

LIFE'S CHANGES.

BY MARAH ROCKE.

(Continued.)

CHAPTER II.

"Ray, did you get me a letter to-day?" asked Mabel, one bright, sunny afternoon as he came in, flushed from his rapid walk.

"Why? Did you particularly expect one to-day?"

"Certainly. Let me have it, please," and she held out her hand with an eager look.

"Here it is," and he held it up above her reach, as she stood on tiptoes to grasp it, her dimpled arm, from which the loose sleeve had fallen back, stretched above her head, showing her supple form in all its curves of beauty. "You haven't paid me yet for bringing it," said Ray, as he held it just out of reach of the white fingers.

"What shall I give you—a yankee sixpence?" and she threw him a kiss from the tips of her fingers, as he dropped the letter into her hands.

"Yes, that will do for this time," and he watched her eagerly tear open the envelope and devour its contents, and he wondered what they could be, as he saw the red flush mount to her cheek and brow.

Ah, Ray, the dark days are coming when your young heart will have learned the bitter lesson of sorrow and endurance which must come to us all.

"I am coming to you, darling Mabel," the letter reads, "when the maples are tinged with red, and our old trysting-place in the grove strewn with the bright-hued leaves of October. I will be with you, never to leave you again, I trust. Till you are my own forever. When again I go, I must take my darling wife with me.

Your true lover,

HARRY VANE."

Seated in the hammock, idly swaying to and fro, her mind was a mass of chaotic thought. She had hardly expected just this news in her letter. Harry had certainly meant to stay on where he was yet another year. What could have occurred to make such a change in his plans? Of course she would be glad to see him. She had expected he would make her a short visit, but to be prepared to leave her home on such short notice. It had been a long time, too, since she had seen him, that young lover of hers, and the bright day they had plighted their vows under the maples so far back in the past. It seemed almost like some half-forgotten dream, and yet it had made her very happy.

When he had left her to complete his study of law, she had been so desolate and felt that life had lost all its brightness till he could come to her again; but of late she had not seemed to miss him so much. Life had been so much pleasanter since Ray had been there. He was such an intelligent companion and seemed to understand all her thoughts and feelings and anticipate her wishes almost before they were expressed. Indeed, she fancied she loved him as well as if he had been in truth the brother she tried to think him. But she would be glad to see Harry, and he and Ray would be such friends, and after they were married, they could do so much more for Ray. He could study law with Harry, and having arranged it all to her mind, she went in search of Ray, whom she found helping Aunt Chloe capture a refractory biddy, which, with her fluffy brood, had taken possession of the garden.

"Shoo! Cl'ar right out ob heah; you'se got no bisniss in heah 'mong my 'materses and cabbage," and, shaking her ample apron, Aunt Chloe soon brought the truants into subjection, while Ray popped the coop over their heads.

Resting her arms on the fence, Mabel watched the operation. How tall Ray had grown, and of late she had seemed to lose her role of teacher and assume rather the attitude of pupil. He had such a masterful, self-confident way of deciding all knotty points, and could not be satisfied with a mere superficial knowledge of whatever he attempted to learn. He must know all the whys and wherefores and delve to the bottom, ere he would be content to leave his subject for another.

She was beginning to look up to him as an authority on whatever branches he had mastered, though she was one year his senior, and to feel a restful confidence in him, that whatever his aim, he would be sure to reach it at last, and well satisfied that his ambition would never be content to rest on lowly heights.

She wondered how the study of law would strike him. Not very favorably, she feared, for his tastes seemed to take an artistic turn. He had a passion for drawing and for music, and in each of these pursuits he had shown decided talent. Many sketches he had taken of the familiar scenes of beauty around their home, and his voice, which had astonished her by its sweetness when she had first heard it, had developed into a rich tenor of great scope and power.

How she dreaded to tell him of Harry's coming, and, yet, it must be done. Seeing her regard him with such an earnest, farseeing gaze, he came up to the fence and, resting his dark eyes on her with a look of inquiry, waited to hear her errand.

"Are you busy now, Ray? If not, can you spare me a half hour or so? I have something I wish to tell you."

"Certainly. Where shall we go to confessional? If I am to be priest, let it be in some shady corner, for housing Aunt Chloe's biddies is rather warm work on such a hot day," and springing over the fence he walked by

her side down the path to the maple grove, whose leafy verdure was in the full height of its summertime glory.

Unconsciously Mabel's steps turn to the rude seat of knarled branches Harry had fashioned so long ago, and his words came to her with a new significance as she seated herself and looked up at the leafy cover, through which came little flecks of sunshine.

When the bright tints of October had changed them to glowing beauty he would come, and she felt it was far too soon. Silently she sat and mused, until Ray recalled her wandering thoughts.

"I thought you wanted to confess some terrible misdeed, or ask my advice on some important subject," he said, as bending down he gazed quizzically into her face.

"Yes, I do; but I hardly know how to begin. Have you ever heard me speak of Harry Vane, Ray?"

"Never, to my knowledge."

"I ought to have done so long ago, but somehow there never seemed to be any proper opportunity. I shall have to begin at the beginning or you will never understand how it all came about."

"Long ago, it seems very long now, about a year after mamma died, and before you came here, Ray, I became acquainted with Mr. Harry Vane, a young law student of Hamilton. He was spending his summer vacation here at the village with a relative, and there I became acquainted with him. I was so very lonely without mamma, and so desolate, that I welcomed any diversion, and when Irma Vane urged me so persistently to make them a visit of a few weeks, I could not resist the temptation. I saw him many times after I returned home, and the end of it all was—the end usually described in all the love stories you read, 'He came; he saw, and he conquered.' When he left it was with my promise to become his wife at some future day, when he should have completed his studies. Since then we have corresponded regularly and I expected a visit from him this fall, but he writes me he shall expect to take me with him when he leaves. It is so unexpected, Ray. What shall I do about it? Why don't you tell me?" she said, as the silence remained unbroken.

He sat with his head on his hand, his eyes bent persistently on the ground, but she could see the glow of color had left the clear cheek and his lips were tightly pressed together, as if to repress any words he might afterward regret to have uttered. As she waited for a reply, he raised his eyes to hers. There was no mistaking the deep look of sorrow with which he regarded her, and he seemed to be striving to read her every thought.

Nervously she sat, her slender fingers twisting themselves together in her lap as she waited some expression of his feelings in words.

"I cannot see what advice you expect or need, Mabel," he said, at last. "You have settled the matter, it seems, and all that remains for me is to wish you the truest happiness and joy in the life you have chosen. I hope he is worthy the love and truth you have given him and will make my little sister very happy," he continued, taking her hands and holding them in a close pressure. "If he is, and is the choice of your heart, all is well, is it not?"

He looked with earnest questioning into her eyes, and, rising, left her with a mute pressure of the hands. Not for a moment longer could he retain his brotherly kindness of manner, and the secret of his love for her must now be buried deep in his own heart. She has made her choice and not a word would he utter to disturb the pleasant relation that existed between them. If she gave no sign that he held a dearer place in her heart than she could give to a brother, she would never know the deep and tender love his own heart felt for her, a far deeper love than a sister could claim, and which had been the mainspring of his life and actions for the three happy years of the past.

Well, they were over now, and he must be alone, to work out this new life problem in solitude. Going hastily to his room, he seated himself by the window to turn the matter over in his mind and decide on his future course of action. Could he endure to stay on after the old fashion, and see Mabel's love and devotion given to another? And yet he would never do to leave her so abruptly. His very haste would tell the tale he wished to hide in his own breast. How hard he had striven to excel, and make himself worthy to ask for her love. Long he sat there, and hardly contested was the battle between his great love and his sense of right, but when Aunt Chloe came to call him to supper, it was with a calm demeanor he descended and joined Mabel.

She, too, had been busily thinking, and her thoughts were not at all pleasant ones, for the tears would come and drop slowly down, one by one, till chiding herself for the ridiculousness of the thing, she jumped up and started for the house.

"One would think I was sorry to see Harry," she said to herself. "I ought to be ashamed of myself, so good as he has been, too."

Nothing more passed between them on the subject that held so great a place in their thoughts for a long time, but Mabel did not make any preparations for immediate departure. Indeed, she wrote to Harry that she couldn't possibly be ready on such short notice, and that he must compromise matters by giving her a little more time, to which he replied that it would be impossible, as his arrangements were all made and could not very well be altered.

The undecided state of her mind was beginning to tell on her health, and the blush-rose tint on her cheeks was giving way to the paler hue of the moss rose. She has lost much of her old vivacious manner, and the pleasant social hours she was once so glad to spend with Ray were things of the past. Indeed she rather seemed to avoid him. The knowledge sent a pang to his

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