



The Family Circle.

"Home, Sweet Home."

Maud Rochester's Valentine.

CHAPTER I.

"Who could have sent it to me? Who could it have been? I don't know the writing! How dared anyone send me such a valentine!"

Maud Rochester's beautiful face flushes angrily as she utters the above question half aloud, and rises impatiently from her low seat by the fire in her boudoir, which is a dainty, luxurious room, well befitting its fair occupant—who although St. Valentine had laid a multitude of offerings at her feet, through the medium of the postman, on this St. Valentine's morning, seems anything but pleased.

Her eyes—wonderful, lustrous, beautiful eyes—have an unmistakable glitter of annoyance; the small red mouth, which is so beautiful and so eminently kissable, that one cannot but regret the expression of pride which curves the crimson lips is set firmly, and the lips are compressed with anger; while the pretty jeweled fingers are clenched into two diminutive fists, which look as if they would be dangerous if they could.

Now, Miss Rochester's cause for annoyance is not a very grave one. Among the numerous valentines which she found heaped up beside her plate on the breakfast-table this morning is one which puzzles and angers her, and which she is inclined to think more about than about all the rest put together.

Most of the offerings are costly and beautiful ones—Rimmel's most exquisite creations in the shape of sachets, and marvellous trifles of silver lace and chubby Cupids; dainty fans and elegant articles of jewellery—of which Maud has more than she can wear already, for not only is she a belle, but she is an heiress, and she has admirers and suitors by the score.

She has opened the dainty packets with the utmost indifference, and hardly glancing at their contents, has tossed them aside one after the other, until she had come to this large square envelope, which contains merely an embossed sheet of paper, a clever little pencil-sketch of her own face, with these lines written beneath:

"Lady Clara Vere de Vere,
Of me you shall not win renown;
You thought to break a country heart
For pasture ere you went to town.
At me you smiled, but unregarded,
I saw the snare and I retired;
The daughter of a hundred ears,
You are not one to be desired!"

"Lady Clara Vere de Vere,
I know you proud to bear your name;
Your pride is yet no mate for mine,
Too proud to care from whence I came.
Nor would I break for your sweet sake
A heart that dotes on true charms;
A simple maiden in her flower
Is worth a hundred coats of arms!"

"Lady Clara Vere de Vere,
Some meeker pupil you must find;
For were you queen of all that is,
I could not stoop to such a mind;
You sought to prove how I could love,
And my disdain is my reply;
The lion on your old stone gates
Is not more cold to you than I."

Maud Rochester is by no means a general favorite, nay, her pride makes many dislike her; and when at school she roused the ire of many of her companions by her cold, reserved manner and haughty demeanor. Thus it happens that the little sting of truth in her valentine wounds our fair heroine, and makes the lustrous eyes flash, the red lips curl, the fair cheeks flush with resentment.

"Who could have sent it?" she murmurs, half aloud, as she paces up and down the pretty room, her soft draperies sweeping the velvet-pile carpet on which her tiny high-heeled slippers made no sound. "Who dared to send it? I wonder if—but no," she adds, with an impatient gesture, "he is too much of a gentleman to send me such a thing; besides"—ah, how the sweet rose-bush mounts to cheek and brow, and how the lustrous eyes soften—"I have never been proud to him." She takes up the paper again, and examines it with the most minute attention.

"It is a very peculiar handwriting," she resumes in a moment. "I am sure, if I had ever seen it, I should not have forgotten it. Whose can it be? Whose can it be?"

At this moment a knock at the door makes her start slightly and crush the valentine into her pocket, as she answers by a rather impatient "Come in," and the knock is followed by the entrance of a fine-looking young man of seven or eight and twenty, who glances at the heap of offerings on the gipsy table with a little laugh and a shrug of his shoulders. "Poor victims," he said, laughing. "It must be hard lines for the postman, fair coz. The sleigh will be round in a quarter of an hour. Can you be ready?"

"Of course I can; I had no idea it was so late. Did you ever see such a heap of useless articles, Arthur?" she answers, laughingly. "How much better it would have been to have given me the money they cost the poor!"

"Ingrate," says Arthur Rochester, with a laugh. "So that's the way you look upon such offerings? I am very glad I resisted my inclination to send you one."

"I am very glad you did; but you can give the money to the Children's Hospital. There is the list on my davenport; put your name down while I go and put on my hat."

So saying, Maud leaves the room and goes up stairs to don her skating-costume; while her cousin obeys her mandate,

and puts his name down on the list of subscribers to the Children's Hospital, adding after it the magical figure £5.

Arthur Rochester is the only son of Sir Weston's younger brother, and to him the title will descend at his uncle's death. Report says that Sir Weston would have no objection to receive him in a nearer relationship, and that Arthur is in love with his beautiful cousin; but Maud knows that his affection for her is purely fraternal, and that she herself is very fond of Arthur in a sisterly fashion.

Mr. Rochester's sleigh is waiting when Maud comes downstairs in her dainty skating-costume of dark blue velvet and chinchilla, looking lovely as a dream, and as bright as the morning itself; for although she has not forgotten the obnoxious lines, she has laid aside her resentment *pro tem.*, with a resolve that if she can discover the sender, she will be revenged to the utmost of her power for the insult thus offered her; and the cousins drive away together in the best of spirits, chatting and laughing gaily as they go rapidly over the snow, the bell ringing cheerily as the horse tosses its graceful head.

Very soon they reach their destination—a small lake in the grounds of a neighboring estate, which the owner opens to some of his friends during the cold weather for the purpose of skating, and where already some score of people are assembled.

Miss Rochester receives a very warm reception, and is soon surrounded by a little court of admirers, although her cousin usurps the privilege of putting on her skates, and reminds her of her promise to go round the lake with him.

"There is Arlington," he says, gaily, as hand in hand they glide gracefully away. "Who is that with him, Maud? What a beautiful little creature!"

Miss Rochester glances at the couple indicated, and the rose-flush on her cheek deepens slightly as she does so. The man is a tall, stalwart, handsome specimen of the *genus homo*, and he is bending over a fair young girl, who is evidently taking her first lesson in skating, for she clings to her companion's arm with helpless dependence, and looks pale and nervous. She is nevertheless, a beautiful little creature, and Arthur Rochester's admiration is excusable, for even her awkwardness—people are very awkward when they first begin to skate, as doubtless you are aware, reader mine—has a pretty grace about it, so naturally graceful in every movement is the same slight, fairy-like figure, while the eyes lifted to Captain Arlington's are blue as forget-me-nots, and a mass of golden hair escapes under her sealskin hat, and falls over her jacket of the same fur.

"Yes, she is very pretty," Maud says, indifferently, wondering why she experiences such a keen pang at her heart as she notices the young officer's tender care of his companion and her familiar dependence on him.

"Pretty—she is lovely! I must get an introduction to her!" Arthur says, enthusiastically, for he is decidedly a squire of dames.

"Perhaps Captain Arlington [may not be inclined to give you one]," answers Maud, languidly. "He seems very devoted."

Arthur glances at her quickly. Something in her tone strikes him, and he remembers that she two or three occasions on which Captain Arlington has met his cousin he had evidently been more struck by her wondrous beauty than was quite prudent for a young officer of small fortune; and for a moment Arthur Rochester wonders if his cousin—beautiful, proud Maud—has returned that interest. Certainly the rose-flush has deepened, but that may be the exercise of skating, and as her eyes meet Captain Arlington's, she bows slightly, and passes on with Arthur, who sees that the young officer bends over his companion and says something which makes her look after Maud's graceful figure with eager admiration in her sweet blue eyes.

By-and-by, having gone all round the lake with Maud, her cousin relinquishes her to some other admirer, and Miss Rochester sees him skate towards Captain Arlington, and that introduces him to the golden-haired girl, who the latter accepts his arm as well, and thus makes more progress than she has hitherto done.

Miss Rochester's admirers find her ever more proud and cold to-day than ever, although her beauty, heightened by exercise, is so brilliant that they cannot tear themselves away from her side. But, after a time, Maud professes herself fatigued, and, dismissing them, seats herself on one of the hand-sleighs, nestles her hands into her muff, and gives herself up to a reverie, which is broken at last by a deep, musical voice, asking if she is tired, and for permission to push her round the lake.

Looking up with a little start, Maud's lustrous dark eyes meet Captain Arlington's, and the red color fades a little on her cheek.

"Did I startle you? I am so sorry! Forgive me!" he says, gently. "I have left my sister with Mr. Rochester, who seems a far more proficient teacher than I am, and I thought I might venture to intrude on your solitude."

"Intrude!" Maud repeats, with a sweet, sudden smile, as one tiny gloved hand steals out of its warm nest and goes out to meet his. "It is anything but an intrusion, Captain Arlington. Is that young lady your sister? I did not know you possessed one."

"I have that happiness," he said, smiling, his handsome face brightening under her sweet glance and gracious manner. "Will you allow me to introduce Lily to you presently, Miss Rochester? She is staying in the neighborhood for a time with Lady Saunders."

"I shall be very happy to make her acquaintance," Maud answers, graciously. "How lovely she is, Captain Arlington! You must be very proud of her."

Captain Arlington smiles, and looks pleased at her praise; and then, swiftly and vigorously, he begins to propel the sleigh. And as they speed over the ice together, Maud feels wonderfully bright and happy, and forgets all about the disagreeable valentine which had so annoyed her.

Captain Arlington is a very delightful companion. He is well read and intellectual, has been abroad for some years, and has made good use of his eyes, and ears, and intellect. Perhaps Maud's beautiful, interested face and earnest attention inspire him, for he is even more agreeable than usual, and an hour passes over swiftly.

How happy they are, absorbed in each other! Gilbert Arlington avowedly (to himself, of course) is in love. He had fallen head over heels into the abyss on his very first introduction to Maud; and although he feels himself that such an affection is almost hopeless—for Maud is beautiful, high-born, and wealthy, while he, although a gentleman, is poor—still he cannot quite lose sight of a glimmer of hope, and, like a moth, plays round the candle, singeing his wings and endangering his happiness.

He loves her with a depth of love which he himself hardly conceives. He is naturally rather sensitive and reserved; but all reserve is thrown to the winds now. And although he

says no word of love to her, Maud's eyes droop under the love in his, and the colour comes and goes in her cheek as she listens to the tender, impassioned tones of his voice. She is very happy, unspeakably happy, although she does not try to analyze the reason for that happiness, and ascribes it to the blue sky, the clear frosty air, which is truly as exhilarating as a glass of champagne, and the swift, pleasant motion of the sleigh as it flew along.

"I think it must be time to go," says Maud, at last. "Papa does not enjoy his luncheon if he is obliged to take it alone. I wonder whether Arthur is ready to go. They seem in some confusion over there, Captain Arlington," she adds, eagerly. "I am afraid! I think something has happened!"

She rises as she speaks, and turns to her companion with a quick little movement of sympathy, for she has caught sight of something which has drained the colour from her cheek, and she wonders whether he has seen it also.

He has seen it, and for a moment his dark cheek has turned pale as her own, and unconsciously he is pressing the little hand which she has slipped into his so closely that the rings cut into the soft flesh.

"It is Lily!" he says, huskily. "I am afraid she is hurt!"

"I think she has only fainted," Maud answers, reassuredly, as they hurry across the ice to the group gathered round Miss Arlington, which opens to let them pass.

Miss Rochester is right in her conjecture that Lily has fainted. She has slipped on the ice and slightly sprained her foot, and the pain had caused her to faint. She is seated on a chair, and the pretty golden head is resting on Mr. Rochester's shoulder as he stands beside her, looking alarmed and so concerned; but he makes way for Captain Arlington, who takes his place by his sister.

"She is not much hurt," Arthur says, in a subdued tone. "Maud, I am glad you are here. Send these people away, will you? What is the object of all this pushing and crowding?"

"I think she will be better immediately," Maud says, as she bends over Lily, and puts her vinaigrette to her nostrils. "If you will leave Miss Arlington to my care," she adds, glancing up, "it will be better for her not to see so many faces when she recovers."

Gradually the on-lookers fell away, and when Lily opens her eyes, she sees Maud's fair, pitiful face bending over her with a tender, reassuring smile.

"You are better?" she says, smiling. "Yes; that is well. You have frightened these good folks dreadfully," continues Maud, with a glance at her cousin, and Captain Arlington. "My cousin Mr. Rochester, is *au de-sespoir*, as he imagines himself to be the cause of your fall."

"No, indeed," Lily says, eagerly, with a sweet, shy glance at Arthur's concerned face. "It was all my own. I wanted to be very clever, you know, Bertie," she adds, turning to her brother, "and let go of Mr. Rochester's arm."

"You feel quite better now, dear?" her brother asks, tenderly, as he bends over her. "What a foolish little lassie it was to faint!"

"Yes, I am quite ashamed of myself," she answers, laughingly. "Then she thanks Maud with her pretty, shy manner, and turns to her brother. 'I think, if you will take me, I should like to go home,' she says. 'I am quite able to walk, Gilbert, indeed.'"

"I could not think of allowing you to do so," Maud says, decidedly. "Arthur's sleigh is here, and he can drive you home first, and come back for me."

"Happy thought!" says Arthur, eagerly. "You will not refuse to trust yourself to me again, I hope, Miss Arlington? Your brother will be with us, you know."

"I am not at all afraid," Lily answers, with the most charming smile, and Arthur goes off to order the sleigh round to the lake, leaving Maud to improve her acquaintance with Miss Arlington, which she does with a winning graciousness which makes Lily's heart all her own, and rivets the chains she has already cast over Captain Arlington; and when the sleigh comes round Lily feels truly sorry to lose sight of her beautiful friend.

"Will you come and see me?" Maud says, smiling. "Will you bring her, Captain Arlington—please do, and soon! And you must send me word how she is after her adventure."

"You are very kind," Captain Arlington answers; and Lily lifts her sweet face to Maud, who bends down and kisses her with an impulsive manner which is very unusual to the young heiress.

"How beautiful she is, and how sweet!" Lily Arlington says, enthusiastically, as her brother helps her into the house, and Arthur Rochester drives away. "How could Annie Montrose say that she was so proud!"

"Did Miss Montrose say she was proud?" says Gilbert, musingly, as he thinks of the sweet eyes which had met his so shyly of the soft, low voice which had uttered such tender, gracious words. "How did she know?"

"Oh, they were at school together," answers Lily. "And Annie was always talking of Maud Rochester, saying, how proud she was, and how much she thought of herself. She did not like her at all."

"She has very bad taste," says Gilbert, smiling. "Don't you think so, Lily?"

"Indeed, yes," Lily answers, earnestly. "She is so sweet and kind. Oh, Gilbert, I do not wonder at."

She breaks off suddenly and blushes; but Captain Arlington does not ask her to finish the little speech—perhaps he guesses its purport.

That evening he sends a little note to Miss Rochester, telling her that Lily has sustained no ill effects from her adventure; and Sir Weston thinks his fair young daughter very absent and *distracted* all the evening, and she pleads a headache as an excuse for retiring early.

"You are over-tired, my pet," Sir Weston says, tenderly. "Arthur has let you fatigue yourself to-day."

"Arthur left his heart on the lake," Maud answers gaily. "He fell in love at first sight."

"Did he?" laughs Sir Weston. "Who is the lady?"

"Miss Arlington—such a pretty creature," answers Maud; and Arthur laughs, and colours slightly.

"She must belong to a fascinating family," he says, slyly. "Ask Maud what she thinks of Miss Arlington's brother, Uncle Weston."

But before Sir Weston can ask, Maud turns to her cousin with flashing eyes.

"Captain Arlington is nothing to me but an acquaintance," she says, haughtily. "I think as little of him as he does of me, and I beg you will not make me the subject of your jest."

She sweeps away, leaving Arthur in consternation, and Sir Weston amused at the little outbreak. But when her maid is dismissed that night, Maud Rochester, the proud, beautiful heiress, throws herself on her knees by her bedside, and breaks into a passion of tears.

"I love him!" she sobs, as she hides her burning face in her little hands. "I love him, while he—disposes me!"