MATTIE DUNCAN;

OR,

LEFT BY THE TIDE

CHAPTER XII.

MADGE MERRIWEATHER GIVES HER FATHER A HINT, AND MAKES A NEW ACQUAINTANCE.

"What is your name, my dear?" she asked.

"Duncan," replied Mattie, quite aware of the wrong construction Madge was likely to put upon her answer.

"Duncan!" exclaimed Miss Merriweather. "Isn't that an odd name for a girl?"

"A good many girls in Rothesay have the same name," returned Miss Mattie seriously.

"I thought it was a boy's name only," said the owner of the pony carriage.

"My father has the same name," said her new acquaintance; "but he calls me Mattie when he speaks to me; he never addresses me by my surname."

And then she opened her big eyes wide upon Madge and broke into a great laugh, in which her companion joined, while she threatened her with her whip.

"And so you are going to Ascog?" suggested Madge.

"Yes, and oh! so nicely," said the cripple. "Thanks to" and here she paused, and looking happily into the other's face, added, "the 'bus being off." She saw that Madge was pleased with the way she put her thanks, so she went on—

"Do you know, this is the first holiday I have had for ever so long—for years and years?"

"So you are making holiday?" said Madge, judging that any expression of sympathy with the girl upon the scarcity of her holidays was not wanted.

"Yes, I am going to Ascog to see the sea," Mattie confided to her companion.

"Only for that?" queried Madge.

"Isn't that enough?" quickly responded the little creature.

"But you scarcely require to take such a journey only for that," argued Madge pleasantly. "You have the sea before you now," and she pointed with her whip to the waters of the bay, along the shore of which they were driving.

"That the sea!" said Mattie contemptuously. "That is water that comes round a corner, and nobody would call anything which does that the sea."

"Oh, I beg your pardon," said Madge apologetically. "I perceive that my notions of the sea have been mean."

"I don't know, but mine are different," returned the little thing, while a dreary look gathered in her eyes. "Here you just look across to where you can go in a boat. Now, at Ascog, you can begin with the water at your feet and look away over it till you can see no farther, and you have nothing in the eye of your body to stop the eye of your thought. There you have a sea that is as good to look at as the sky; and such a sea is always better than the sky, for, while it does not cramp your thought, you can touch it and play with it."

"Do you love to play with the sea?" asked Madge kindly.

"Well, I have not had much chance to do so," replied Mattie. "Do you know, that though they call me a native of Rothesay, I have not been six times, I think, as far round the shore as we are now?"

"They call you!" exclaimed Madge. "And are you not a native of the place?"

"Perhaps it would be truer to call me a native of Rothesay Churchyard," said Mattie, relapsing for a moment into one of her grim moods. "You are not afraid of ghosts and uncanny folks generally, are you?"

"You're a queer girl," said Madge, regarding her earnestly.

"So they say—those who say I am a native of Rothesay, I mean," replied Mattie, returning the gaze of the other steadily.

"Ah! now I know who you are," cried Madge with a merry laugh. "You are the sexton's daughter. I was sure you were familiar to me in some way, though I was equally sure I had never seen you before."

"Dear, dear," said Mattie with a sigh, "to thing how one becomes notorious. It's a shame how people talk."

"Ah, but I've only heard—good of you." It was unfortunate that Madge hesitated a little before uttering the word "good;" for Miss Mattie was sharp enough to catch the almost inappreciable pause.

"You mean that you have heard no actual evil of me," she said, "but you've heard also that I'm queer, and that I have a reel leg and a reel head and all sorts of peculiarities, isn't that so?" and she cast a piercing and imperative glance upon her companion.

"Iv'e heard that you have a very lively imagination," returned Madge, smiling, "and I find that I have not been misinformed.

"Oh, but——" began Mattie.

"Oh, but," echoed Madge, interrupting her, "I'd advise you not to let that same imagination run away with you."

"As it hasn't much to carry in the way of a body and I might not be able to check it, you mean," said Mattie, laughing in spite of herself. "But who told you about me?" she added coaxingly. "Tell me, do, there's a dear." She never dreamt that her familiarity might give offence; nor did it.

"What would you say to a gentleman who takes a great interest in you?" asked Madge.

In a moment the cripple had turned away her inquisitive eyes, while over her poor, wan cheek the faintest possible blush gathered suddenly. But the next instant she had regained full command of herself, and confronting Madge again as firmly as ever, and with a brightly droll look on her face which baffled even that young lady's sharp glance, said—

"And now I know; my prince of chief mourners has been telling tales. Are you a friend of Mr. Osprey's?"

"Are you what Mr. Osprey would call a witch?" replied Madge pleasantly.

"Well, now we've both been good girls and guessed our riddles correctly," said Mattie, with one of those sudden relapses into a close resemblance to childish prattle which puzzled every one who came across her, "tell me the true name of these birds that are making so much noise out there?"

"I don't know whether sea-mew or gull is the correct name," replied her companion.

"They are not Osprey's?" queried the other.

"No," laughed Madge, connecting in her own mind the appellation with the name of her friend. "Ospreys are a species of sea hawk, and therefore the natural enemies of gulls."

"And can gulls help being gulls?" asked Mattie with a look of the sweetest simplicity.

"Not that I know."

"And Ospreys must be Ospreys too, whether they will or no," was Mattie's next remark.

"Quite so," said Madge, laughing.

"But couldn't an Osprey be a gull at the same time?" Mattie said, continuing her parable.

"I'm sure I don't know," returned Madge; "but here is Mr. Osprey, he should be able to tell us. Woa Jerry!"

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