



The Family Circle.

"Home, Sweet Home."

My Sister Margerie.

We were all sitting at tea in uncle Robert's grim, stiff, dingy room—a room so gloomy, so completely in accordance with the thoughts and ideas of its gray, stern owner, that the very sun never ventured to send a stray gleam to brighten the prim, old mahogany furniture, and the fire never burnt cheerfully, but seemed to us to smoulder in a deprecating manner, as if it was not the correct thing to blaze or crackle.

I dare say that this was all fancy, and that uncle Robert's own manner made his house look unlike home, but years ago those were the opinions we formed, that the fires were afraid to burn and the sun to shine in uncle Robert's presence and impressions formed in childhood are hard to be shaken off.

Well, we were sitting at tea by daylight on an early spring evening, our three pairs of eyes turned on uncle Robert's face—Margerie's half defiant, Blanche's timid and scared, like a frightened child, and mine—well, I think I was frightened too.

But it was on Margerie that uncle Robert's stern eyes were bent during the awful silence that followed Margerie's bold request for permission to accept an invitation to a military ball—a farewell dance given by the regiment stationed in the town.

Margerie sat straight up, and looked uncle Robert steadily in the eyes, without flinching. She was very pretty, with a proud, aristocratic beauty, and she was looking her best, though flushed and excited, her head thrown back, showing her white neck, her hands in her lap, her attitude one of quiet dignity and unstudied grace.

I have seen many pretty faces, but never one equal to that of my own sister Margerie. The broad white brow, with the waving brown hair brushed back, the steady dark eyes, deep true blue, shining like stars, every feature beautifully chiseled and the mouth sweet and smiling—the whole combined made a bright, lovable face, with the red and white blended in the fair cheeks. And yet uncle Robert sat unmoved by that pretty, wilful face whose eyes were so like and yet so unlike his own. Steadily he looked at her, and then he spoke—

"I forbid it—not another word."

"Please, oh, please, uncle Robert—just this once!"

It was Blanche who spoke—little timid Blanche, who had never crossed uncle Robert's will in her life—fair-haired, baby-faced Blanche. It must have been a strong reason that made her speak.

Uncle Robert guessed the truth; he knew our inmost thoughts better than we imagined. With a look he cowed Blanche.

"Why do you wish to go to this ball, Blanche?" asked the hard voice.

"Because—because—" she faltered.

"Uncle Robert stooped forward.

"Speak the truth, Blanche; say you want to meet that young Dale. And I say you shall not!" And to emphasize his words he brought his hand down with a thump on the table.

Blanche lowered her fair, sensitive face from his gaze, to hide the fast-falling tears. I felt my cheeks burn; it was hard. Uncle Robert turned to me.

"And do you wish to go to this ball too, Jean?"

"No, Uncle," I replied quietly.

He smiled a peculiar smile that made my face one burning blush before the stinging words came.

"No—you would hardly meet anyone to interest you there." I knew his meaning, but kept back the bitter words that rose to my lips. Margerie's face was flaming with indignation. When uncle Robert at last left the room, she sprang up and exclaimed passionately—

"It's a shame—a crying shame! But I will go in spite of him!"

Blanche looked up, tears on her cheeks.

"Perhaps I shall never see Charley again"—with a little catch in her voice.

Poor, pretty little Blanche! Charley Dale the gay young soldier, had stolen her heart; and uncle Robert, like grim fate, had stepped in and forbidden Charley the house, and scolded Blanche till she cried herself ill.

It was hard, there was no objection to the match. Charley Dale was rich enough to afford the luxury of a wife if he liked. But he was a soldier. Uncle Robert hated soldiers; that was enough. He was our guardian with absolute authority over us and could do what he liked; and in those days I think we all hated him. This is plain speaking, but we did. Margerie's fiery spirit had broken out at last.

"I mean to marry whom I like," she said defiantly, drawing herself up. "Blanche and Jean, why don't you defy him? How dare he choose our future? He shall never have a word to say about mine—my mind has been long made up about that."

"It is easy to talk, Margerie," I said. "What can I do?"

"Do? Marry Philip Hillard in spite of him? That is what I should do. If I liked a man, I would risk and dare anything for his sake."

I made no answer. Margerie's idea was all very well in theory, but in practice even Margerie herself had never dared to act in direct opposition to uncle Robert. I had a story and a romance of my own, which may be told in a very short sentence—"For lack of gold we parted." Philip Hillard my brave, loving Philip was only a curate, and uncle Robert hated clergymen as much as he hated soldiers; and when Philip and I had learned to love each other a day came when Philip Hillard left uncle Robert's study white and stern, the door banged, and the romance of my life was over.

"When I have a home of my own, may I ask her?" Philip had inquired; and uncle Robert had replied with a bitter smile—

"When you have, yes; but in the meantime, I forbid any communication whatsoever between you."

"May I see her again?"

"No, and give me your word now, as a gentleman and a clergyman, that you will never address a word to my ward, or communicate with her in any way, till I give you permission."

And, though Philip Hillard knew that that permission, if ever it did come, would be long in coming, he kept his promise. He was the soul of honor, and though we passed each other almost daily, he never spoke as much as a word. Our eyes would meet sometimes, and perhaps our looks conveyed what our lips could not. That was a year past; and in my heart I vowed to be true to Philip, as I knew he would be to me. I think uncle Robert imagined I had forgotten him—him one day when Philip passed, and I, knowing uncle Robert's keen eyes were searching for some sign of emotion, schooled my face so that not even the tell-tell crimson died my cheeks.

"You are a sensible child Jean," said uncle Robert, smiling.

Sensible! If he had only known how my heart was breaking for a word from Philip Hillard's lips? But what was the good in saying anything? I only bowed my head and hid my secret from his gaze. But this is a digression from that particular evening.

Blanche cried a long time, and Margerie and I cried a little for sympathy; and we watched the darkness gather over the town, and listened for the sweet notes of the bugle sounding tattoo. Blanche, looking out into the darkness, wept afresh for, before many suns had risen and set, her soldier hero would be marching away, and she would be listening to the bugle of another regiment. Poor little broken-hearted Blanche! She looked up at last and wailed out despairingly—

"What will my life be worth now? I wish I could die."

"Hush, Blanche," I said quickly—"don't say that."

But Blanche was too miserable to weigh her words; she sank back in the window, and all three again became silent, each thinking her own thoughts.

It was a very dreary evening, and we were not sorry when it was time for bed. Blanche and I slept together. Margerie came into our room for a chat, it was a lovely moonlight night the air was very fresh and cool. Margerie opened the window, and looked out over the town. Up behind the house-tops were dark masses of trees, with Delaware Castle in the midst, and all its lights twinkling in the windows. Margerie sighed as she shut the window.

"I wish I was as rich as the owner of the Delaware Castle," she said.

"What good can riches do after all?" inquired Blanche, thinking no doubt of Charley Dale, with his fifteen hundred a year.

"Good?" cried Margerie, tossing her head with a disdainful gesture. "They would make uncle Robert eat humble pie! I believe Sir Jasper Delaware is coming home; and as our guardian is evidently reserving us for the highest bidder, most likely he is keeping us that Sir Jasper may make his choice."

She laughed a mocking little laugh as she left the room, humming the "Laird of Cockpen," and Blanche and I, both rather out of sorts, and not in the humor for talk, went silently to bed.

In the middle of the night I woke, I heard Blanche sobbing; at the same moment a light shone under the door and Margerie came softly in in her dressing gown, a candlestick in her hand.

Blanche hid her tears in the pillow. I sat up.

"What has happened Margerie?"

"Nothing. Only I have been lying awake ever since. Let me get into your bed, Jean. Is Blanche asleep?"

"No." And then I whispered, as Margerie lay down beside me, "she is crying."

"Blanche, wake up!" said Margerie, "I have planned it all. I mean to go to the ball!"

"Margerie!" And Blanche turned her wet face, the candle-light shining on her tears, towards us.

"It's all for your sake, Blanche," said Margerie, laughing softly. "I know you want to see Charley. I should, I know, if it was my case. Well, listen to my plan. You know Captain Crofton's wife has often offered to chaperon us to parties; well, I mean to ask her to take us to the ball. I know she will."

"But, Margerie, how can we go? Uncle Robert will never give us leave."

"We'll go without it then. Leave it all to me, Blanche; I haven't been lying awake for three hours without planning everything. Promise to go if I arrange everything, will you?"

Go! Blanche was ready to go there and then, if Margerie had said the word. Right joyfully and willingly she made the desired promise, and we talked and laughed so long that the daylight was shining in cold and gray before we fell asleep.

The next afternoon Margerie came into the drawing-room, which was just as stiff and prim as the dining-room; she had a bunch of crocuses and snowdrops in her hand.

"Jean, I am going to take these to Mrs. Crofton—will you come?"

I felt my face grow crimson, and Blanche's was equally red. Uncle Robert looked up from the letter he was writing.

Margerie came to the rescue.

"Come Jean, and get ready—it is a lovely afternoon."

I was glad when we were fairly out in the street, the cool air fanning my hot cheeks.

"Oh, Margerie, you don't mean to ask Mrs. Crofton really?"

"Of course I do, Jean. It is for Blanche's sake; she will feel herself to death if she doesn't go to this ball."

My heart beat very fast in Mrs. Crofton's drawing-room, while I listened to Margerie telling the whole story to her friend, who entered quite into the spirit of the thing. It almost took away my breath—in half-an-hour the whole thing was planned. We were to go up stairs as usual on the night of the ball, and then Margerie and Blanche were to dress, descend from the window by a ladder, previously put there ostensibly to nail up the rose-tree, and Mrs. Crofton was to be in waiting at the garden gate. It was a bold scheme, and I did not half like it; but Mrs. Crofton, who was quite a girl, was as high spirited as Margerie and twice as daring.

"Charley Dale is in dreadful spirits at going away without seeing your sister again," she said. "Poor fellow he is very hard hit; and I do not wonder—your sister Blanche is so pretty."

"But, Margerie," I urged, "what good can possible come of it? It will more likely do harm."

Margerie leant forward—her sweet face was very earnest.

"Mrs. Crofton, you know how much they care for each other—my sister and Charley Dale; and do you not agree with me in thinking that it would make the parting less bitter if they could say good-bye?"

"Yes," said Mrs. Crofton, "I think so."

There were folding-doors to Mrs. Crofton's drawing-room, and for sometime I had noticed one of the doors slightly moving. Suddenly it partly opened, and a gentleman's face for a few moments looked out straight at Margerie.

He did not know I saw him, and for some seconds I steadily regarded his face, while he as steadily fixed his eyes on Margerie.

As far as I could judge, he was not very young—past forty, I should think—with closely-cut curly brown hair, and a very bronzed face. He had no whiskers only a long moustache, which did not quite hide a smile that seemed to be hovering round his mouth; he had bright dark-blue eyes, which were literally dancing with suppressed amusement.

I turned hot and cold. Most likely he was one of the officers of Charley Dale's regiment, and as in all probability he had heard every word Margerie uttered, what fun the story would be told at the mess-table!

I looked warningly at Margerie, who was artlessly telling all Blanche's little love-story so cruelly nipped in the bud by the hard uncle; but she never saw my entreating glance, and, as I turned away, I met the full glance of the merry-blue eyes looking in at the doorway. He gave a comical little start, and then put his finger on his lip—and somehow all my doubts vanished. His was a face to be trusted.

Then Margerie rose to go, in high spirits about the coming escapade. She was delighted at her success, and as we walked down the street she could talk of nothing else. I made a last remonstrance.

"Margerie, do give up this mad scheme. You have no ball dress, you know; nor has Blanche one."

She looked down at me—there were tears glittering on her eye-lashes.

Jean, have you not seen that this disappointment and anxiety is killing Blanche; she is wearing to a shadow. It is for her sake I am braving uncle Robert. She must come to some sort of understanding with Charley Dale. You would not wish our sister to die, Jean?

There were tears in Margerie's voice as well as in her eyes. I gave in, that I thought that Blanche might live down her sorrow and disappointment, as I had done. But then she had been always frail and delicate, and I was always strong enough to bear my own burden.

Margerie went on presently in a lighter tone.

"And, as to dress, I have thought of all that too. We will slip out after tea, when uncle Robert has gone to his study, and buy our dresses."

"But the money?" I gasped, thinking that Margerie had gone mad.

"The money will be forthcoming. Trust me, Jean, I mean to be fairly godmother for the occasion. Don't you think plenty of white tulle would look well over our white silks looped up with water-lilies?"

"Margerie, are you going to ask uncle Robert for money?"

"Not quite," she answered, laughing. "Don't ask questions, Jean."

When we reached home, remembering Margerie's words, I noticed Blanche more particularly. Yes, she was changed; her small face was smaller, and thinner than it used to be, and the color went and came fitfully. My heart sank like lead. I had read of gentle, timid natures dropping and pining away making no sign—just fading and dropping off like flowers killed by an early frost. How blind I had been not to have seen this before!

After tea, during which little was said, uncle Robert being too taciturn, and we too excited to talk, I followed Margerie up stairs, where I found her bending over her little trinket-box, looking over her treasures—not many—only our mother's jewellery, which had been divided among us. Margerie looked up, an old-fashioned diamond-ring in her hand; the light of the candle flashed from the diamond as she turned it round. It was too large for her slender white finger.

"I wonder what it is worth, Jean?"—"I don't know, Margerie. Why?"

"Never mind," said Margerie, slapping down the lid of the trinket-box, but keeping the ring in her hand. "Put on your cloak, Jean, with the hood over your head, and come with me."

"Margerie, if uncle Robert thought we went out in the dusk, what would he say—what would anyone say? I cannot go with you."

Then I will go alone."

There was no help for it. I put on my cloak in silence, drawing the hood well over my head. We cautiously descended the stairs, went out into the street. It was a misty wet night, and I was as glad as few people were abroad. At a jeweller's Margerie stopped and went in. I followed determined to let her have everything her own way.

The blaze of the gas light fell on Margerie's bright, fair face looking out from the dark hood. A tall figure in a long, rough overcoat, was standing in the shop, looking at some scarf-pins. When Margerie spoke, he turned quickly round, and I recognized the bronzed hero, who had peeped in at the folding-doors at Mrs. Crofton's drawing-room on that afternoon. His eyes were at once riveted on Margerie's unconscious face. In a sudden fit of fear and trepidation I clutched her by the arm.

"Margerie! Margerie, come away!"

"Presently," she replied, without looking round.

"What can I do for you, miss?" the shopman was saying.

With crimson cheeks and faltering tones Margerie held up her ring.

"Please can you tell me what this ring is worth?"

The stranger in the overcoat was again bending over the scarf-pins, but I knew he was listening to every word. The diamond seemed to take the jeweller's fancy—it was a very large and beautiful stone.

"Do you wish to part with it, miss?" he asked "I will give you ten pounds for it."

"Oh, thank you!" said Margerie, joyfully, her voice trembling a little.

The tall figure beside me turned again and looked over my head at Margerie, who, flushed and trembled with excitement, speedily concluded the bargain for the ring, accepting, without hesitation, about one quarter its value.

"Be quick, Margerie!" I whispered, for I was terribly frightened.

The tall man in the overcoat stooped, bringing his eyes on a level with mine.

"You may trust me," he said, in a low voice; and then in a moment he was looking at the scarf-pins again.

With a sigh of relief I followed Margerie swiftly out of the shop.

(To be continued.)