

A WILD ORCHID.

BY HÉLÈNE E. F. POTTS.

"There may be heaven—there must be hell ;
Meantime this is our earth here—Well !"

CHAPTER I.

THE READING OF THE FORTUNE.



IT was only a few moments ago that she had come very definitely into view. O'Donnahue, powdered white from head to foot by recent contact with divers bags of flour, leaned up against the siding of the big mill door to cool himself, for the heat was great, and to rest awhile ; and saw her toiling up the railway track, carrying two something—or—other, that had a pale pink flush on the top, discernible even at a distance. "What in thunder has the girl got?" was his mental ejaculation. O'Donnahue's capacity for expletives was a constant source of astonishment to his wife.

The girl made straight for the mill with her burdens as soon as her eye lighted on O'Donnahue, and, when she got to the foot of the inclined platform where the truck is trundled up and down, she set down two patent pails and said :

"Lady's slippers."

O'Donnahue came down the platform and went into a rapture.

"How magnificent! Where d'you get them? How beautiful! Wild orchids!" For he had a small notion of botany.

They were beautiful indeed ; and as O'Donnahue turned them over and over, he saw that there were yellow ones, as well as pink, and magenta ones, and even one or two purple-black ones, which kind are very rare, so he said, again looking at the girl somewhat attentively :

"Where did you get them?"

"Over there where I live," she answered.

"Where's that?" continued O'Donnahue, looking down again at the flowers.

"Over there on the mash (marsh) near the Mus'rats?"

"Are you a Muskrat?" asked O'Donnahue.

"Yep," said the girl ; and, as O'Donnahue scanned her face, she dropped her eyes. She looked sad, he thought, and her eyes were swollen as if she had been weeping heavily ; so he said kindly, for he had a big heart :

"What's the matter with you?"

"Nothin'" said the girl, turning her head away. O'Donnahue felt his trousers' pocket and brought out four quarters.

"Here's a dollar for your orchids, and I'll take all you can bring me."

"They'll soon be done," said the girl as she took the money. Her face did not change its stolid sadness ; she was not to be affected by mercenary considerations it seemed.

"Kin I leave me pails till I come back? I'm goin' up to the Dorf."

"Yes," said O'Donnahue, and called to a boy to fetch a tub to put the orchids in.

The girl turned, and walked towards the Dorf, which swells gently up from the marsh.

O'Donnahue looked after her for a minute, then laughed and said : "Guess she's suffering from the 'distressing malady of being seventeen.'" Just lately he had been reading a famous essay, and it was on his mind.

The girl turned into the first grocery shop. She bought a quarter of a pound of tea, a dozen bananas and two small boxes of strawberries, for it was the month of June.

When she came out with her purchases, she retraced her steps till she came to a side street which leads to the French Canadian quarter. Up to the top of this street she went, and knocked at the door of a house there, the last of a row of similar houses—all wooden, standing on cedar posts in the midst of little vegetable gardens.