

# Little Venice.

A Story of the St. Clair Flats. ❖ ❖

## CHAPTER III. Continued.

SHORTLY after his sailboat was anchored securely among the reeds, and Madeleine's little boat was speeding away with its double load down a tiny side channel, that grew narrower and narrower till it seemed scarcely more than a silver thread among the marshes. So shallow it was that at times the boat's keel rasped along the sand, and the reeds on each side struck them in the face as they forced their slow way through. In and out, round and about, wandered the tiny lane. The sun seemed dancing madly in the heavens. Now it was to the right of them, now to the left of them. Now they were steering directly east, now again as directly west. And now all at once there was no more any channel at all, but only tall, dense reeds all about them. But Madeleine thrust down her long pole among the grasses, and pushed steadily on across the reedy meadow, until with a bound the boat glided out into a clear space of open water like a tiny inland pool, around which on every side the reeds grew thick and close. Horace gave a low whistle of surprise. Floating on the blue surface was a mass of white pond-lilies on their shining satin leaves, and in the midst of these an old boat lay at anchor, filled with earth and planted to the brim with flowers that grew all through and over one another in a bewildering tangle of luxuriance—pansies lifting their quaint faces to peep in wide-eyed wonder at their surroundings; candytuft standing up straight and stiff, claiming its democratic right to live wherever it chose to set its hardy foot; heliotrope and mignonette; geraniums, daisies, and sweet peas.

"So this is your garden, is it, little magician?" said Horace, looking about him with undisguised interest. "It does you wonderful credit. How did you get all the flowers? Nothing but sagittaria grows in these marshes."

Madeleine stood leaning on her pole, looking over her tiny domain, her supple slenderness outlined by the straight folds of her coarse red gingham, which, cut a little open in the neck and with loose sleeves rolled up to the shoulder, showed her shapely brown arms and round, smooth, young throat. She had thrust back her broad-brimmed red hat, and her black curls clustered thickly about her face, in which there was not a trace of the old sullenness.

"I got some of the flowers at Algonac," she answered slowly; "and the rest the best ones—Mrs. Hayden gave me when she went away last year. They grew in beds at the front of the house, don't you remember? I kept them in the boat-house through the winter. I was so afraid they would die. Some of them did, but these lived. And see you haven't noticed it but this is the best of all. Look!"

Pushing aside the more luxuriant plants as she spoke, she brought into view a dwarfish, scraggy bush adorned with a few straggling leaves, on the topmost branch of which, pale and delicate, was a half-blown bud.

"It's a pink rosebud, isn't it?" asked Horace, rather indifferently.

"It's the only rose I ever had. I've been watchin' for weeks for it."

Breaking the bud from its stem, she held it out shamefacedly, without looking at him. Horace took the tiny flower good-humoredly,

dimly comprehending that it would hurt her if he refused, and fastened it, with a show of gallantry, in the bosom of his flannel shirt.

"Thank you, Madeleine; it's an awfully pretty flower," he said, ostentatiously sniffing at it. "But all your flowers are pretty. I never saw such a lot of water-lilies together. Did they grow here?"

"No; I got them farther on—ever so much farther on. I brought them here."

"They're the prettiest I ever saw," declared Horace, enthusiastically. "I wish some grew around Claribelle Island. They would show well there in among the reeds at the back, wouldn't they?"

Madeleine did not speak all the way back. Early that afternoon she started out again alone in her little boat. The day had become oppressively warm. All were indoors who could be there. The sun beat down burningly upon the glassy water. Scarcely a breath of air stirred the rushes. Even the blue-winged dragon-fly, poising in mid-air, seemed languid and weary with the heat, and the transparent bodies of the ephemera, delicate and unsubstantial as if fashioned of gauze; floated tremblingly by, like a shimmer of white heat, while beneath, massed together in incredible numbers, and flecking the water as with spots of creamy froth, lay their ghostly fellows, dead almost before they had begun to be.

From a window in the upper story, Horace nodded pleasantly to Madeleine as she passed the house. He was leaning both elbows idly on the sill, his head in his hands, and an open book before him. The rose hung drooping upon his breast. Madeleine did not answer his nod, and he thought she had not noticed him; yet she had seen not only Horace, but her flower as well, and the sight gave added vigor to the good-will with which she plied her oars.

He did not know it, but it was solely for his sake that she was out now, acting upon his careless remark that water-lilies would look well among the reeds behind Claribelle Island. It was a long way to where they grew, and the sun's rays were scorching, but she minded neither the distance nor the heat, since it was to minister to his pleasure that she went.

The sun was setting when at last the little white boat shot out from the reedy channels into the main stream on its homeward way. As Madeleine lifted her dazzled eyes, it seemed as if Heaven lifted her across all the western waters, and its wide gates were unfolding to take her in. It made a beautiful picture as the young girl, flushed and radiant, came suddenly out into the sunlight from the reeds. The boat, from end to end, was filled with the white lilies, heaped in one upon another in profusion. It seemed simply a bed of floating lilies among which Madeleine, erect in the stern, made a brilliant bit of color in her gay dress and hat.

Noiselessly, the beautiful boat load glided on across the water until it reached Claribelle Island, where it paused at one side of the pier. No one was visible, but the sound of voices reached her from within the house. It was the dinner-hour, and she must wait until it was passed before Mr. Horace would appear, and she could offer him her gift. She had taken up the lilies, roots and all. They should grow now where he willed. She filled her hands with water and dashed it over them again and again to keep them fresh and fair for him. Then she sat down in the stern of the boat to wait, looking idly off at the sunset. Somewhere in the far distance a storm had passed, and in the west lay masses of heavy thunder-clouds, broken by lightning-like lines of intense gold, and here and there striped with bands of scarlet and purple like royal standards; while lower down, in the

very heart of the blackness, the sun broke through in a last splendid burst, dyeing the waters ruby-red. There were clouds in the east too, but these were fleecy, fair, and indefinite, floating across the hazy blue like vague dreams through a happy slumber, and changing to all manner of delicate evanescent hues as one looked. Now they were pale silvery green; now faint lilac; now soft, fleeting pink, like the flush at the heart of a white rose; and now all palpitating gold as if sprinkled with moth-wing dust; while the water below, scintillating as with scattered diamond splinters, reflected the colors back in soft iridescent tints melting indistinctly into one another—as a topaz might deepen into a cairngorm, or the shadow of a sapphire pale into an amethyst, and that again shade into an opal, or a beryl.

But Madeleine, in her lily-white boat, saw nothing of the evening's glory. To her the sky was only an hour-glass, indicating by the ebbing of the light, the coming of a crowning time of joy. She was impatient for the day to be done, and presently turned her back upon it all and began watching the passing of the vessels by the wharf. She could see them miles away, apparently twisting and doubling upon themselves as they followed the natural course of the channel, yet drawing nearer with each turn. There were vessels of every description passing up and down along this marine Broadway. Now some colossal iron boat, huge as an ocean steamer, would come ponderously by, its great bow breaking the bright water into a hundred waves that dashed themselves to spray against each wharf in turn, or ran noisily into the reeds to toss them sportively to and fro and frolic madly with their weakness. Now it was a noiseless birch-bark canoe, filled with grave, mute Indians, like so many figures hewn in oak, who stolidly offered their gay basketware for sale as they passed from one island to another, gliding along without sound, their coming betrayed by not so much as an oar-drip upon the water. Now it was some beautiful little steam yacht, gay with flags, and fair enough for any Cleopatra to have sailed upon; now a tug, puffing consequentially by with five or six helpless four-masted vessels in tow, in stately, slow procession; now a white excursion-boat, clumsy and uncouth-looking, with its tiers of crowded decks; now a row of steam-barges of different colors laden down with freight, till nearly on a level with the water; and now a whole fleet of sail boats like white-winged butterflies, darting here or there as the caprice took them; or a row-boat, more timorous than the others, and keeping nearer to the shelter of the reeds within the shallows. And then would come spaces of time when nothing passed at all, and the sunset held the water's surface unbroken under a spell of beauty.

It was one of these chance moments, when there was scarcely a craft in sight, that a row-boat came by with a single figure in it—a girl but a few years older than Madeleine. She sat looking intently at the sunset with dreamy hazel eyes while her unguided boat drifted down the current close to where Madeleine sat waiting. She was evidently not much used to rowing, Madeleine thought, noting her dainty white dress and her delicate hands, with their slender, fragile fingers. There could not be much strength in such dimpled little wrists as those. At that instant, concluding that she had floated far enough, the young stranger took up her oars and attempted to turn her boat to row back. But the current, which had borne her so easily and swiftly along the moment before, now held the boat perversely in its grasp, and in her ineffectual struggle with it she lost an oar overboard; reaching hurriedly out after it she tipped the boat too far to one side, and