

But this was not the usual day for Chloe's letter, so they felt a little anxious as the envelope was torn open.

"I hope nothing is wrong, Sabrina?" asked Miss Elizabeth. She would not have dreamed of looking over her sister's shoulder to ascertain for herself.

"No; nothing is wrong, Elizabeth; but the letter contains some important news," answered Miss Sabrina, handing the letter to her sister.

The news was that M. Cervay had been urgently requested by his father, who lived in Chicago, and was falling in health, to pay him a long visit as soon as his present work should be at an end.

"Eugene will see the completion of his work here next week," wrote Chloe, "and we shall then start for Chicago. Work is scarce here; and my husband thinks of settling in the United States, probably near his father. But, meanwhile, we should like our one child, Bien Aimee, who is about nineteen, to have a quiet house. She is not very strong, and the unsettled life we shall lead for a time would be very bad for any girl. Dear sisters, you can guess what I am about to ask you. Will you take our child till we are settled in a home of our own? All arrangements shall be made. While I write, a telegram has come to hasten our visit, as my father-in-law is growing rapidly worse. Counting on your ready consent, we shall put Aimee under the escort of a friend who is also coming to England, and she will be with you, all being well, on the evening of next Friday."

Then followed many inunctions to take care of "our dear child, our Bien Aimee," and to teach her the housewifely gifts that Chloe knew her sisters possessed.

When Miss Elizabeth had finished reading the letter, she drew a long breath.

"I am glad Chloe has such confidence in our love for her," said Miss Sabrina with moist eyes. "I shall write her at once to say how more than glad we shall be to have her child. She will brighten us up, quiet old maids that we are."

"We will give her the front bedroom, Sabrina, and I will move into the little one over the kitchen," said Miss Elizabeth, ever intent on kindly deeds.

But her sister opposed her with quiet determination. "I shall sleep in the back room, Elizabeth. You know, my dear, how liable you are to take cold; and there is a most trying draught from that chimney."

The intervening days—it was then Sunday—were spent in removing Miss Sabrina's belongings and making the guest's room as pretty as possible, Miss Elizabeth denuding her own room of many of its quaint ornaments that Bien Aimee might have everything bright around her.

On the Friday morning, Miss Elizabeth went down into the village to order supplies for the week-end, and as she came up the hill carrying a basket of fresh brown eggs, she met Dr. Meadows coming out of the chemist's shop. He accosted her with a friendly greeting. The hand that lay in his for a moment trembled, and the basket nearly fell; but remembering Sabrina's inunctions, Miss Elizabeth drew her slight form up with wounded pride and resolved to treat Dr. Meadows very coldly.

"Shall I carry your basket for you, Miss Elizabeth?" he asked, bending down to catch a glimpse of her averted face.

"Thanks, Dr. Meadows; but I prefer to carry it myself."

For a few moments silence ensued; and Dr. Meadows stopped at the gate of his own house, and determined to make one more attempt to melt the little lady's icy tones. "May I walk up with you, Elizabeth?" he asked in tones of reproachful tenderness and respect.

Wounded by what she was forced to believe his meaningless sentimentalism, Miss Elizabeth looked straight into Dr. Meadows' eyes and said coldly: "No; I thank you—I prefer to walk by myself."

With a low bow, the Doctor turned in at his gate; and Miss Elizabeth, with sore and wounded heart, toiled up the hill alone—only prevented from bursting into tears by the grim satisfaction of having done her duty.

About eight o'clock that evening the village omnibus drew up at the back gate of Sunnybank Cottage, and a slight tall girl, with pale tear-stained cheeks, alighted, and ran into the arms so kindly held out to greet her. She suffered herself to be led into the cool drawing-room and laid on the couch by the open window.

"Poor tired child!" said Miss Sabrina, with unwonted tenderness, smoothing the girl's dark hair as she lay and cried for very weariness. "But cheer up, my dear. Here is your aunt Elizabeth bringing you some sweet cakes of her own baking and a glass of new milk. Try to eat, and then you shall go to bed.—To-morrow you will wake up quite refreshed and happy."

Thus urged, Aimee dried her eyes, and slipping her arm round her aunt's neck, kissed her on both cheeks in her impulsive foreign way.

"You are a good kind aunt.—Aunt Sabrina, is it not?" she asked in broken English.—"And you are Aunt Elizabeth? But I shall call you Tante Elise; it is prettier, do you not think?" she added, turning to Miss Elizabeth.

"Call me what you like, dear, if you will only eat what I have brought you. To-morrow, we will hear all about your mother and father," said her aunt, stooping to kiss the cheek held up to her.

"Ah, you are so kind, so kind;" and the tired girl fell to crying again, touched by the tenderness of the two gentle ladies.

"Come, my dear," said Miss Sabrina when Aimee had been prevailed upon to drink the milk and nibble a morsel of cake, "I am going to put you to bed without asking your leave."

Nothing loth, Aimee followed her aunt upstairs, and was soon tucked up in her well-combed bed, where she slept the dreamless sleep of wearied youth, and woke the next morning to see a yellow ray of sunshine slanting in through the white blind.

"Ah, you look better to-day, my dear," Miss Sabrina said as Aimee came to breakfast-time with cheeks rosy from a walk round the garden and eyes bright after a long sleep.

"Oh yes, ma tante. I do not mean to be a damp blanket—I think you say," she answered gaily; "and I may explore these lovely woods behind the house, and learn to bake these sweet cakes—may I not? And ah, but there will be a thousand things to do; and you must hear all about la belle France."

A few days passed full of delightful novelty to Aimee; but Miss Sabrina noticed that her sister's cheeks were growing paler, and was not deceived by her assumed cheerfulness.

"Elizabeth," she said one evening, after Aimee had gone to bed, tired from a long ramble in the woods, "I have been thinking that this would be a very good opportunity to pay your long-promised visit to Mrs. Carruthers"—naming an old friend of Miss Elizabeth's who had recently become a widow. "You see, I shall have Aimee to take care of me; and I think the change will do you good."

There was no escaping the scrutiny of those all-seeing gray eyes, so Miss Elizabeth quietly dropped her mask and assented.

Accordingly, the next day she packed her little trunk, and steamed away submissively to her friend's house at Carlisle, a distance of about twenty miles.

On the evening after her departure, Aimee was watering the grass in front of the porch, when a low cry reached her ears through the open door that led into the lobby. Running into the house, she found her aunt sitting on a chair in the hall evidently in great pain.

"Helas!" she cried, "what is it you have done, ma tante?"

"I fear I have sprained my ankle, dear," answered Miss Sabrina, her face all drawn with pain. "Will you send Bridget for Dr. Meadows? I cannot move till he has done something for me. I stupidly caught my foot in the stair carpet where those nails have come out."

In about a quarter of an hour Dr. Meadows came hurrying in, and, with Bridget's assistance, carried Miss Sabrina up to her bedroom, after first bandaging the injured ankle.

Leaving her with strict inunctions not to move, he went down-stairs, followed by Aimee, who introduced herself in her pretty foreign way: "Vous savez—ah, you know, monsieur—that Tante Elise is away—Mees Elizabeth, I should say. It would be better—would it not?—to keep the news of this little accident from her, in order not to spoil her holiday?"

"Is Miss Elizabeth away?" asked the doctor rather abruptly, knitting his heavy brows.

"Ah yes. She was not looking as she ought. Her cheeks were pale; so ma tante sent her to get a little change."

"I am sorry to hear she is not well," said Dr. Meadows, as he stood with his hand upon the half-open door—"Well, you will not allow your aunt to get out of bed, Miss Cervay. I will call in the morning. Good-evening to you."

"How nice Monsieur le Docteur is," said Miss Sabrina with some constraint. "But we have been fortunate enough not to require his professional services very often."

"He is married, n'est-ce pas?"

"No; he is a widower;" and the subject dropped.

A week or two passed, and the doctor called every day. He was amused by Aimee's impulsive ways, and enjoyed listening to

her lively chatter. Soon she became quite at home with him, and told him about her father and mother, and "la belle France;" for he was not a busy man now, and would stroll round the garden with her after seeing his patient, and draw out her childish confidences, till her affectionate nature, together with the instinct that made her trust him so completely, soon caused her to regard him as an old friend—almost as a temporary father.

Soon Miss Sabrina was allowed to come downstairs for a few hours every day, and from the drawing-room window where she lay on the couch she watched the middle-aged man and the young girl take their habitual stroll together, and gradually the idea grew in her mind that Dr. Meadows was seeking a bride in earnest—the niece, and not the aunt.

The night before Miss Elizabeth's return, Aimee was talking to the doctor of her younger aunt. He had been drinking tea with them in honour of Miss Sabrina's first walk round the garden. "I should say, mon ami," she said reflectively, "if Tante Elise were younger, that she had 'la grande passion.' For see, when a girl in France has it, she grows pale; she seems not to hear you when you speak to her; and then her laugh sounds strange and harsh. So it is with Tante Elise; and are not English and French alike in that? But thee, alas! I fear she is too old for la grande passion."

"Too old!" said the Doctor indignantly, adding involuntarily: "I am not too old."

Something in his voice caught the girl's attention. She looked up curiously at him, and he, foolish ancient lover, blushed like a girl beneath her inquiring eyes. "Ah!" she cried archly, "you—my mock-papa—are you in love? Why, of course," she cried again, clapping her hands in childish delight at her own quick perception. "You are in love with Tante Elise. Why did I not guess before?" Then, noticing that his face was very grave, her mood changed at once, and raising his hand to her lips, she kissed it impulsively. "Ah, I am so sorry," she said apologetically. "I should not have said it. I will not be rude again;" and with a hasty "Good-bye" she turned and ran back into the house.

Miss Sabrina had been watching the little scene, and never doubted that Dr. Meadows would now ask for Aimee hand at the earliest opportunity.

"I shall refer him to her parents, of course," she thought; "yet I am sure they could not but approve. I knew he would choose a young bride. What a good thing I warned Elizabeth in time. I shall tell her first thing when she comes home; and meanwhile I will not mention the subject to Aimee."

The next day Miss Elizabeth returned, looking a shade fresher for her change; and for a long time that evening the sisters were closeted in Miss Sabrina's bedroom. At the end of that time Miss Elizabeth emerged very white and drawn, and she knelt long into the silent watches of the night, praying for the spirit of unselfishness, which should make her rejoice in her niece's good fortune.

When Dr. Meadows left Aimee at the gate, he swore inwardly at having betrayed himself; but when his wrath had cooled a little, he thought of her words, and soon the manliness within him began to cry out against the timidity and self-depreciation that had held him back from making a straightforward appeal to Miss Elizabeth's feelings. Then and there he decided once more to "screw his courage to the sticking-point," and "We'll not fail" he said to himself as he stood on the doorstep; and he pulled the bell so vigorously that the servant came running to the door in dishevelled alarm.

Accordingly, the morning after Miss Elizabeth's return he donned a fine white waistcoat, buttoned up his frock-coat with agile fingers, and sallied forth to place his happiness in the scale of fickle fortune. He was fortunate enough to find Miss Elizabeth alone in the drawing-room arranging flowers in a gown of Quaker gray. Determined at once to broach the subject upper-most in his mind, he began—after a little humming and hawing—in this wise: "Miss Elizabeth, I have come to speak to you on a subject which concerns my happiness very deeply."

So it was true; Sabrina had been quite right!

"Yes, Dr. Meadows," said Miss Elizabeth nervously, pulling a pany to pieces as she spoke. "I know—that is—we are quite prepared—I will go and fetch Sabrina."

"Fetch Sabrina" echoed the good Doctor in astonishment at this novel way of receiving a speech so obvious in its meaning.

Miss Elizabeth became more and more flurried. "Well—I will fetch Aimee," she said tremulously. Then, catching the Doctor's eye, and reading a strange tale therein, she added wildly, in her confusion, "or both of them."

Suddenly it all flashed upon the Doctor. He moved to where Miss Elizabeth was standing, and took both her hands in his. "Is it possible, Elizabeth, that you can mistake what I mean?"

"Oh, please don't talk like that, Dr. Meadows," sobbed Miss Elizabeth in dismay. "I promised Sabrina that I would not let you lead me into foo-oo-ish sentimentalism."

"What do you mean, Elizabeth? I love you. I want you to be my wife. It is 'Yes,' is it not?" he asked tenderly, for Miss Elizabeth had unconsciously laid her head on his shoulder and was sobbing as if her heart would break.

"But Sabrina said you were only a bee-ee," she murmured piteously through her tears, "and that you—flew about—sucking a little honey—here and there; and that if you ever were to settle, it would be on some gorgeous flower; and I am only a comparatively p-poor old maid." She had learned her lesson well.

At that moment Dr. Meadows hated Miss Sabrina with a vindictive hatred. But he controlled it, and gently putting his arm around Miss Elizabeth, he drew her to him and tried to soothe her agitation. "I don't think I am a bee," he said, hardly able to keep from smiling at the apt comparison: "and if I am, why, my dear, I have got a cosy hive, and you shall come and be my queen."

Then he laughed at his foolish words, and Miss Elizabeth laughed too, and was just wiping her eyes, when Sabrina opened the drawing-room door. She stood still for a few moments, looking with bewildered eyes at the "tableau vivant."

"Miss Sabrina," said Dr. Meadows, stepping forward, "I have asked your sister to become my wife, and she has done me the honour to accept my offer. I cannot ask for your sanction, but I should like your blessing and continued friendship. Believe me, I am not the light rover you imagine. I will take care of Elizabeth, and you shall not feel that you have lost a sister; but only, by God's help, that you have gained a brother." And stooping, he raised Miss Sabrina's hand to his lips.

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