creature of circumstance: she determined to be herself in spite of fate,—her busy cheerful self. And one day the thought came to her with startling distinctness, that, simply to *put away*, at the voice of duty, was not all of sacrifice, but it was to *leave* our gift on the altar, with no looking back, while we turned again to the world to live our lives as God's children. And *thank God*, who has placed the solitary in families, there was enough for her to do,—enough at home, in relieving the tired careworn mother, enough at the Sunday School in teaching bright eyed children, enough in the street in picking up ragged little beggars and teaching them to be clean and neat. She wrote long letters to Harry who had gone back to College, she soothed the teething fretful baby,

she walked and talked with the twins and told stories that made their black eyes round with delight. In short she packed her days so closely, she left not a square inch for the heart ache. But, once in a while, all her life seemed "stale, weary and unprofitable," and a homesick longing for Rush and his love, possessed her. Who could blame the girl, who was so bravely "taking up the burden of her life again?" And for reward, she began to feel the weight lifting, began to feel interested in her own life. The smiles came back to her lips, the light to her eyes, the flush to her cheek. Maggie was almost her joyous self once more.

It seems an added proof of our immortality, that all living beings demand happiness as their right; they do not ask it as a gift, but regard it as something to be expected. As God makes no faculty to waste, does this not suggest, there must be some *other* world, where this demand may be fully satisfied, this aspiration reach full completion?

Rush Howard, too shallow and fickle to steadily pursue an object that seemed unattainable, consoled himself by seeking the society of other girls; though he said truly, when he sent word to Maggie, he never should love any one else as he loved her; no one else would ever do him so much good. It was the one opportunity of his life, when his better nature had said, "Friend, come up higher." But he neglected the call; ever after he trod the family road, a selfish pleasure seeker. As for Maggie, her better nature interfered and saved her the hard fate of lifting him up by the force of her own moral strength.

Maggie's pride helped her wonderfully in conquering the weakness, when she heard of Rush walking and driving with others, and apparently enjoying himself as well as ever.

CHAPTER V.

MRS. Brent's nearest neighbors were the Vernons. Quiet people they had always been; but now two sons, growing up to manhood, brightened the old house, bringing noise and light into the shut up rooms, kept sacred from use and dust. As Mrs. Vernon said, the boys had a way of living all over the house and enjoying all there was pleasant in it. John Vernon, the elder of the two, was now in the army under Sheridan. He was a lawyer, his father's pride. The old man would rub his hands, in secret glee, as he thought of his son coming home to practise his profession and becoming some time, perhaps, the Esquire of the town.

Willie, the younger, was a good natured, happy fellow, not brilliant, but honest and always in good spirits, had played with Maggie from babyhood, and both young men had kept up their childish friendship. Maggie was a little afraid of the quiet student so grave and dignified. She had a lurking fear that he was quizzing her and felt a strong temptation to be saucily indifferent to the young lawyer, her father and mother were always praising. But however she might talk, she could not help enjoying his long letters, so full of terrible incidents. She wrote him nice little notes in return, that made the young soldier smile, as in those sage thoughts upon life and love, it was easy to see what experience Maggie was passing through, while she was all unconscious how her secrets were creeping out her fingers ends.

Willie Vernon was an intense admirer of Maggie, she was so quick and bright where he was slow; so *spirituelle* where he

was clumsy. Greedily and grudgingly he had watched her, the last two years, ready to come the moment he caught a smile from Maggie. One part of their natures fully sympathized, they dearly loved a frolic, and many a one had they enjoyed together when children; at the brook, sailing their tiny boats, down the steep hillside, on swift flying sleds; in gay picnics in the green woods, or cleaving the air in the highest swing. Now it was a long time since they had a good laugh, and, as one summer evening Will drove his bay mare to the door, he wondered if indeed Maggie would go with him; and if she would be animated and lively or sober and absent minded, as she had been of late. It was the end of a warm summer's day when one feels that to rest quietly in the open air, is all one demands of existence; and Mrs. Brent and Maggie were sitting on the piazza, while the baby, the twins and Carlo, an old Newfoundland, tumbled promiscuously on the lawn in front.

The children shouted at the sight of the horse and his driver; Carlo, as if ashamed of being caught in a game of romps, walked gravely forward while the ladies smiled their welcome to the new comer.

"Will you go to drive with me, Maggie?" trying to speak indifferently and as if his whole heart wasn't in his words.

"Yes, thank you, I'd like to very much," and off went Maggie for the hat and the warm shawl; the prudent mother suggested, to cover the blue gossamer dress that floated around her like a cloud. "By Jove how like an angel she looks," muttered Will as she came down, the blue feather in her hat, making her look fairer still: and nodding adieux to the family party, they drove off. It was not in Willie's nature, to keep anything to himself, and, he had hardly guided his horse out from the avenue into the broad road, when he turned and took a long, hungry look at the sweet face, its beauty heightened by the coquetish lace veil. Maggie half pouted, half

blushed; conscious she was pretty, feeling her power and enjoying it; innocently happy, that to him she always looked well. "That is a handsome dress, Maggie, and I like your new hat, too. Do you know, Maggie, you are the prettiest girl in town?" Maggie laughed a low, girlish laugh—"you mean you think so, Will. Auntie says girls must never listen to compliments, they are the Devil's own lures."

"Much your auntie knows about them," said wicked Will, as a vision of the tall, spare, withered spinster rose before him.

"Hush, Will, auntie was very handsome when she was young."

"Why didn't she get married then," said practical Will."

"How absurd! just as if marrying you men was the chief end and aim of women's existence," pouted Maggie indignantly.

"Well, now, isn't it?" and mischievous Will bent down very close to the blue eyes; "now can you say to me, 'certain true black and blue,' as the children say, that you *don't* look forward to loving and marrying somebody? you know you can't," said Will triumphantly, as Maggie paused for an answer.

"I know that if I had such a horse as that, I wouldn't be creeping along at snail's pace when we could fly like the wind;" and Maggie, seizing the whip, beat a joyous tattoo with her little foot, happy to get safely over that question. This love for his horse being only second to his feeling for Maggie, Will put Crescent to her speed.

"See, Will, those cardinal flowers and lupines, white and pink and blue, can't we get out and pick some? won't Cressy stand?"

Will Vernon, with a word, checked the well trained animal, at full speed. "Cressy will follow us like a dog," said he, and getting out, he helped Maggie, and they were soon roaming about, gathering flowers, while Crescent followed where he

could, or waited patiently, as they climbed the hill, turning his head to cast long looks at his master.

"There, I think we have enough," and Maggie gazed with delight upon their spoils, "we must go home now. See the little stars are winking at us, and that baby moon is suggestive of—of what, Will? why don't you help me?"

"Why, of cradles, I suppose, that is all I can think of."

"Pshaw," said laughing Maggie, and resuming their seats, drove rapidly home; fully enjoying the cold evening air.

Happy, indeed, was Will Vernon to be with Maggie Brent, and hardly a day passed without bringing him to the house. They rode and they drove, or roamed about the hills; they went to the hops at the hotels, made pleasanter by gay young people from the city. They went nutting in brilliant October woods; and soon their names were coupled and excited much talk and surmise, which, however provoking to the parties concerned, is at once, so natural and universal. Nothing, to single ladies, young or old, is so interesting as their friends' love affairs, unless indeed, it is their own. Mr. and Mrs. Brent looked on in silence; they might expect Maggie to choose a more brilliant man, still there was nothing to object to in Will Vernon. Moral and good tempered, showing quite an aptitude for business, while the paternal accumulations would divide well for the two sons. And Maggie herself,—had she indeed found her ideal in the jovial boy who, though attentive to business, found his highest pleasure in horses and dogs; who seldom opened a book, and voted reading a bore; whom Dame Nature, in return for his devotion, had gifted with a physique like the Greek of old? To tell the truth, Maggie did not think much about it. She enjoyed being with him,—his manner being such a delicious flattery, whether he spoke or was silent. Every thing she did, he thought was just right. She had not forgotten her first taste of the forbidden fruit. She craved more without knowing what it was she wanted. A causal re-

mark from a friend, opened her eyes to the full force of the life she was leading, and with a convulsive start, she woke to ask herself what she was doing, and if she was not deceiving Will Vernon by thus receiving his attentions. Looking back over the last few months, she felt she had given him decided encouragement, and as she remembered how thoughtlessly happy she had been, she shuddered to think it might be at the expense of his suffering; and then, as she shrunk from inflicting pain, the desire came over her to possess this love; not to thrust it away.

Would it not be better to live a calm, happy life with him? Will would always be so kind and pleasant. Then, too, she would have money; she would be rich and have everything she wanted,—dresses, carriages, horses; she felt she could jog along the journey of life very comfortably with Will Vernon. *Comfortably*—that word struck the key note to a different train of thought. Was that the aim of life, to eat and to drink, to have splendid clothes, and diamonds, and laces, and horses to drive? This world is to fit us for the next; are these the spiritual employments of Heaven? She had dreamt that to love and marry was to find one who should supply all that she lacked in her character, while she formed the completion of his. Marriage was to help forward the true living, that was to make Heaven but the supplement of this life, death but the open door. Was Willie Vernon this man, who could so help her, did she so love him that her heart said—"Thou art the man?" No. To some other he might be; but well she knew that the calm friendship she felt for Will Vernon was not the preference that would be true to herself: she would never marry until she did, though she lived a solitary old maid, like Auntie herself. All this and more Maggie wrote in her journal, that faithful repository of all her secrets. Absorbed in thought, in her self reproach she did not notice some

one coming in at the open door until Will Vernon stood beside her.

"What are you doing, Maggie, writing in your journal? Let me see it," with a loving smile, "you might as well. No one knows so well what you are doing, *let me see it.*" Maggie made a quick movement to take it from him, then thinking sadly he must soon know what was written there, she said to herself, he might as well *read* it, it will save us both unnecessary words. The ink was hardly dry as Will Vernon read fatal words that burned themselves into his brain. He read them again and again, it was so hard to crush the hope and confidence of the joyous past. Then turning to Maggie, who lifted a sad face filled with remorse, he asked "Is this true? have you nothing more to say, Maggie?"

The ring was all gone from his voice, it dropped heavily on the air.

"Nothing, Will, only I am so sorry. I have been very wicked, but I didn't mean to be; I didn't think."

"*Think* next time, Maggie," said the young man, pausing in his stride up and down the room, the bitter disappointment irritating his even temper. Up and down he walked, while Maggie with bowed head watched him, the heavy tread seeming to go through and through her brain. Twice he paused and standing still before her, looked at her from head to foot, from the yellow curls and the drooping blue eyes, down to the blue rosette on the little slipper, and looked as if he wished to stamp her image on his heart; then bending down, he kissed her between those clustering curls and without another look turned and left the house. Maggie was alone with her conscience, and it pricked her sorely; disguise it as she might, she knew it was a case of pure, unmitigated flirting—of heartless trifling; her only excuse,—she didn't think. Poor excuse! she felt humiliated, lowered in her own esteem; she had always blamed others for doing just this. Maggie took a heavy heart

to her room that night. She had meant to keep her girlish record so pure, she had felt such Pharisaic pride in thinking she was not as other girls were, and here she had wilfully trifled with a strong, true love, and agonized an honest, manly nature. Truly, her woman's heart had sorely tempted her. And she learned a hard lesson of self-distrust; all winter she struggled with bitter feelings of self-reproach, but it was well learned and long remembered.

"Maggie," said Mrs. Brent one morning, "Mrs. Vernon is almost distracted, poor thing. John is wounded severely and the surgeon has sent for them to come to the hospital; Will and his father will go with her and will start immediately. You had better go over and offer to help her."

Maggie had wondered why she received no letters from John Vernon. This explained it, and she sympathized warmly with the good mother and the anxious father. Willie, in his newly awakened love for his brother, could put aside his feelings for Maggie, and she found she was of great service to the confused household, with her busy fingers and clear, practical sense. She stayed until the carriage drove off; then, going around the house, directing the servants to put the desolate rooms in order, she came to John's room. Here were all his books and papers; everything as he had left them, when he hurried off at the President's call for the 75,000, all taken charge of with tender care by his mother, showing her yearning love for her first born. Tired, she sat for a moment in his chair at the table, looking about on the various articles that everywhere spoke of him. Is it possible that he may never come back? Her hands playing idly with the papers, her fingers felt something not so smooth. Turning, she spied a bit of blue ribbon that looked strangely familiar. Curious, she drew it from the leaves, exclaiming with surprise as she recognized it as her own. She well remembered her gay frolic at the painting lesson, when one of the girls, snatching the rib-

bon from her hair, had mischievously painted it; the stars and stripes on one end, the "Stag's Head," the "sheaves of wheat" and the "Green Mountains" on the other,—daring her to wear it that night at a party given to the volunteers before their departure to the Seat of War. Her young heart fired with enthusiasm; she had tied the gay ribbon on her hair and braved the comments of the laughing circle. Captain Vernon alone had said nothing, but she fancied he saw it and thought her silly to make herself so conspicuous. When she went home from the party she missed the ribbon, and no searching in the morning could produce it. Now, here it was. Had John Vernon seen it loosening from her curls and caught it ere it fell? Was it possible the brilliant lawyer, the brave soldier, cared for her then, little Maggie Brent, only sixteen? Nonsense; probably he found it on the floor, not knowing to whom it belonged. She thought over the letters he had written her. Pshaw! they might as well have been written by her grandfather, for all the personal interest in her. Well, the ribbon was hers and she should take it, and, with a saucy nod of defiance at the chair and table, she tripped out of the room and across the gardens, home.



CHAPTER VI.

HERE another surprise awaited her. Mr. Brent proposed a journey to the White Hills. Tired and worn, he determined to leave business awhile and give himself some recreation. He proposed sending for Harry to join them, and starting the next week. The children were all well, the new seamstress would prove a capital housekeeper, and Mrs. Brent, with one or two misgivings, allowed herself to look forward with pleasure to one of the few vacations of her married and motherly life. As for Maggie, she was wild with delight; she sang and danced over all the wearisome preparations and packing; and a pleasing party they were, as they started off in the cars, Mr. and Mrs. Brent forming a sensible back ground to Harry's laughing raillery,—the high spirits, that even the long dusty ride in the cars could not tire.

But oh, for words to paint that lovely sail over Winnepesaukee Lake at sunset,—the mountains misty in the distance, like huge leviathans sporting in a sea of air,—the green islands rising up from the waters as if by magic,—the little boat winding its way in and out, almost touching the trees. Maggie thought it very beautiful, as she stood with hands clasped and lips parted, reverently drinking it in,—all unconscious that a tall, fine looking gentleman opposite, was watching her as intently as she watched the prospect. At last her brother's voice roused her, and, looking around, she saw him talking with a handsome stranger, whose blue eyes, straight nose and blond hair, bespoke pure Saxon descent. Her inquiring look was met by one so admiring, though respectful, that Maggie retreated and kept close to her father's side, not daring to look

again, though she wondered who he was and how Harry came to know him.

That evening, Harry and his sister were walking on the piazza of the Centre House.

"Who is that gentleman, Harry, you were talking with on the boat, and who looked at me so?"

"I don't know, Maggie, except that his name is Frank Lovell. He gave me his card, and he asked who you were, sis. I wish I could introduce him, but father will think I don't know him well enough—but I am sure he's a capital fellow."

Just then, Harry's new friend appeared at the door, and Harry was off to join him, leaving Maggie inclined to scold this new attraction that drew Harry away from her. The next day, as they were mounting the stage, fortunate to get seats on the outside, a strange hand helped Maggie; she felt, rather than saw, that it was Mr. Lovell. Once fairly started upon that ride to Conway, the mountains going with them all the way, a power outside of themselves, took away the stiffness and the strangeness, and made them all as friends. Perhaps the freemasonry there is in a stage coach,—perhaps nature, tossing her huge playthings up in her lap, speaks with subtle force, making one feel the nothingness of self, the brotherhood of man, the fatherhood of God,—whatever the cause, it seems to be true that conventionalities disappear, and nature rules, in a stage ride up the White Hills, with their exhilarating breezes. The conversation, beginning with Harry and Mr. Lovell, soon spread from one to another; the talk grew animated with repartee and gay sallies from the young, while the old forgot age and became young again, breathing the clear air, like the Elixir of Life. And so they sped on; by farm yards, shadowy in the slanting sunlight, where patient cows were pouring out their milky burdens; through woods, spicy with the "breath of the balsam pine;" past ghostly birches, up hill and down dale, till Maggie felt as if suspended in mid air, and clung to

Harry for support, as some sudden lurch of the unwieldy vehicle would throw her slightly from side to side. All nature was stilled, save the slow tinkling of the bells, the bleating of the sheep, the sleepy chirp of some little bird, until Maggie and Harry broke out with a gay College song. Mr. Lovell rolled in with a deep bass, while the whole party came in on the chorus, until they fairly woke the slumbering echoes. It is a singular fact, but as true as strange, that, meeting strangers of whom we know nothing, neither name, nor birth, nor life, suddenly some careless remark lets us into the secret of all, and we find that we have heard all about them, though the story was well nigh forgotten. So it was with Mr. Lovell. The chance mention of their mutual friend, George Griswold, recalled to Harry Brent all he had heard him say of his college chum, Frank Lovell. The young men gaily shook hands over this new tie between them. But, like a stony weight on Harry's head, sank the remembrance of the character his friend had given him of Frank Lovell,—the handsomest, the most fascinating, the most dissipated man of his class. Neither his brilliant talents, or his high scholarship, could save him from the slur cast on his name, after nights of wild debauchery.

"Who ever would think it?" said Harry, after telling the shocking story to Maggie; "there wasn't a nicer fellow around."

"Yes," said Maggie, "and he looks so refined and intellectual, and his dress is always so exquisitely neat; he seems a perfect gentleman, one who has entire command of himself. Oh dear! I can't understand how you men can make such brutes of yourselves. I really think, Harry, if they could only be made to see what *silly, drivelling fools* wine makes of them, they would be shamed out of it. I declare, Harry, if ever *you* disgrace your mother and sister in this way, I'll—"

"Well, what will you do?" said Harry, amused at her vehe-

mence. A little hand, raised quickly, came down with such stinging force on Harry's ear, it made him jump; and catching Maggie in his arms, he vowed he'd carry her through the hall and up the stairs, both thronged with people, unless she said she was *very* sorry, and promised she would never do it again. Plucky little Maggy would not say it until the last minute; then, as he put her down, giving his whiskers a sly tweak, she was off and out of his reach before Harry could do anything but groan.

And the days followed, one after another, filled with sight-seeing. Pictures of cascades and ravines, pools and basins, mountains and valleys, tumbled pell-mell in Maggie's memory. They ascended Mount Washington, and had the pleasure of seeing the clouds below them. It was all they saw. In vain the indefatigable guide pointed with one hand to the Atlantic Ocean, with the other to the adjoining cities.

"It's no use, old fellow," said Harry, "you might as well say, there rolls the Bay of Fundy, and there stands the man in the moon, there lies the Garden of Eden, and there stands the original deluge; might just as well be one as the other; can't see a thing, and don't believe there's anything there." But luckily, going up on the Crawford side, they had enjoyed magnificent views of the country, from the four hills they crossed, before the fogs and mists shut them in.

And all this time, Mr. Lovell had been their constant companion, through all the walks and drives, from early morn till dewy eve; through the lively house games of charades and tableaux, on the rainy days, he was the ruling spirit.

"Perhaps we can help him," reasoned Maggie, "and at least we keep him out of harm's way, and he can't hurt us."

Young and old felt his charm. Full of wit and humor, finely educated, a ready talker, so warm hearted, he felt and showed an interest in everybody. Few could resist Frank Lovell. If you were talking with him, he listened with close atten-

tion; if you were speaking of yourself, his eyes never left your face, and he drew you on with skillful questions, until you found yourself opening your whole heart and mind to this handsome stranger, who, for the time, seems unconscious there is another person in the world but yourself. Many people have the gift of talking to you; few have the *rare* gift of *listening* and *talking with* you. And to think all these powers of mind and heart were so governed by the senses! It was pitiful.

Never had Maggie felt so exhilarated. The mountain breezes made her feel as if walking on air; Mr. Lovell's society, the subtle flattery of his manner, excited her and made her think and talk as never before; never had she been so brilliant; she was conscious that when he came near, she always looked, and did and thought her best; conscious that no other had ever excited such power over her.

* * * * *

It was bright moonlight; all the amphitheatre in front of the Profile House was one floor of molten silver, save where the mountains threw down their jagged shadows. The whole party had been looking at an eagle's nest, trying, through a glass, to spy out the young eaglets. Frank Lovell drew Maggie's hand through his arm and turned off to walk on the piazza.

"Well, Miss Brent, you will leave them soon now. What do you think of the mountains? do you feel an affection for their highnesses?"

"No, indeed, Mr. Lovell, you will think me silly when I tell you I am half afraid of them. Why, when we came through the Notch, I actually shuddered, thinking those rocks would come together and crush me. I remembered all the stories of prisoners killed by their dungeon walls closing in; I hardly drew a long breath, until we drove out of their frowning shadows into the broad sunshine."

Mr. Lovell said nothing; only looked down admiringly at the pretty trembler, and Maggie talked on—

"I don't understand their dread fascination for me. I remember, long ago, when I read about the "Willey Slide," in my Goodrich's History, what a weird charm the story had, and how the mountains seemed alive. Great grim granites, as they are, they frighten me. Do you suppose it's because they are so big, while I am such a wee bit?"

"We do not measure spirit and substance in the same scales, Miss Maggie. It is their quiet strength, their resistless force, that impresses you, Miss Maggie; and why not? There is nothing so splendid in the whole world as strength, nothing so worth living for."

"Which kind, Mr. Lovell; moral, mental or physical?"

"Mental, Miss Maggie, the power of knowledge, and the power to use that knowledge; the power that rules people and circumstances, alike,—that moulds one's life as the smith bends the yielding iron, in the red hot fire of opportunity. Ah, yes, the strength of the intellect for me."

And Mr. Lovell's blue eyes flashed, and he drew up his tall figure. The unexpected turn of the conversation reminded Maggie of her intention to speak to their new friend of himself and the sad story of his dissipation. She could not help feeling that, if he only realized how dreadful it was, he would change, and give up that horrid life and turn away, himself disgusted.

"And is there nothing grand in moral strength? To me it is the most sublime of all. Age, disease destroy the physical; sin corrodes the mental; but the moral strength goes on through all eternity; braves all forces by virtue of the inexhaustible fountain of strength it draws from, even God himself. Your intellectual man may govern others, 'tis only your man of virtue who governs himself."

"Yes, yes, of course, Miss Maggie, a man must control himself,—that is self-evident."

"In what is so easy, Mr. Lovell, does your strong intellect serve you in the hour of temptation?"

Frank Lovell looked at Maggie in surprise. Unconsciously her voice had dropped, and trembled as she said those words.

"Excuse me, Mr. Lovell," she continued falteringly, "perhaps we do not know you well enough to say anything about it. But we all feel such an interest in you, that I thought I would,—I determined"—

And here, Maggie broke down entirely, confused by the earnest look he bent upon her, and frightened at her difficult undertaking.

"Miss Brent, Maggie, *dear* Maggie, don't offer any excuse, say anything you like to me; don't you know, haven't you seen, how much I think of *all* of your family. Maggie, have you seen how much I think of you? that I love you, ardently, devotedly, with my whole heart?"

Poor Maggie, bewildered, confounded,—she could only remember that he had talked to her in just this way in charades, and that Harry had called him an awful quiz;—he must be acting now, though so malapropos, perhaps to change the conversation. She would not let him laugh at her. Quick as thought, she drew her hand from his arm and, spreading her skirt in wavy folds, made him her deepest courtesy, and mockingly thanked him for the honor conferred on the family, but, indeed, she must decline, since she had vowed not to accept a single offer while going through the mountains; and really, she had received so many, she was quite overpowered.

Here, she drew a long breath of comical distress and looked up, expecting to see an appreciative smile, at her fun. But no, Mr. Lovell stood with folded arms, his lips sternly compressed.

"Miss Brent must, indeed, have received a great many

offers to be such an adept at refusing. She neither wastes words or feeling upon her victims."

Maggy started in dismay. Was she wrong, after all?

"Were you really in earnest, Mr. Lovell?" she stammered, "I thought you were acting,—talking for fun."

"It was very funny, certainly," answered the angry man, while his white teeth bit off the words savagely.

"Harry said you were a quiz, and I thought you had known me so little while, that"—

And Maggie paused to look up appealingly at his rigid face.

"That you did not think I would presume, Miss Brent?—pardon me, I will not annoy you for the future."

Tears stood in Maggie's eyes,—to be so harshly spoken to, so misunderstood. But, forcing them back with a strong will, she spoke with quiet dignity—

"I meant, Mr. Lovell, I didn't think you had known me long enough to feel so deeply interested,—but we will drop the subject; it seems we are both mistaken."

And she turned away to join the laughing group, who were arranging a ride for the coming morning. Mr. Lovell felt hot, irritated, provoked; with all his insight into character, he was baffled, he could not understand this simple green mountain flower,—now all sweetness, now all briers. He could not comprehend Maggie, he did not see what an utter absence of conceit was there. She enjoyed the consciousness of pleasing others, but she had no desire for admiration.

* * * * *

The next morning, Maggie went directly to her room from breakfast, meaning not to come down until the driving party were just ready to start; determined, if possible, to avoid an interview with Mr. Lovell. Harry came to her room with an open letter in his hand.

"I have just received this from Griswold, Maggie, and he repeats all he said before about Lovell, only he makes it

stronger. See what he writes: 'Indeed, Frank Lovell's habits are such, no pure minded woman could possibly be happy with him. I am distressed, Harry, to speak so harshly of one of us, but since you say you have such good reasons for wishing to know, I must be frank and tell you the truth.'"

Maggie laid her head on Harry's arm to hide the tears. Poor girl, she had dreamed a little. Then, he was so handsome, so fascinating, and he had also told her he loved her.

"Maggie, I feel so sorry, only I didn't once think of your loving each other. Now don't cry, and don't break your heart about him; you won't, dear little sis."

"No, indeed," said Maggie, lifting the wet eyes, "but, oh, Harry, isn't it hard?"

Reassured, Harry gave her a kiss and hurried off to join the party. Maggie waited a few minutes thinking life was very dark that sunny morning, then walked slowly down stairs. Alas for Maggie's wise intentions; there stood the spring wagons, *full*, and there stood Frank Lovell by the side of a patriarchal old chaise.

"The seats in the wagons are all taken, Miss Brent," said he, coming to meet her. "But I have procured this vehicle; will you trust yourself with me?" And he looked at her imploringly; at the same moment Harry came up, saying—

"Maggie, I have kept my seat for you, in the wagon, and I will drive with Frank, if he will take me."

Another pleading look from Lovell decided her; and declining Harry's offer, she allowed Frank Lovell to put her in the chaise. He looks as if he would like to say he is sorry, thought the girl. After a night's reflection, Mr. Lovell had concluded Maggie was not the heartless flirt he had thought, those first angry moments; but, as she said, she was simply mistaken.

The gay cavalcade proceeded, startling the quiet woods with happy voices. Not a word was said in the antiquated vehicle,

that brought up the rear, as Dobbin jogged gravely along. At last, Mr. Lovell turned his face to her, those blue eyes luminous with expression—

"I believe, Miss Brent, you were saying something to me, last evening when I interrupted you. Will you tell me now?"

Maggie started, her heart sank within her; she found it no easy task to speak to this gay Lothario of his faults and failings. However, she had no right to neglect this opportunity; she had hoped to do him some good, so, summoning all her courage, she began—

"Yes, Mr. Lovell, hearing something about you that troubles us, it seemed to me that you could not be conscious what a reputation you were making yourself. I felt, if you only would rouse yourself to see what a terrible end the life has you are leading, that you would realize your danger. It seems to me, that you would not voluntarily allow yourself to be so governed by your senses,—your *will*, your *intellect*, both paralyzed."

"Some kind friend has been telling you, perhaps, that I am a little wild, that I occasionally take a glass of wine with a friend."

Maggie tapped her foot impatiently.

"Will you tell me what is my reputation?"

"That you are the most dissipated man of your class; neither your talents nor scholarship can save you from that stain upon your manhood, that should be pure and above reproach."

A hot flash reddened Mr. Lovell's pale face. He looked half angrily at the young girl beside him, so brave in her singleness of purpose.

"Miss Maggie, the reports are exaggerated; I am not in any danger; I have perfect control over myself. I know just when to stop."

"Do you know there is no surer sign of weakness than this feeling of safety? Oh, Mr. Lovell, did your excesses of last

winter leave behind no sting, and no remorse, and no lessons? You are indeed blind, and you will not see yourself nor let others see for you. Can I say nothing to make you feel you must keep out of temptation? If only your mother were here to talk to you as I cannot."

"I have no mother, Maggie."

Maggie lifted her wistful eyes with a sweet sympathy.

"Then, if only for your own sake,—if only not to disappoint God, in the man he meant you to be,—be strong; turn your back on those terrible sins. Do not taste one drop of wine."

"That would be ridiculous, Miss Maggie. There's no harm in moderation."

"And you will go on that same dreadful way?"

"No, I promise you not to drink to excess."

Maggie shook her head, thoroughly discouraged, and for a time there was silence. Then, Mr. Lovell spoke, while those luminous eyes shone way down to their depths.

"Maggie, if I had been so happy as to gain your love, would this knowledge of me make any difference?"

Maggie's eyes drooped, but she did not blush; she paled under that intense gaze. Dear little Maggie, she had enjoyed being with him so much—but she could not marry a drunkard and libertine.

"Would it make any difference, Maggie?" repeated he, bending tenderly over her.

"Yes," said Maggie.

"You would give me up for that?"

"Yes."

"Is this forever, Maggie?"

"Forever," sighed Maggie, feeling so utterly weary, that the thought of ever going through this again made her heart sick, and she settled back heavily against the cushions.

The expressive movements, the sad look on that usually

joyous face, filled Frank Lovell with self-reproach. His conscience told him the interview did not redound much to his credit; and, putting aside all personal feeling, he exerted himself to entertain and amuse his companion the remainder of the drive, calling into play all his powers to bring back the smiles to her face. Perhaps, too,—for we are all human,—there mingled with the effort a desire to show her how much she was refusing. However that may be, he succeeded well, and soon, but for the tremor in her voice,—the sound of unshed tears,—Maggie Brent seemed as usual. As they neared the Profile House, Frank Lovell held out his hand—

“May I bid you good bye? I shall go away to-day. I hope to make myself more worthy of your friendship, before we meet again.”

And he kissed the little hand he had taken, as if it were the book, and he taking his oath. As for Maggie, she said nothing. She longed to go to her room and think. She did not regret what she had done; she only felt that it was a hard experience, and that it was a crying shame Frank Lovell was not the glorious creature God and nature intended him to be. That day was the last at the Profile House. Early the next morning, they started for home, bidding a long, lingering adieu to the mountains.



CHAPTER VII.

SETTLED quietly in the old routine of home, Maggie and her mother were busy taking those never ending stitches that a family of children necessarily require. Wrapt in thought, Maggie had kept unusually quiet. Once or twice, Mrs. Brent looked up from her work, wondering what occupied her so closely. At last, with sudden impulse, Maggie dropped her sewing.

“Mother, do you know I believe I shall be an old maid?”

“An old maid?” echoed Mrs. Brent, gazing at the young girl, whom each day was developing into a more beautiful womanhood, face and form alike.

“And pray what makes you say so, Maggie?”

“Well, mama, I have been thinking very hard, since we came home. You see, here I am nearly twenty-two years old; a good way out of my teens, you know,—and since I was sixteen. And, by the way, I think sixteen was very young for me to leave school.”

“I think so too, Maggie; but you remember you were not well that summer. I am resolved Agnes shall go much longer.”

“Well, mama,” resumed Maggie, “in that time, I have met beauty, goodness, intellect; and, mother,” (while the blushes came in spite of herself,) “I am afraid I have been in love with all three. I have had to give up my theories about first love and eternal constancy, for here I am, heart whole at last.”

“Are you sure of that, Maggie?” asked Mrs. Brent earnestly.

“Quite sure, mama; though I can’t help feeling sadly that

intellect should come in that guise. Now, it is n't at all likely I shall ever meet goodness, beauty and intellect combined; or, if I do, that said combination will ever fancy me. And I am sure my experience shows I shall not be satisfied with less;—~~so~~ I think I never shall be married. I think I never shall love again. I think God meant somebody for me, but I am afraid he has been killed in the war, or lost in some railroad accident. I don't mean to be unhappy about it, mama, I will fill my life with work. Every family needs an elder sister, a maiden aunt,—though I don't know, I am sure, why my life should be different from that of other girls. I am sure I could make somebody a good wife."

And the half sob in the trembling voice, told the watchful mother what a struggle there had been between principle and inclination, in that affair with fascinating Frank Lovell.

"Well, my child, I would not feel badly about it now. You are not so very old yet, and I am sure you could be happy, even as an old maid, at home with your mother. And now, love, since you are going to be so very useful, just step down into the kitchen and make one of your nice orange puddings for John Vernon. His mother says he is loosing his appetite."

Mrs. Brent smiled quietly as her daughter walked away. She had her own views for Maggie,—views which had been for a long time maturing, and which enlisted all her motherly interest.

The pudding sent at noon was productive, at night, of a little note and a big bunch of sweet Pea for Maggie.

True to her theory of constant occupation, Maggie was reading aloud to her mother, one morning, when the servant announced Mr. Vernon.

"I have hobbled over here, in spite of the doctors, Mrs. Brent. I shall be so happy if you will let me sit here, while you go on with your work,—and reading, too,"—he added, as Maggie closed the book she held. "Maggie, Agnes told me

you were reading Palfrey; and I thought if you only knew how long these summer days are for me, to sit and do nothing, you would willingly let me come and listen sometimes."

"Yes, indeed, Mr. Vernon, I should be delighted to amuse you."

"From pudding up to Palfrey," said he, smiling, while the grateful look in his dark eye showed how her earnestness pleased him.

As for Maggie, she was conscience stricken. She had vowed herself the champion of the suffering, and here was a soldier, wounded in her country's battles, patiently enduring the pain and ennui of a strong man struck down; her neighbor, beside, and she had almost forgotten his existence. Mentally, she registered a vow to devote herself to him. While thus resolving, Maggie was aiding her mother to wheel the couch opposite a pleasant window, where the bees hummed over the jassamines all day long. Mrs. Brent, with motherly care, helped the sick man dispose his tired limbs upon it. Then taking up her big basket of stockings, she turned to Maggie, saying,—

"We are ready now, my dear."

Spurred on by her resolve, Maggie heroically essayed to begin; though she found it strangely difficult to say the first word, with John Vernon lying there, watching her face with his kindly eyes. Desperately plunging, she commenced, and soon becoming interested in the history, went on without effort. Perhaps, had she raised her eyes and seen how happy and contented looked the sick man, girlish consciousness might have flushed the pink cheek and made the clear voice falter. But she did not look up, and the wounded soldier, as he leaned back against his pillows, the summer air blowing over him, heavy with the garden sweets, and bringing to him the music of her voice, feasted hungry eyes upon her beauty, feeling well paid for all he had suffered,—only wishing this happiness

might last forever. But soon, the bells were ringing out the twelve o'clock noon-day, and the children, Bertie and Agnes, and five-year old Jamie, came running in from school.

"The dead past must give way to the living present," smiled Maggie, as baby Jamie climbed into her lap, and she pushed back the shining rings of hair from his flushed face. Bertie and Agnes were both at the soldier's side, in a minute. They were old friends. Sent over to him, at first, with messages, they had soon learned to go for themselves, and had amused him mightily with their nonsense, while he had won their hearts by letting them ride his prancing white horse that the servant daily exercised before his window, while he lay there watching and wondering if he should ever ride him again.

The readings, begun so pleasantly for John Vernon, were kept up through the summer days. Sometimes, the interest wandered from settlements made by Puritans or Pilgrims, and Maggie would draw on the young General to tell them of Sheridan's dashing raids, or listen with paling cheek, when he told of hardly fought battles around Richmond, the death throes of the great struggle; or she would ask him about Sheridan himself, so dearly worshipped by his men,—until John Vernon found getting well not quite so wearisome as he anticipated.

And Mrs. Brent sat quietly by, contented. What better could she ask for her cherished daughter than a thoroughly disciplined man. One who had learned in life's battles, as well as in his country's, to implicitly obey his commander, and to dare all for the right. As for Maggie, she lived on,—thoroughly happy,—but asking no questions of herself. The whole soul and heart expanded and grew from converse with his large nature. Unknowingly, she sunned herself in his love. Yet, when a sly look from Harry called up the hot blood to her cheek, she quickly repelled the insinuation; for his manner was very unlike honest Will's wholesale admiration, and his words, fully charged with interest though they were, never expressed the flattery of fascinating Frank Lovell. No;

John Vernon had never told his love. Why should he? He had learned patience in a good school, and had no fancy for unripe fruit, but waited rather for time to mellow and perfect it. In the mean time, he surrounded Maggie with the tenderest care. He permeated her whole life with his wealth of love. Her reading, her studies, her very thinking, he knew all about. For was not her life dearer to him than his own? He gave her his strength and experience and knowledge. And he gave her what so many women live without,—entire sympathy in her religious life; for was not he a true soldier of the Cross, with God for his General, and Christ commanding his army corps? Well might the young girl rejoice; for while it is true, many a mother makes a Maggie Brent, one seldom meets a man like John Vernon. And why is it? Do mothers, living over their own lives in their girls, fail to understand the manly nature in their boys; while the fathers, who should find here their true work, are too much occupied in their business and their clubs, to attend to their sons—so, shirking the responsibility, throw the unequal burden on their wives?

Plain homespun Mr. and Mrs. Vernon, had at least succeeded in this,—that they joined together in bringing up their boys; and each did their part; and for the rest, John Vernon made himself, and was a true, whole-souled man, not a one-idea fragment. I don't mean by this that he was vouchsafed any special gifts of perfection, but that where he had faults he tried to cure them, where he had weaknesses he tried to overcome them. He did not sin in the same groove all the days of his life, nor blindly stumble against the same obstacles; but by daily praying and daily striving, became what any man can be, what every man should be, the perfection of himself.

Mrs. Vernon, happy and grateful for her son's recovery, issued notes for a large party in his honor;—only begging Maggie and her mother to come over early and help her receive, for the quiet lady felt all her courage going. Kindly pitying her fears, Mrs. Brent and Maggie hurried over and

were there before any of the guests had assembled, leaving Harry and Mr. Brent to follow at their leisure.

As they left the dressing room, John Vernon opened the door of his room opposite, saying—

“Will you come in a moment to see some trophies sent me from the battle fields, by one of my men?”

While Mrs. Brent was examining them, John turned to Maggie.

“Do you know I am suffering from a robbery deliberately committed on these premises? While I was away, some one entered this room and burglariously abstracted something. In my capacity as Justice of the Peace, I am seriously thinking of arresting somebody.” And he looked very meaningly at Maggie.

“Indeed, Mr. Vernon, it seems to me it was you did the stealing, in the first place,” said Maggie, stoutly.

“Ah, Maggie, then it was you who took my blue ribbon. I wasn’t quite sure, before.”

And he laid his hand on her fair hair and, lifting up her chin, looked down the blue eyes with a gaze half quizzical, half tender. Foolish little Maggie! she had meant to tease him about that ribbon, and he had found her out so soon. What a goose she was, to be sure. Mrs. Brent spoke from the table about some engravings, and, as he moved to answer, Maggie took flight. The touch of his hand, the eager look in his eye, frightened her. It made her heart flutter like a bird’s; and when John Vernon turned back, there was no Maggie there. She never stopped until she found herself safe by Mrs. Vernon’s capacious skirts.

“Oh, ’tis you, my dear. How do you do? It is so very kind for you and your mama to come early; and how pretty you look in your new dress. There will be plenty besides me to say so, before the evening is over.” And she tapped the young girl’s cheek.

Lovely, indeed, she looked in her white lace dress, while the

coral trimmings gave a witching charm to the whole, in contrast with her fair hair and blue eyes.

Maggie took Will Vernon’s offered arm, and they strolled down the long parlor, now rapidly filling with guests. The young soldier was the hero of the hour, and stood beside his mother, receiving congratulations. He knew here would be his place the most of the evening. But still, he hoped, once in a while, to catch a smile from Maggie, or a sympathizing look. But no, try as he might, she would not see him. Her head would turn away, the eyes look modestly down. She danced, she talked, she laughed. She was surrounded, as usual, with a bevy of belles and beaux; but she was radiantly unconscious of his presence, only the avoidance was too entire to be natural. How he longed to break away from the talking crowd, and, holding her fast, look down her blue eyes, until he made her blush. His patience barely lasted until released from doing the honors of the evening, when he hastened to her to claim his promised dance. Maggie, too, had begun to think the evening long, without him, and gave him a sly look of welcome, while he could feel the little hand flutter in his as he led her to the dance.

“You haven’t given me a look or a smile, this whole evening,” said he.

“You shouldn’t accuse people of stealing, then,” replied Maggie, triumphantly.

“That’s it, is it?” thought the lawyer, beginning to have a faint glimmer into that harp of a thousand strings, a woman’s heart. Not much chance did they find to talk, in that dance, and soon he assigned her to another partner, knowing he should have her to himself, going home. The heart of the young man yearned toward her. The calm friendship of the last few months seemed intolerable. He must be sure that she loved him, that she would be his wife.

People at length began to make their adieux, and, among

the rest, the Brents. As they came down to the door, Mr. Vernon, senior, stood in the hall.

"Why Maggie, my dear, do you know what a frosty November night it is? Are you dressed warmly enough?"

And he gazed rather contemptuously at the cold, white fabric of her opera cloak. Before Maggie could reply, John Vernon had thrown around her his blue military cloak, and held it there, too, with a force she could as easily resist as a Polar bear's hug. Before she well knew what she was about, he hurried her off the steps, and out from the glare of the lighted house.

"Well, John Vernon, I hope you are satisfied now. You have covered up my pretty cloak I was sewing all the week to wear here, to-night," said Maggie, pouting, while she pushed the encircling arm. John only took the aggressive hand in his, and bending over her, said—

"Pardon me, Maggie, I only feared you might be cold; and now and forever I would shield you from every wind that blows. Oh, Maggie, if only you will trust yourself with me, and let my love protect you! Speak to me, Maggie, if 'tis only one word, to tell me you love me."

But Maggie could not speak. Only the little hand ceased fluttering in his, and the fair head rested a moment on his arm, and John Vernon felt that he was answered, that his heart's desire was gained.

"My own, all my own," he whispered, as the voices of the rest of the party warned them they were no longer alone. As they parted at the door,—

"I will see you in the morning, Maggie," said he, tenderly, unwrapping her from his blue cloak.

Then, seizing Mrs. Brent's hand, he gave it a hearty grasp, which told worlds of meaning to her motherly heart.

Such a dreamy, happy night for Maggie. She could not sleep. She could only fold her arms over her heart, and lie there like some fair saint in perfect content.

In the morning, as she was standing before her glass, dressing for him, in her white dress and blue ribbons, Betty came in with a note Mr. Vernon's servant left. Maggie read:—

"My dear Maggie:—I shall not see you, this morning, as I must go away, with one of my clients, for the day. It will go hard with me to keep your face out of my work; and I shall look forward impatiently to the evening, when I hope you will meet me with a bright smile of welcome. Leaving you in God's love, which alone is greater than mine, I am yours, forever.

JOHN VERNON."

The tardy sun at last set; and the young lawyer, by force of will, had kept his mind fixed on the tedious details of his case, and felt he had earned his reward. Meeting Harry on the piazza, he entered with him, and caught a happy blush of surprise from Maggie. Harry soon left them alone. Knowing fellow, Harry, for was he not going now to see his own lady-love, sweet Jennie Gray? Hour after hour passed, and still they sat there, talking of the past, the present, the future. There was enough to say, even without those pauses of delicious content.

"I wish, Maggie, that you had never loved any one else. I can't bear that you should waste a moment's feeling on those others. I have waited a long time for you, darling. And sometimes I think it is my strong love that attracts you, not myself; and that you do not love me as I know you can love."

"Do you think so, John?" said she, wonderingly.

She had thought he knew every feeling of her heart. Then looking up, she started to see his pained look, at her hesitation. Impulsively, she drew from his arm, and, standing before him, whispered—

"Shut up your eyes a moment, John."

Then, as the strong face lifted itself up, the girl hurriedly kissed the broad forehead, the loving lips, the bearded cheek.

"Do you believe me now, John?"—as flushed and fright-

ened, she threw herself on the corner of the sofa, trying, with little hands, to hide the hot cheeks, the burning face.

"Believe you, Maggie?"—

And, sending back the tumultuous feelings those kisses had awakened, John Vernon rose up, and, taking her hand, bowed reverently over it, as he vowed with deep and earnest voice, as God would let him, to love her, to carry her ever on his heart, through life unto death. And not more solemn to him was their marriage vow, than this.

Mr. and Mrs. Brent willingly gave their consent to the engagement, for it was the man of their choice.

And now, we all know whom Maggie will marry. Not handsome Rush Howard, the shallow trifler; not good natured Will Vernon, the unsuitable; not fascinating Frank Lovell, the roué; but John Vernon, the full grown man.

I am conscious it is very old fashioned, to end a story after this wise—"And they were married, and lived happily forever after;" that, in this progressive nineteenth century, the most of the stories begin after marriage; that the veil our ancestors tenderly dropped over the married life, has been rudely rent in twain, showing discords and jealousies, loves and hates, coldness and indifference, that afford novel writers full play for all their powers.

This is a significant fact, whether we regard these disquisitions upon matrimony as simply a breaking of delusions, or a change in the life itself. It is possible that the growing world, understanding humanity better, demands real pictures of life, and will not be satisfied with illusions, no matter how lovely. Letting these remarks carry their own truth, I still claim that marriage is the Eden of life, where the only thorns are the faults and frailties of the wedded pair. Let each stalwart Adam, each gentle Eve, but be good and true, and Paradise again blooms on earth, since God himself made marriage, and made it perfect.