

ROBERT LIVINGSTONE'S WARD.

CHAPTER VIII.

Her teachers were very kind. It was simply a pleasure to teach her, she was so eager for knowledge—so determined to master every difficulty that stood in her way; and they were no less proud than Gertrude herself, when, at the end of the year drew nigh, she stood among the first in her class.

She had developed, too, a great taste for painting, while her voice, under careful cultivation, gave promise of becoming a source of delight to herself and her friends.

She heard from Allan regularly once a month, and she replied to every letter faithfully, although her own epistles were always very brief, and she said just as little as possible about herself and her pursuits.

Allan had approved most heartily her plan of going away to school, and was deeply interested in her progress although he had to depend more on accounts from his mother regarding that, than upon Gertrude.

'Who writes to you in such a fine, bold hand, and from a foreign port, too, Gertrude?' Rose asked her one day, as she came into their room, bringing a letter that the professor had just handed her.

'Oh, this is from Allan,' Gertrude returned, seizing it eagerly, but coloring vividly at her friend's question.

'Allan; indeed! And who may 'Allan' be, if you please?'

'Why Allan Livingstone, of course.'

'Oh, your brother!' returned Rose, jumping at conclusions. 'What is he doing in Paris?'

'Studying to be a physician.'

'How old is he?'

'Twenty-one.'

'Well, I must say you are extremely quiet about your affairs!' exclaimed Rose, in surprise. 'No one would have dreamed that you had a brother from anything that you had ever said. Pray, have you a picture of this noble youth?'

'Yes there is one in my trunk,' Gertrude admitted, but feeling greatly embarrassed.

'Do let me see it. I am crazy to know what he is like. Does he look like you?'

'Not at all; he is very handsome,' Gertrude said, unconsciously emphasizing the pronoun.

'Indeed! Do you mean to imply that he is the only handsome one in the family?' demanded Rose, dryly, but with a roguish twinkle in her eyes. 'What do you call yourself?'

'I am a—dowdy,' came from Gertrude's lips, almost before she knew what she was saying.

'What do you mean?' exclaimed Rose, in astonishment, and speaking with indignant emphasis.

Gertrude laughed.

'Oh some called me that once, and I have never forgotten it,' she explained, but with heightened color.

'I should like to know what reason any one had to insult you in that way?' said Rose, with spirit.

'More reason than you imagine possible,' replied Gertrude, gravely. 'Less than a year ago I looked entirely different from what I do now. My hair was red, coarse, frowsy; my face was one mess of unsightly freckles; I measured and weighed half as much again as I do now; and all this, besides being very careless and untidy in my personal appearance, contributed to make me anything but attractive.'

'Your hair red!' gasped Rose, almost breathless from amazement. 'Whoever would believe it? What changed the color?'

'I had a terrible illness—brain fever—and my hair had to be shaved off, and when it came out again it was no longer red.'

'No, it is a beautiful, glossy brown; and Gertrude, there isn't the suspicion of a freckle about you. Your skin is as smooth and fair as a piece of satin; you have a beautiful color, and your eyes are simply glorious; you are just as lovely as you can be, and growing more so every day; you're the queen of the class. A 'dowdy'! Gracious! I'd like to box the ears of whoever said it!'

'Spare me,' Gertrude said, putting her white, delicate hands up to her cheeks, and laughing at her friend's compliments and undisguised disgust over what she had told her. 'I know I am changed, but I am afraid you have exaggerated the improvement.'

'I haven't. But I suppose you want to read your letter from that precious brother of yours; so I'll vanish, until you are through, then I shall insist upon your showing me his picture.'

She did not forget, as Gertrude hoped she would, but made her dive to the depths of her trunk, and bring up a photograph of Allan, that he had sent her the last year he was in college.

Rose was delighted with it.

'He is like a young prince!' she cried. 'You bad girl! Why have you concealed all this beauty in the bottom of your trunk? He isn't a bit like you, though. I guess he must resemble his mother, and you your father. We'll just put this treasure in the most conspicuous place we can find, and it will be such fun to see the girls open their eyes, and wonder who he is.'

'No, Rose, don't,' Gertrude pleaded, with a troubled look, as the gay girl was proceeding to place the picture upon a bracket just beneath their looking glass, because girls always look in the glass the first thing when they enter a room, and they'll be sure to see it here,' she said.

Gertrude could not tolerate anything like deception, so she would not say that Allan was her brother, and she could not tell her miserable secret, and acknowledge him as her husband.

'I would like to know why you are so obstinate about it,' retorted Rose. 'I declare I feel personally aggrieved that you should have kept this fascinating face concealed from me all this time. Have you been afraid that some of us would fall in love with him, and you have other for him? Perhaps he is even spoken for already, and you thought some of our innocent young hearts might be endangered to no purpose. Come, be a dear, now, and let me put the picture where I want to. I'll make the girls think that he is a 'very particular friend' of mine.'

But Gertrude would not; it was too painful a subject to be talked about, and she would not run the risk of having to answer uncomfortable questions.

Rose saw that something was troubling her—something that she did not wish to explain—so she returned it to her after a time, and said nothing more about it, though she could not help wondering how any one having so handsome a brother as Allan Livingstone appeared to be, could refrain from talking about him and betraying a pride in him.

As the long summer vacation drew near, Gertrude began to dread going back to Livingstone Elms. She had been so happy at school. But she did not have to go back. Permission came to Rose from her mother to invite her friend and chum to spend the vacation with her at Long Branch, where the Taylors had a lovely residence, and Mrs. Livingstone, upon being consulted, agreeing to the arrangement, Gertrude was only too happy to accept it.

So the middle of July found the two friends by the sea.