WHAT! NEVER?

CHAPTER I.

"What, never?"

"No, never!"

"Cousin Sue, I don't wish to be rude, but I find it difficult to believe the truth of your assertion."

"I tell you, Charlie, I utterly despise flirts. I never flirted in my life, and never will. And if you insinuate such a thing, I shall never forgive you."

Charlie shrugged his shoulders incredulously. A pretty girl, with the necessary amount of brains, who would not, under favourable circumstance, flirt, was a phenomenon in nature with which he was wholly unacquainted, and in which therefore, he utterly disbelieved. Charlie was good-looking and good-humoured, a general favourite with the fair sex, and, consequently, thought his opinion on the subject worth something.

In our young country, and with our nineteenth century ideas, Old Country manor houses are considered as fit for nothing but to figure in novels and romances, and, perhaps, good enough for the race of English squires who inhabit them, and who certainly are behind the age. But for our part we prefer the fashionable and the elegant to the picturesque and the artistic. We prefer sacrificing a few haunted chambers, corridors lined with family portraits, green, blue, and yellow bed-rooms for the less romantic consideration of ease, and above all warmth. No doubt we are right, —but don't let us be too hard on the old manors,—they had, doubtless, their good points, though we fail to appreciate them.

The house in which Charlie Gerald and his cousin Sue held the above conversation resembled in many respects an English manor. When the grandfather of both cousins came out to Canada he had it built after the model of his own home in England, making a few allowances for the exigencies of the climate. On his death he left the place to his eldest son, Henry Gerald, Charlie's father. Sue's father, the younger son, was a clergyman, an earnest, good man, doing his ill-paid work faithfully. His was a poor parish in one of the largest Canadian cities. Sue, his eldest daughter, was a very pretty girl, not beautiful, but extremely bright and attractive. Small, and very fair; a certain grave firmness in her pretty mouth and grey eyes was almost concealed under the expression of vivacity and sweetness which lighted up her face.

She had never been from home before, except to boarding-school, and was enchanted with the picturesque old house. And when Charlie's sister Annie, who was of a practical turn of mind, expatiated on the inconvenience of having no furnace, no cupboards, and half the space in the house taken up by passages, Sue was amazed how anyone could be so horribly matter-of-fact as to put such trifles in the balance with huge stone fire-places, high wainscoting, innumerable delightful nooks, and corners (only icy cold at this season, as even Sue was obliged to admit, after nearly freezing herself trying to read in one), and actually, a haunted chamber. The latter, however, I am obliged to confess, was nothing but a brilliant stroke of imagination on Sue's part, it being an old lumber room quite innocent of ghosts.

The cousins had not seen each other since they were children, but, nevertheless, were soon the best of friends. Annie and Sue, despite their difference of opinion, got on admirably together. In the morning Annie instructed her cousin in the mysteries of housekeeping, of which the latter was rather ignorant; in the afternoon they went skating or sleighing, or coasting with Charlie, or if it were too stormy they stayed at home and played billiards or worked, or read. The evening was generally devoted to music. Charlie had a very fair voice, Sue played remarkably well, and Annie and Mr. Gerald made a capital audience, admiring everything, critic-izing nothing.

And so the days passed smoothly and pleasantly. "It's too good to last!" Charlie said. Whether that were true or nor I do not pretend to say, but it certainly did not last. And this is how the change came about:—The afternoon on which our story commences was stormy, but billiards for the first time had failed to exercise their wonted attraction; they had been abandoned after the first game. Then followed idle chat; Annie was called away, and Sue and Charlie continued the conversation, the last words of which commenced our chapter. Sue soon left the room. She had a letter to write, besides she felt decidedly ruffled.

Flirt, indeed! What did Charlie take her for? She had several times almost thought that Charlie needed only a little encouragement to start a flirtation with her, though she was his cousin, just to keep his hand in, of course. The idea!

However, by the time Sue had finished her letter to her mother her indignation had subsided, and she went down to tea with a serene face.

During the course of the meal Mr. Gerald said, as if the matter had just occurred to him:

"By the way, children, would you not like to invite some friends for the Christmas holidays? You must be almost tired of one another's company by this time. Besides we ought to show our little city girl here what a good, old time Christmas in the country is. Eh, Sue?"

"Uncle," said Sue, putting down her tea-cup, excitedly, "it would be lovely, in fact the only thing needed to make everything perfect. A family gathering—the mistletoe—holly—yule log—dance, etc, etc. Splendid!"

"Mistletoe," repeated Charlie, meditatively.

"Sue, we'll have to make the puddings and mince pies immediately," said Annie. "Three weeks to-day will be Christmas; we ought to invite the people for about a fortnight or ten days before."

"Who will be the favoured ones?" asked Charlie.

"Let us have a council of war after tea," suggested Sue, flushed with excitement.

After tea the members of the council had a long confab, during which Sue took care to snub and patronize Charlie in an elder sisterly manner. It was agreed that the number of guests should be limited to five. First of all, Annie considered the advisability of inviting a chaperone in the shape of a maiden aunt of the cousins, a dear old lady of whom they were all very fond; then two cousins of Charlie's and Annie's, Donald and Ada Ashfield; Miss Pet Frances, an old school friend of Annie's (for Charlie's special benefit, the latter remarked), and Charlie's great chum, Mr. Arthur Holland.

Sue had urged the necessity of having none but members of the family, but had been outvoted by the others, who did not look at the matter from her point of view. So she had to console herself by making the most of the Ashfield cousins.

CHAPTER II.

Next morning when the cousins met, Annie gave it as her opinion that the Ashfields ought to be invited immediately. "You see, Sue, Ada will be simply invaluable in the matter of plumb-puddings and mince-pies, and I want to consult her about the decorations and the Christmas tree, and a thousand other thing-."

"A week sooner or later won't make much difference, I suppose," remarked Charlie, glancing comically at his pretty cousin. "Send for them by all means. What is Christmas without a good plumb-pudding? Perhaps you wish to telegraph?"

"Exactly so," answered his sister, decidedly. "If we do that they ought to be here to-morrow by the early train."

"Accurately calculated," said Charlie, resignedly. What is the message to be?"

This was soon satisfactorily composed, though Annie insisted, to Sue's intense disgust, on a postscript, entreating that the receipt for Christmas pudding might not be forgotten.

Two days later, on Friday morning, they drove to the station to meet their cousins. The air was bright and frosty,—all were in excellent spirits.

"What are they like, Charlie?" asked Sue of her cousin, who was sitting in front driving.

"Oh, Donald's a good enough fellow. Awfully clever,—a regular book-worm, in fact."

"Is he?" said Sue with interest.

"Yes. And he's a perfect giant, too. Not bad-looking, but rather clumsy, I think," continued Charlie, stroking his dainty moustache, as well as thick mitts permitted.

"Oh!" laughed Sue. "And what about his sister?"

"Well," said Charlie, hesitatingly.

"Oh, they're always quarrelling," interrupted Annie, laughing. "When they were tiny babies they used to try to scratch each other's eyes out; and ever since then it has been very much the same way, only, of course, they keep within the bounds of propriety now. You see, Ada thinks it her duty as cousin to take Charlie to task for his laziness and general good-for-nothingness—not to mention his numerous flirtations and other small peccadilloes—and he resents that. Then, Ada worships Donald, and is continually holding him up as a model to Charlie, and, inasmuch as he differs from that model, he is wrong."

"Oh, Ada isn't a bad girl!" remarked Charlie condescendingly, as they drove up to the station, thinking it would be only magnanimous to say something complimentary of his absent cousin, after Annie's explanation.

They had some minutes to wait for the train. When it did glide up, the first person to jump out on the platform, was a very tall young man of about twenty-six. She thought, with dark brown hair and beard and moustache; he turned to help his sister descend,—to judge from her movements, a lively, though not pretty brunette.

"Ada, Donald!" said Charlie, with mock solemnity, after the first greetings, "pray allow me to introduce you to a cousin of yours, Miss Sue Gerald. I feel assured that before an hour has passed it will be a subject of deep regret to you that your fate had allowed you to remain strangers so long."

"Charlie, how can you!" exclaimed Sue, indignantly.

The travellers looked mystified. Annie hastened to explain that the cousinship was nothing but a joke of her brother's. Mr. Ashfield looked black at that, and his sister, perceiving it, remarked in a clear, pleasant voice, just a shade distatorial, "Charlie, you sad boy, have you not outgrown your youthful follies yet?"

"Why, cousin, you surely would not insinuate, that I have outgrown my youth!" demanded the sad boy, with a laugh.

"Well, I suppose, since we are the same age, least said on that point the better," said Ada, good-humouredly; and they took their seats in the sleigh.

Annie and Ada were soon engaged in an animated discourse on the subject of Christmas trees; and Sue, whose high spirits had not yet been entirely subdued by the black brows of her neighbour, ventured some remarks as to the delights of country life. "In the city everyone is so busy," she said. "Here we have nothing to do but amuse ourselves from morning till night."

"Delightful existence!" said her quasi cousin, sarcastically.

Sue laughed, and was going to add that certainly for any length of time it might prove wearisome, when he continued severely:

"I confess myself quite unable to comprehend how anyone can take pleasure in such an utterly aimless life, profitable neither to oneself nor to anyone else!"

Sue flushed angrily. "How ill-tempered and rude!" she thought, and she turned and joined in the conversation of her *vis-a-vis* till they reached home.

Certainly Donald Ashfield was in an unusually bad temper just then. He was perfectly well aware of it. "What a confounded bear I am!" he said to himself, after his last speech; a very good male version of Sue's criticism. His bad humour, however, was not without cause.

He was a studious fellow, as Charlie had said, and had been looking forward for some time to these Christmas holidays, intending to pursue a complete course of reading on subjects extremely interesting to him, but not within the range of his professional studies,—he was destined to be a civil engineer. When the telegram came the Wednesday before, he had just brought out his beloved books, and was taking a delightful dip into this one and that before commencing the serious work.

Imagine the feelings of a hungry man, seated before a goodly feast, having already eaten say half a dozen morsels, when his sister entreats him to lunch with her at an ice-cream saloon! And when he generously sacrifices himself, is it to be wondered at if he feels rather savage, not only towards the ice-cream, but also towards the lovers of sweet, unsubstantial nothing?

In spite of the explanation, however, the unamiable fact remains. Donald was cross—cross as a bear, as he truly put it; and his temper was by no means improved by the fact that he was not only angry with others, but with himself as well.

After dinner Annie considered what had best be done. Donald was out of sorts, Ada, distressed, and even Sue seemed a little piqued about something. At last a brilliant inspiration came.

"Let us build a snow-man!" she cried.

Mr. Ashfield's nose ascended visibly, a fact which Sue noticed with great resentment,—whereupon she immediately declared it a capital plan.

They were soon hard at work, stopping occasionally to pelt one another with snow-balls. During these intervals Donald would sit patiently on a snow-bank, as if saying, "When you have finished that nonsense and are ready to go to work again, I will be quite willing to help you. In the meantime I can only sit and wonder!"

"Do throw a snow-ball at him," whispered Sue to Charlie. "He looks too stiff for anything!"

Charlie did not need to be told twice, and the next moment an enormous ball of soft snow struck the side of Ashfield's head. He turned crimson, and, quick as lightning, he had seized a handful of snow and deftly formed it into a hard compact ball, which he let fly at Charlie with all the strength of his powerful arm. It was well aimed, but Charlie dodged it; Sue was so engrossed in watching the result of her advice that she never stirred. The ball intended for Charlie's shoulder struck her lip and grazed her cheek; the skin was broken, and the blood trickled down her chin. Donald sprang forward, this time thoroughly ashamed of himself.

"Miss Gerald! Pray forgive me! Are you much hurt?"

To his surprise, she laughed merrily as she answered:

"Not at all, Mr. Ashfield. It was my fault, for I wanted so much to see if you could condescend to throw a snow-ball. I had no idea I should receive such very emphatic proof of your ability!"

She walked quickly past him into the house, the other girls following. Charlie repaired to the billiard-room, and Donald walked around the grounds, muttering questionable compliments to himself.

CHAPTER III.

When they all assembled at tea, Donald made himself extremely agreeable, having entirely got over his ill-temper. He was a capital talker when he chose to exert himself. Ada's spirits, as usual, rose with his. Sue looked more bewitching than ever with the coquettish little "mouches" of black court-plaster on her lip and cheek. She was in the best of spirits, though all the time Donald was speaking, she was doing her best not to show how interesting she found his remarks. The manner in which he had made and thrown that snow-ball pleased her immensely, but she considered that she ought to keep on her dignity a little while longer on account of the morning. However, her mock cousin released her from that perilous position as soon as circumstances allowed.

After tea they all repaired to the parlour, a bright, cosy room. Sue seated herself in her favourite little corner near the window, from where she liked to watch the great wood fire in the open hearth, casting golden light on the warm brown furniture and crimson carpet, and on the kind old face of her uncle who sat beside it. At the other end of this room were the lamps on either side of the piano, shedding their bright white light, which looked cold by contrast to the fire's glow. As she was watching the same scene again this evening with renewed pleasure, some one spoke her name quite softly, close beside her ear. She started.

"Miss Gerald," said Donald, speaking quickly, "I want to apologize for my rudeness this morning. I was in a horrible temper, which culminated in that unlucky snow-ball that hurt you. Please don't believe that that is my normal condition. I was ashamed of myself this morning, but am doubly so now." He spoke rather constrainedly, as if not relishing the task.

Sue looked up smiling. "Everyone is cross sometimes, Mr. Ashfield; it is human nature. I am very glad indeed to make peace," and she gave him her hand—a little hand, so soft and white, that Charlie, looking on from the sofa, thought the man must have a heart of adamant who could resist it and it's charming owner. Not that Charlie was in love with Sue; by no means. Charlie was very fond of his cousin, but nothing further ever entered his head. But he looked on Sue with interest; he admired her greatly; he was firmly convinced that, under favourable circumstances, she might turn into a most charming little flirt. "She has it in her!" he said to himself repeatedly, and he now regarded Ashfield with interest as the possible man who might bring it out of her. Nor that that was his style. Oh, no! But then, there was no accounting for tastes!

Sue had a few qualities, Charlie considered, which might impede her development into a coquette. She was given to making witty speeches, which were occasionally almost a little *too* sharp, her cousin thought,—and then she was rather too conscientious, and under all her gayety and nonsense Charlie thought he perceived a little more real earnestness than rightly belongs to the composition of a perfect flirt. However he did not abandon his pet idea, but looked hopefully towards the corner by the window.

Nothing less like a flirtation.

He was talking with animation about something or other, probably his travels, for Charlie caught a foreign name every now and then; she was looking at him with grave, eager interest. They were a striking contrast—he so dark and massive—she so fair and slender.

Donald's heart was not of adamant. He had noticed that the hand he had taken in his was small and soft, and especially that the grey eyes raised to his were intelligent and frank, and, withal, tender. They had many subjects of interest in common; they discussed favourite authors and studies, occasional differences only adding zest to their conversation; and Sue listened eagerly to all his accounts of foreign countries, of which he knew more than of his own.

"Cousin Sue!" Ada's clear voice interrupted them later in the evening. Sue looked up, astonished at the title. "Charlie dubbed us cousins, and with our mutual friends we can scarcely be strangers. You don't object to the liberty, do you?"

"No, indeed. I like it very much."

"Well, then, Cousin Sue, will you please give us a little music?"

"With pleasure." And Sue tripped across the room to the piano. It was a beautiful instrument, one of the few modern pieces of furniture in that ancient house.

Charlie sprung up and offered to turn over the leaves for her, at the same time glancing at Donald, trying to perceive some sign of vexation at the usurpation of his place. There was none however, on the contrary, a look of relief rather than otherwise. "That night he became he's not much of a musician," soliloquized Charlie. "Any way, it's rather too soon to expect anything yet."

Sue played, and then Charlie sang, and then they had duets and quartettes and choruses—as all, even the unmusical Donald, had very fair voices.

"Good night, Cousin Sue!"—when they separated for the night.

"Good night, Cousin Don!" returned Sue, laughing.

"Annie," said Charlie, impressively, as they passed in the passage that led to their rooms, "we'll have them flirting yet."

"Nonsense!" returned his unsympathetic sister, as she entered her room.

The next week was a very busy one. The culinary occupations took up all the morning; in the afternoon all were pressed into the service to gild walnuts and blown eggs, and tissue-paper festoons, and make glittering ornaments for the Christmas tree. Later in the afternoon they generally found time to skate on the pond near by. Sue was learning—Donald was teacher. Certainly, the *soi disant* cousins were the best of friends. Poor Charlie was left in the lurch those days. Annie and Ada had always matters of great importance to discuss, though Charlie found them uninteresting enough. Even if he did venture to introduce a few trivial remarks into the serious conversation, he was incontinently snubbed for his pains. To be sure, Sue was as merry and good-tempered as ever, but her society was generally monopolized by Don, and he was taking so much interest in the proceedings in that quarter that he restrained all desire to "cut his cousin out," as he expressed it.

Nevertheless he was obliged to admit that his pet scheme was not meeting with adequate success. Sue had not yet begun to show those wonderful powers which Charlie was convinced lay within her. She was witty and saucy, and coquettish enough when they were all together. She made unmerciful fun of Donald's clumsiness; indeed once when she had given him eggs to beat for that wonderful pudding in which all had to have their finger—and he spilt them all over his person—she appeared to take such intense delight in the whole proceeding that he lost his temper and stalked out of the room in high dudgeon. When they talked together, however, Charlie always noticed the same bright interested look on Sue's face that had been there the first evening of their acquaintance, while "the Don," as they called him, discoursed with unsentimental volubility on all kinds of subjects.

The next Friday evening after the arrival of the Ashfields was a beautifully clear moonlight night. A proposal to go skating was met with general applause, and in a very short time all were ready equipped for the excursion.

It was ten minutes' walk to the sheet of ice where they generally skated. Arrived there, Donald as usual put on Sue's skates for her, while Charlie performed the same service for the two other ladies. Sue's straps broke on this particular night, and by the time the accident was repaired the others had reached the farthest end of the pond some little distance off.

"They have deserted us most shamefully!" said Sue. "How shall we punish them?"

"Let us desert them now. The ice over there seems smooth; will you come?"

Sue was nothing loth; so they skated off into what might be called a bay, a long strip of ice extending inland, and separated by a small bush from where the others were skating.

"This is the first bright, clear day we have had since last Friday," remarked Sue after they had skated a little while in silence.

"The day we arrived, what a barbarian you must have thought me that morning!"

"So I did," replied Sue frankly. But now I understand how great the provocation was. In fact," she added, laughing, "it has been a matter of amazement to me how you have put up with this aimless life, profitable neither to yourself nor to anyone else, for so long!"

"Don't be so sarcastic, Sue." It was the first time he had dropped the cousin, which made the name a little more formal. "At any rate," he added, "I shall think you have no need to wonder at it."

"And why not?" demanded Sue.

"Because, my sweet little cousin, you have made this happier to me than a whole year amongst those worrying books." And Donald firmly pressed the little hand he held in his. Sue trembled. In one short week she had lost her heart to that black browed giant at her side.

In the meantime, how had Charlie fared? Not too well, poor fellow. He had tried to make himself agreeable to his cousin and sister, and had signally failed.

They had not been on the ice two minutes before it occurred to Annie that she had forgotten to consult her cousin on an extremely important subject, namely: *could* Ada show her some pretty border for the pale blue shawl she was crocheting for Sue for Christmas. Of course Ada could; Ada had patterns for crocheting, and embroidery, and knitting, not only at her fingers' ends, but at her tongue's end too.

"I can show you a beautiful fringe, Annie, soft and fluffy, like snow. You take ten strands of wool,"—here Charlie ventured a gentle remonstrance—"Would'nt Ada take pity on his ignorance and reserve the description of that fringe till they returned home?"

"Really, Charley," replied his cousin severely, for she did not like to be interrupted in the midst of her favourite fringe. "Really, Charley, I wonder at your selfishness! You can't expect others to take interest in anything but flirtations to please you. Now, Donald is so different in that," continued she, turning to Annie. "He admires my fancy work very much. In fact he tried to learn to knit once, just to see how it was done."

"Poor fellow!" muttered Charley, as he wheeled about and skated off in the opposite direction. He soon caught sight of the two truants in the secluded bay. "I vow," cried he, "I'm not going to make a martyr of myself any longer! She may have it in her, but the Don is evidently not the man to bring it out; and as for her really caring for him, of course that's out of the question: he's too big and clumsy. I'll interrupt their platonic philosophy, by jove! It'll be fun to see those black brows of his look thunder. I'm sick of fringe and plum-pudding!" And he skated boldly up just at the point where we left our so-called philosophers.

"Sue!" cried he, "Allow me to compliment you on the wonderful progress you have made. You skate swimmingly, to use a paddyism. Just try a turn with me, like a good cousin that you are. The Don's too big for a little thing like you to skate with, you're altogether out of proportion! Come!" And seizing her hand he skated off with her, chuckling as he noticed the thunder clouds which he had predicted looking black and awful on Ashfield's brow.

CHAPTER IV.

The next morning after breakfast they started on an excursion to which they had been looking forward for some time. They were going out to the woods to select the Christmas tree and evergreens for decorations. A couple of men followed them in a country bob-sleigh.

Charlie's mind had been fully made up the night before. Consequently as they were taking their seats in the sleigh, he said to his cousin in a patronizing manner, "Come, Don, you understand horses better than I. Just take the reins to-day like a good fellow, will you?" And he was just going to jump into the vacant seat beside Sue, when Donald's strong hand calmly placed him to one side, and Donald himself as calmly took the empty place. Charlie looked somewhat disconcerted, but there was nothing left for him to do but to take the front seat with the best grace he could muster. Sue was greatly amused, but restrained her mirth out of consideration for her cousin's feelings.

As they glided quickly over the sparkling snow amid the noisy tinkling of the bells, Charlie could catch snatches of conversation. To his disgust he noticed that the couple behind him talked either of philosophy, nor science, nor travels, but on the most trifling everyday subjects, in which both seemed suddenly to take great interest.

"Do you expect to skate when you return to the city?" he heard Donald ask. "Perhaps—I don't know," returned Sue. Then came something that Charlie did not catch; he glanced over his shoulder and caught Sue in the act of blushing—actually blushing, and looking remarkably pretty at the same time. "I believe she rather likes him. By Love, he should have her; she's a thousand times too good for him!" Charlie still felt the pressure of that big hand on his arm, and an uncontrollable desire possessed him to pitch his cousin into the snow and take his place.

A remarkably fine tree was selected; a quantity of evergreen was cut down, and they started homeward in good time and in the best of spirits, thoroughly satisfied with their morning's work.

The three remaining guests were expected by that afternoon's train. All drove to the station to meet them. This time Charlie was triumphant. There was not room for all in the large sleigh, so he had his own little cutter brought out, and by force of arms and strategy he carried Sue off with him.

It was not till they had all gathered round the tea-table that Sue had an opportunity to observe the late arrivals. Miss Frances was a bright, stylish-looking girl, with no absolutely good features, except her eyes, but with no very bad ones; she was perfectly at her ease, was very graceful, and talked well. Charlie was devoting himself to her assiduously. His own friend was a grave-looking young man of about twenty-three or four, a curate. One could scarcely imagine friends more different, yet they had always been chums since their earliest school days. This was the first time he had been at the manor; and Charlie, who was a kind-hearted fellow and possessed a slight propensity for match-making, which is supposed to be exclusively feminine, had fondly cherished the hope that his old friend and his sister would make a match of it. But the fates had willed it differently, and already Arthur was conversing amicably with Ada. Old Miss Gerald, their aunt, was a quiet, kind old lady, whom all loved, young and old. Her many sorrows had opened her heart to the smallest sufferings of others.

Sue was impatient till tea was over. She had a letter in her pocket which she longed to read. At the first opportunity, she retired to her favourite nook in the parlour, to peruse it undisturbed. She read intently, her face softening with love at the news of the loved ones at home. Suddenly she started. What was this? "You say one of your guests is Mr. Ashfield," so the letter ran. "Mrs. Sinclair was speaking of him to me the other day, praising him greatly. She says he is engaged to her niece, and the marriage is to take place in a few months. Perhaps you know this already; but you spoke so favourably of him in your letter that I thought I would warn you to take care of that little tender heart of yours, darling." Sue could read no more. He was engaged. Why had they never mentioned it? and why had he acted thus? It was too late now. She did care for him. But nobody need ever guess it. Nobody should ever guess it. And her mouth took a determined, almost hard expression. Just then she was summoned to the piano; she crushed the half-read letter into her pocket and went. She passed Charlie in crossing the room, and beckoned him to come and turn over the leaves for her. Had any one asked her, she could certainly not have told why she spoke to him in such a merry tone, and beckoned almost coquettishly.

"How very witty Miss Gerald is," remarked Miss Frances to Donald. "I suppose she is your cousin also?"

"Not at all," returned the Don quite testily. "She is no relation whatever." He had taken a most unreasoning dislike to Miss Pet, and that young lady, after exerting all her charms to put him in good humour, and having signally failed, pronounced him an ill-bred fellow, and talked to Charlie for the rest of the evening. Sue had retired.

"Annie, she'll do," remarked Charlie sententiously, as brother and sister paused in the passage, as usual, to wish each other good night. "Who'll do?" "Why, Miss Frances, of course!" "Oh, Sue!" returned Annie. She had scarcely had time to close her bed-room door, when there was a gentle tap on it, and in came Pet herself.

"Sit down, dear," cried she. "And let us have a talk. I have been longing to speak to you all evening; I have something so important to tell you."

"Well, what is it, Pet?" asked Annie when they were both seated on the sofa.

"Guess!" said Pet softly, looking up with blushes on her cheeks.

Annie had her suspicions, but declared her inability to guess.

"Well, then, dear—he—you know who I mean—proposed the day before I left."

"And you said yes, of course?"

Pet nodded assent.

"Poor Charlie!" thought Annie.

CHAPTER V.

"Yes, there is certainly a change in Sue," said Annie, meditatively.

"She makes a bewitching little flirt. Do you think Charlie's heart is really quite safe?"

"Oh, yes; I am sure of that, else Sue would never do it. They are simply playing a game which both seem to enjoy. Only I must confess I am disappointed in Sue. It's not exactly that I think flirting—at least, that kind of harmless flirting—wrong, but I thought Sue was different."

The two girls were sitting in a little study off the billiard-room, where the subjects of their conversation were now playing. Sue's merry laugh interrupted them, and they paused to listen.

"Well, Charlie! I declare that was almost as awkwardly played as the Don himself could have done it!"

"You're awfully hard on Donald, Sue."

"What do you mean, Sir?"

"Why, have not you noticed how melancholy he has looked lately?"

"If you mean cross, why I agree with you."

"Well, who would have thought you were such friends a week ago?" was Charlie's indiscreet remark.

"Come, Master Charlie, I object to being lectured, and I am not aware that I ever constituted you my mentor," retorted Sue, and walked over to the window, where she stood in full view of the cousins. Her face was flushed and her head thrown back with an air of offended dignity, exaggerated to hide an expression of sadness which hovered around her mouth and eyes.

"I take it all back, Sue," said Charlie with mock penitence; "abuse the Don as much as you like as long as you keep good friends with me!"

So Sue relented and put an end to the farce, only to commence with some other five minutes later.

Certainly Sue was a bewitching little flirt. She was witty and graceful, and coquettish. She and Charlie got on admirably; both understood that the whole thing meant nothing; a pleasant way of passing the Christmas holidays. Charlie thought—perhaps Sue could have imagined a pleasanter one. They went through all the stages except the sentimental. Charlie had little taste for that, and his fair cousin a very strong distaste for it. If things done in the sight of all men are harmless, this flirtation was innocent enough. Sue was always livelier when they were all together, and avoided as much as possible tete-a-tete with her cousin.

Charlie was quite right in what he said about Donald Ashfield. If Sue had not been blinded she must have pitied him. He considered himself the most miserable man on earth, and Sue the most heartless little coquette. He made a pretence of being obliged to read, to escape some of their social gatherings, where he had no one to talk to, and every one evidently looked upon him in the light of a wet-blanket—which he himself admitted to be a just criticism. Even his own sister seemed of late to have ears and eyes for some one besides himself. After Annie had informed her brother of Pet's engagement, that young lady was generally left to Donald to entertain; and very little entertainment she would have got I fear, had not the Fates, in the shape of a telegram, called her home a couple of days after her arrival. The only one who took pity on poor Don was Miss Gerald. She listened to all his cynical remarks about the world in general and womankind in particular, talked soothingly to him, and readily succeeded in pacifying him and turning his chafing rage into a resigned sadness, which was pitiful to behold. Quite a friendship sprang up between the young man and the old lady; and strange to say, Sue also had learned to love her dear old aunt's company more than ever. Her simple goodness and faith calmed the girl's ruffled feelings, and a day seldom passed without an hour spent in Miss Gerald's little room.

And so Christmas drew near, though in two hearts within the old manor there was little sign of peace.

It was now the Thursday before Christmas. For the last two days all had been busy decorating the house, all except Annie and Sue, who had charge of the tree. To-night they were going in a body to help decorate the village church.

It was a quaint old building, small, with low ceilings, and plain glass Gothic windows. Sue was sitting in one of the transepts busily twining twigs of evergreen into a garland; Charlie was helping to carry in the great branches of cedar. She was mentally comparing this with her father's bright little church, and wishing herself there with all her heart.

"Miss Gerald," said a well-known voice hoarsely near her. She started, thinking of that other time in the parlour when he had thus spoken her name.

"Well, Mr. Ashfield?"

"I really wonder you condescend to speak to me!" exclaimed he, bitterly. Poor Donald! that temper of his was too much for him. He had made up his mind to ask Sue calmly and dispassionately for an explanation of her conduct.

"I don't understand, Mr. Ashfield," returned Sue quietly. "It is true we have not spoken much to each other of late; but if you think, you will remember that I have had nothing to do with that. You keep away from us all as much as possible." Her quiet manner exasperated him.

"I will remember! I *do* remember that for some reason, unknown to me, you have avoided and treated me as less than a stranger for nearly a week; and I protest that no lady has a right to be friendly and—and pleasant with a man one day, and, as it were, cut him dead the next!" he spoke roughly.

Sue drew herself up. "Mr. Ashfield, you forget yourself. Whatever you may think of my conduct, you have no right to speak as you did just now."

"No, I suppose I have not," he replied, forcing himself to speak as coolly as she. "But I had thought you so different, and the best of us don't like to be obliged to acknowledge ourselves mistaken!" and with a short laugh he left her.

"If he is engaged to some one else, how can he care as he seems to?" meditated Sue. "And how dishonourable to act as he has done? I, too, thought him so different. Could there be any mistake?"

Charlie came up just then, and Sue received him with almost her usual face, and more than her usual gay banter. And for the rest of the evening she devoted herself assiduously to the decorations.

Donald had left the church almost immediately, cursing his temper and stupidity. He had wanted to come to an understanding with Sue, and now things were more unsatisfactory than ever.

CHAPTER VI.

And so passed Friday and Saturday. Such busy days that Sue had little time for thought. She had become recklessly gay since that night in the church; and even Charlie began to have suspicions that cousin Sue was changed.

After church on Sunday, Sue repaired to the little study beside the billiard-room, where Miss Gerald was fond of sitting. She found the old lady there as she had hoped.

"Auntie," said she, seating herself on a stool beside the fire, "I'm home-sick. Isn't it strange when everyone here is so kind and good to me?"

"Is that it, dear? And is that what has made those poor little cheeks look pale these last few days? Poor child!"

"No, auntie," said Sue, truthfully, and her cheeks were rosy enough as she spoke. "That wasn't the only thing; indeed I'm afraid that wasn't it at all!"

"What was it, then, dear? Don't be afraid to tell me," said the old lady, drawing her chair near to Sue's stool, and taking the girl's hand in hers.

Sue commenced hesitatingly and with effort, and the relief of speaking out what had so long troubled her helped her to tell her little tale clearly and simply. How, before she was aware of it herself, she learned to care for Donald; about her mother's letter, and that was all. Only that she longed to be at home again. But by not so much as a syllable did she blame Donald.

"Poor darling! poor darling!" murmured the old lady, softly stroking her little niece's hair the while. It is hard, dear, but we all have our troubles to bear in this world. God knows best. I don't often talk of my own troubles, dearie, but I will tell you one of them now and it may help you to bear yours." And the old lady told her niece the story of her first and only love. He was a young missionary, fervent and fearless. They were betrothed when she was only sixteen, too young to accompany him on his first mission, which was to China. After five long weary years of waiting he returned; they were to be married in a month, and sail immediately afterwards back to China. The day before that fixed for the wedding, the two lovers took their last walk to a hill near by, from whence to bid farewell for many years of the country they both loved. The days were very long at that time of the year, and though it was nearly nine when they retraced their steps, it was still daylight. They had to cross the railway track just where it issued from a tunnel in the hill-side;—railways were novelties in those days. In crossing Miss Gerald stepped incautiously and caught her foot in the switch. She tried to remove it, but could not; and while she was still struggling to free herself, they heard with terror the shriek of the approaching train. Her lover, quick as lightning threw himself between her and the coming locomotive, folded his arms around her and whispered a word of comfort, a word of trust in God. There was a brief moment of horror, and the train was upon them. He was killed instantly,—the miraculously saved.

Sue's eyes brimmed over as she looked up into the sweet old face above her,—telling of suffering without complaint and of agony without bitterness,—and it did help her to bear her own trouble. She went out of that little room with a heart more at peace than she had for many days.

Miss Gerald sat musing long after her niece left her. First, on memories of old times and old faces; then on Sue's little tale of woe. She sat expecting Donald to come in for his accustomed Sunday chat; and she was not disappointed, though he came later than usual.

"Sit down, my boy; I want to talk to you," she said cheerfully.

Donald obeyed.

"Do you know I have been watching Ada and Mr. Holland lately, and I have come to the conclusion that they are not at all indifferent to each other."

Donald looked amazed.

"Oh, I see more with these old eyes of mine than you imagine. Among other things, my dear nephew, I have seen that you have not been in good spirits lately."

Donald moved uneasily.

"Come now! Confide in your old aunt! Are the letters you received from a certain young lady not satisfactory? Have you had a quarrel?"

Donald looked utterly mystified.

"Oh, yes, you did not take your old auntie into your confidence, but I know nevertheless. A little bird told me all about it."

"Indeed, my aunt, I wish the little bird had performed the same service for me. I assure you I don't know what you mean."

"Seriously, my dear nephew, you don't understand me!"

"Most seriously, auntie. Please explain yourself."

"Then I am very glad of it!" exclaimed Miss Gerald with a sigh of relief.

Donald was utterly at sea.

"Pray, tell me why my ignorance is so pleasing to you, Auntie?"

"Because, my dear boy," explained his Aunt, smiling on him benignly. "Because a little bird told me you were engaged, and I'm very glad to hear it is not true."

A great many things had grown clear to Donald while Miss Gerald was speaking.

"Who was the little bird, Auntie?" he asked eagerly.

"Oh, as for that, I think you must guess!" replied his aunt gaily, delighted with her afternoon's discovery.

And I think Donald made a pretty correct guess.

CHAPTER VII.

The next day was the last before Christmas. It had snowed in the night and a sleigh-ride was decided upon as the most enjoyable way of passing the morning.

The large sleigh and the cutter were soon before the door. Charlie had asked Sue to drive with him in the latter, and she had immediately accepted, having made up her mind to ask him a question that morning, which till then she could not have trusted herself to speak with the requisite calmness and indifference.

It was a lovely day. The snowy burden of the trees sparkled dazzlingly in the sun. Usually Sue's spirits rose with the barometer; to-day she was subdued.

As they neared home, she turned round suddenly, and asked her cousin, as if the idea had just occurred to her, "By the way, Charlie, how is it you never mentioned the fact of Donald's engagement when you were speaking of him? Now if I had been a susceptible country lass, instead of a heartless city girl, who knows what might not have been the direful consequence?"

"I never mentioned it, for the very good reason that it is not true. At least not that I know of."

Not a muscle of Sue's face betrayed the shock she experienced, she scarcely knew whether of joy or regret.

"Well, all I know about it is what mamma wrote me. She said he was engaged to the niece of a friend of ours, a Miss Sinclair."

"Oh, phew! that's another Ashfield, a cousin of the Don's. *He's* no more engaged than I am."

Sue continued talking with animation till they reached the manor. She was afraid to allow herself to think, but she seemed to hear a voice repeating over and over again:—"It has all been a mistake, —a mistake,—a mistake." But nevertheless her heart felt wonderfully light.

She had no time to collect her thoughts before dinner, for it was late when they reached home. She did not notice, as she hurried up to her room, that Charlie, with an exclamation of delight, seized a square parcel lying on the hall table.

"An English post-mark! What is it?" asked his sister.

"Something nice," replied he mysteriously, as he carried it off with him upstairs.

After dinner Sue took her seat at the parlour window to put some last stitches in a present for the morrow. The room was empty, and she could freely indulge her thoughts. They did not take very clear form,—a good deal of uneasiness as to how things would end,—shame when she thought of her conduct to Charlie, which she began to suspect had been simple flirtation,—but beyond all, and pervading all, a feeling of happiness, so that she involuntarily smiled as she worked.

Her back was towards the door, and she did not see Charlie enter softly, holding in his hand a sprig of mistletoe, the contents of the mysterious box. He approached noiselessly, and holding it over her head, stooped and kissed her. She sprang to her feet, flushing scarlet, just in time to see Donald beat a hasty retreat from the door.

She had been angry before—she was furious now.

"How dared you, sir?" she exclaimed in a voice trembling with anger. Charlie, abashed, mumbled some confused words of apology.

"Don't speak to me—and leave me instantly! I will never, never forgive you!"

Charlie retired, covered with confusion, leaving the mistletoe lying on the floor where he had dropped it.

Sue threw herself into her chair. From head to foot she burned with shame and anger. Had Charlie taken that liberty a few days before, she would certainly have been very indignant, but she might have forgiven him. She certainly would have been more forgiving even then, had not the unlucky Donald made his appearance just at that moment. But as it was she could have stamped the offending mistletoe under her feet in her anger. It was her own fault, she told herself over and over again. She had lowered herself by flirting, actually flirting—she no longer hesitated to apply the word—and now she deserved this final humiliation.

All that day Donald had been trying to get a chance to speak alone with Sue, but without success. We already know the occasion of his last failure. He had felt supremely happy till then, but that little scene in the parlour had plunged him from the seventh heaven of hope to the darkest abyss of despair.

He was knocking the billiard-balls around aimlessly, when the crest-fallen Charlie joined him.

"I say," said the latter, glad to tell his grievances to any one, "I got myself