

wise, faithful teachings of her sister—they had grown up shrinking from companionship with the thoughtless who scoffed at such prudery. What mystic pulsations each heart may have had, these were jealously guarded. Free from the repulsive aim of many unthinking girls to count upon their fingers their beaux, to see in every acquaintance a chance to add to the number, their straightforward simplicity would have *shunned the chance* of such conquests, and till that *mysterious something* shone out from the eyes of Noel, as she so unconsciously tossed back his uncle's badinage, had never awakened to the possibility of their being other than the brother and sister they had seemed since first they played and did battle in their childish days.

As Beatrice turned hurriedly away, yet as if in a perfect bewilderment of doubt, and Noel with a glistening eye but proudly flushed cheek did the same, though in a contrary direction, the eyes of Mr. Ralph Brandon met the gently reproachful ones of Miss Fitzroy.

"O Ralph, why did you speak so?"

"My dear Mary," he said with a surprised smile, "I positively had not a thought I was saying anything new to the child. Bless her sweet innocence, it does one good after all to see a girl crowned with woman's greatest glory. Our children make us proud of them. What say you?"

"Thankful, Ralph," was the answer, with such a depth of joy shining from her eyes. "But poor Beatrice had not realised till you forced her to do so; she had given her heart away unknowingly."

"Now do not say I forced her to this knowledge. It was my lucky lad who has that deed to answer for."

"Then you would be willing," asked Miss Fitzroy.

"Willing!" he echoed gladly. "I am more than that, Mary. It is just what his mother would have desired for him," he added in a low voice.

A look of sympathetic meaning was all she could give, as the troop of girls now came to bid her adieu. With an intuitive delicacy to allow Beatrice an escape her sympathy was at fault to discover, she petitioned her help in gaining her own room, alleging truly she needed quiet, and would not remain until her sister's return. So under cover of the willing, eager hands all so anxious to minister to the well loved invalid, the "good night" between Beatrice and Noel betrayed no difference excepting to themselves from that of other nights. Noel's daily run over to the Holt had another significance next day, and when he found Miss Fitzroy alone, plunged at once into his errand.

"Auntie, in the midst of plenty I have come to want," he began, looking with a wealth of affection into her face.

"The fate of human nature, dear, never to be satisfied," she returned as she caressingly smoothed the wavy hair from the broad white brow. "I think, I need not suppose myself very wise when I guess it is something in my possession you are craving."

"Will you give it me, Aunt Mary?"

"Gladly, my boy, knowing you will strengthen and uphold each other; that in the rest of life's journey Beatrice will have one to help her walk steadily through its many winding paths so often strewn with thorns, but through all leading straight to the bright home awaiting all who turn their faces thitherward. There will be no loosing of hands down by-paths and getting separated; both are *agreed upon the way* and to what it is to lead to. Kiss me, Noel. Now, my boy, let me give you one for 'Mamam.'"

"She would rejoice, I know, and the thought adds so much to my happiness," said Noel with glistening eyes. "Where is Beatrice, Auntie? We have made a bargain without asking her consent."

"Your face says that is not causing you much thought," said Miss Barbara suddenly making a third in the conference. "Beatrice may not like to drop into your keeping as if she were a parcel of goods, ready packed, waiting to be handed over when called for."

"You are not going to discourage me, Aunt Barbara," he said laughing joyously. "Come, take my kiss of forgiveness as if I were your little troublesome Noel of old."

"You were a young rebel, but I rejoice to claim you as belonging really to us, so go and make sure of your bargain," and as he hastened to obey her order, he knew she shared his joy as fully as ever did Aunt Mary. Not long was Noel in finding the object of his search, and was greeted with a glad exclamation of surprise from Violet, and by Beatrice with a half-frightened, half-wistful look—not at him, but at the door; and a smile curled his lips as he returned his sister's caress, while he just as determinedly placed himself so as to cut off the flight he saw meditated by the other.

"What brings you at this time of day?" asked Violet. "But never were you more welcome, for whatever ails Beatrice I cannot think; to sit still seems impossible, and when I talk she makes the most ridiculous answers. Noel, let us punish her for her treatment of poor me, by leaving her alone, and your taking me a ride."

"If you will leave Beatrice to me for five minutes I will find out what is the matter, and come and report the disease; then we can arrange for the ride."

"Violet, said poor Beatrice piteously, 'you are too bad, I—'"

"Never mind, Violet," interrupted Noel, "she will do what I ask," and with loving gravity he took the hand of the astonished girl, led her to the door, closing it upon her.

"I was just coming for you," said Miss Barbara at this juncture. "Why, child, your wits are gone wool gathering, from your looks."

"Noel actually turned me out of the room," she gasped. "What is the matter with people this morning?"

"You very child," laughed Miss Barbara, "Noel only wants to give you a sister, and you were in his way. Now do not disarrange my collar," said the lady, as Violet with all her impulsive nature roused, fairly threatened to smother her informant.

"Aunt Barbara, I never thought of such a thing. I must be a very mole for blindness."

"In more ways than one, young lady," was the grim rejoinder. "I came to tell you Fitzroy has the horses ready, and is waiting for you, so run and put on your habit quickly."

As Noel turned from the door he faced Beatrice who was making for it. "You may go, dear Beatrice, if you are not willing to stay with me as your

intended husband," he said gently. "Have I startled you too much by such a proposition?" he asked as she looked into his face with the tears dropping in quick succession down hers.

"I never thought of such a thing," she whispered, ingeniously adding "till last night."

"Since then," interrupted Noel, taking both her hands, "what conclusion have you come to, Beatrice?"

"O, Noel," she pleaded, "do please let me go."

"Do you really mean that? Answer my question dear. We have been so long as brother and sister, it will not be hard, will it, to change the relation to a dearer title. Am I to be brother or husband? I cannot hear if you hold your head like that," said Noel with a mischievous pleasure in her new sweet embarrassment.

"Uncle Ralph made me know you were dearer than a brother. I wish he had not," she said piteously "for for—"

"When you are used to our new relations with each other, I hope you will help him as I do, and take back the wish, for I claim you as my wife," and this was Noel Brandon's betrothal to Beatrice Fitzroy.

The influence of the practical Miss Barbara, joined with the pure teachings of Miss Fitzroy, had developed a strength and consistency of character in the young girl not often met with, search far and wide, and Noel did the best thing next to his decision of three years ago, when he sought a wife in Beatrice. High principled, unselfish to a fault, aiming to excel in right doing, she had the noble qualities of the true woman, with the grace and artlessness of a child. Not even Aunt Barbara hated and scorned any shams of whatever nature they might be more than did Beatrice Fitzroy, and Noel had chosen wisely and well one who would ever have aspirations in unison with his own. Not long after their engagement Miss Barbara had private hopes of her own dashed aside, and very reluctantly determined to remove one concerning them.

"Fitzroy, you have been idling quite long enough," she said coming suddenly upon that gentleman. It is time you began to put into practice all your propositions for benefitting your fellow-creatures."

"Upon my word, Aunt Barbara," he returned with a hearty laugh of amusement, "If you are not the most matter-of-fact individual any generation ever produced. There are few would give such unmistakable hints to cut short a visit."

"I never hint, you know well enough, and you know equally sure you could never outstay your welcome. But it is better for you not to remain any longer."

"Snakes alive! why not?" he asked thoroughly perplexed.

"Now Fitzroy, I never meddle with love affairs; these are things beyond management in general, and am not matter-of-fact enough to be quite devoid of delicacy,—and certainly should not say one word now if you were not likely to suffer and cause suffering. You will end in loving Violet, and I tell you go home at once."

Fitzroy grew red, and mentally wished his lynx-eyed relative had not such good use of her sight. Not relishing to be told to go home like a naughty boy, he waxed rather wrathful, but as well suppose an angry wave might move the rock-bound coast as any ebullition of manner move Miss Barbara.

"I speak for your own good, my boy," she continued.

"I wish it might have been, but these things are beyond control."

"If you wish it, why tell me to go? You take a fellow so off his guard he has to surrender *volens volens*. Pray what is to hinder me singeing my wings?"

"Violet, she would fret dreadfully if she supposed you thought of her other than a dear sister. Lookers-on see more of the game than the players; had you been one of the former you would see Brandon has won the prize."

"Brandon!" was the surprised exclamation. "Why he has been as a brother nearly all her life."

"You young people have been so thrown together that it is hard to say where love really begins and friendship leaves off."

"Aunt Barbara," interrupted Fitzroy impetuously, "has she told you she cares for him?"

"No, indeed," she retorted sharply "I should be disappointed if she made the heart's secrets common talk. Not even with Beatrice are these matters subjects of conversation. I never have much opinion of girls whose talk is of lovers and marriage, and take every opportunity of airing their limp selves to whatever will give attention. Fitzroy she at this moment is as unconscious of any deeper care for Brandon as a very child;—but he has thought of her and will tell her so; now Noel has taken the lead, or I am no prophet. I am sure a Somerset never needs to be told twice what duty is."

"The acts of injustice and tyranny perpetrated in the name of that much-absurd article," exclaimed Fitzroy with a ludicrous intonation. "There you bid me start to it, and fly from it. Can you undertake to tell me what and where it is?"

"Yes, my dear boy, I think I can; it lies straight before you, helping your brother man as only those can who have the opportunities of position and wealth as you have. I am more disappointed I believe than yourself. The only matrimonial speculation I ever indulged in was one between you and Violet."

It is gratifying to one's wounded feelings," he said with a laugh, "to think the lady has not developed the discernment you think she might have shown had she chosen your nephew. It really is a healing plaister to one's self-love. Like Cæsar, I came, I saw, (tell it not in Gath) *got* conquered; you will observe the difference one word makes. Aunt Barbara," he went on as if a bright idea had just occurred to him, "the infection towards matrimony is pretty strong in these quarters. Do you not think, as I am tainted, you had better try for a cure? What say you to your especial favourite, Miss Myra Brown, for a niece? You are pruning away at her, and she may do you credit—with my help," he added roguishly.

"I am glad your infection has not amounted to much," she answered, greatly relieved to find he breathed the matter so cavalierly, "and will leave time to supply the future Lady Somerset."

"Has nothing to do with it," was the quick interruption. "I do not