



Aubrey's Revenge.

CHAPTER XX.

"I feel like I was running away and leaving my new mother and all my grand-lady life behind me," she said to herself, with a gleeful little laugh. "I've half a mind never to go back."

And on she went, half fancying that ere long she should hear the boom and thunder of the great sea and catch sight of the gray old lighthouse towering up in the distance.

"Wouldn't it be good to get back to daddy and dear old Tom? How surprised they would be, and glad, too!" Kelpie had no doubt about that. The old man would take her in his arms and say, with tears trickling down his cheeks:

"Why, little woman, have you come back to old daddy?" And Tom—surely Tom could not laugh at her.

The color in her cheeks deepened and her heart beat faster at the thought, but she went on, taking no heed of time or distance.

Now and then a carriage whirled past or a pedestrian, muffled to the teeth, made his way through the whirling drifts; but they were nothing to Kelpie, and she scarcely gave them a glance.

She kept on, thrilled by a wild sense of freedom, until her storm coat was white and an aureole of snowflakes encircled her fair, fresh young face. Then, her breath growing short and her feet somewhat heavy, she sat down on the granite steps of a handsome building to rest for a moment and collect her thoughts, which seemed to be keeping time with the dancing snowflakes.

"I wonder where I am?" she thought vaguely, "and how long it will take me to get back to Van Cortlandt Place? Won't there be a racket if they miss me?"

She laughed softly, and then held her breath as the sound of exquisite music fell on her ears. The door of the church, on the steps of which she sat, had opened, and the organ was pealing within. Kelpie arose to her feet, and gazing down the long, dim aisles, caught sight of the twinkling lights and the white-robed priests swinging their censers.

Her heart thrilled with strange rapture and a sudden rush of tears blinded her eyes.

Half a dozen women came up the steps and went in with soft footsteps and bowed heads, and Kelpie followed in their wake.

They sank on their knees before the altar, and so did she.

Then the organ pealed, and the priests chanted, and the incense arose in fragrant clouds.

When it was all over Kelpie arose with the rest and made her way out, deeply touched by this new experience and wondering within herself how people could be content to spend their lives in dressing and dining and living luxurious idleness when the great outside world held such privileges as she had just witnessed.

This little lighthouse girl had never known a place of worship save the little stone chapel at Thatcher's Rock.

The storm was increasing as the gray twilight came on, and here and there a blaze of electric light flashed out over the snow-clad city.

Kelpie stood with a sudden thrill at her heart.

"Daddy is lighting the lamps at New Castle Light now," she said to herself.

"A young man, wearing a long fur overcoat and a cap of the same material pulled over his ears, stopped short in his rapid walk and regarded the girl curiously as she stood in the whirling storm with her face turned to the light. He hesitated an instant, started on, and then turned back.

"Beg your pardon," he said, "can I assist you in any way?"

Kelpie's thoughts were elsewhere, but his voice thrilled her like the notes of a half-forgotten melody. She turned and looked at him in the uncertain light.

"You are very kind, sir," she said. "I shall be glad if you'll tell me the nearest way back to Van Cortlandt Place. I'm a stranger in the city."

"A great wave of electric splendor flashed over the city at this moment, turning the swift-falling snow into a glittering whirl of diamonds and bringing out the girl's face into clear and startling relief.

"The young man started violently. 'Why, it is Kelpie!' he burst forth. The old lightkeeper's granddaughter had sturdy Puritan blood in her veins, and it showed itself. She did not move or evince the least surprise, though the heart in her bosom was fluttering like a frightened bird.

The young man's face grew white as he stared at her, almost as white as the snowflakes on his fur collar, and for one swift instant he bit his lip fiercely as if to keep down some terrible pain; but with his next breath the color rushed to his very temples and his eyes glowed as he caught hold of the girl's hands.

"I can scarcely believe my own eyes!" he cried. "I must be dreaming. You can't be my own, dear little Kelpie. It is impossible."

"I am Captain Stonestreet's granddaughter," answered Kelpie, with the dignity of a young princess.

CHAPTER XXI.

"My dear child, you must listen to reason!—We shall both freeze to death if we stand here much longer. You really must allow me to get a taxicab or a carriage and take you home."

"Pray don't stand here and freeze on my account, Mr. Fitzhugh," said Kelpie. "I prefer to walk home."

"The young man laughed. 'Why, you couldn't walk twenty yards in this blizzard to save your precious life,' he said. 'At any rate, I don't intend to let you try it. Didn't I understand you to say you want to go to Van Cortlandt Place?'"

"Yes."

"Good heavens! I'm booked for a dinner party at Van Cortlandt Place this evening, and it's nearly six o'clock now."

The young man spoke the last words in a sort of aside, holding fast to Kelpie's arm and looking distractedly in every direction for a carriage.

"Heaven be praised! Here comes a cab at last—rather a one-horse affair, but it will serve our purpose. Come along, my dear little girl."

Kelpie's black eyes were dancing, and an odd little smile dimpled the corners of her scarlet mouth. All the old half-forgotten admiration of the bygone summer blazed up fresh in Carroll Fitzhugh's heart as he looked at her.

"Where are you going to take me?" she demanded, as the cab came whirling up.

"Anywhere you desire to go," he answered gallantly. "But let me get you under cover first of all. The storm is getting beastly."

He caught her up boldly as she spoke, whisked her across the street,

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and stowed her away in the waiting cab.

"What street, sir?" shouted the cabman.

"Van Cortlandt Place, please," answered Kelpie before her companion had time to speak.

The door closed with a bang, the cabbie sprang to his seat, and away they went through the white, feathery snow.

"Well," said the young man, drawing a deep breath, "this must be a dream. I can't realize that I am sitting here with your hand in mine."

He made an attempt to possess himself of Kelpie's hand, but she drew it under the wide sleeve of her storm coat.

"I would rather not have you hold my hand, Mr. Fitzhugh," she said, quietly.

"Why, how unkind of you. You used to let me hold your hand last summer when I was lying ill at Thatcher's Rock."

"But you are not ill now, and we are not at Thatcher's Rock, which makes all the difference in the world."

"I don't see why it should. Oh, Kelpie, if you only knew how many times I've thought of you, you would not treat me like this. Do you remember that last day when my mother came and carried me off?"

"Oh, yes, I remember it distinctly."

"I hope you remember your promise, too. You said you would be glad to see me when I came back."

"But you didn't come back."

The young aristocrat flushed with pleasure.

"Oh, there's the rub," he said to himself. "The little beauty's in the sulks because I didn't show up at New Castle Light according to promise. I do wonder if she's come all the way to New York to hunt me up? I must find out."

"No, I didn't come back," Kelpie, he said aloud, "but Heaven knows it was no fault of mine. My affairs, or my mother's affairs, rather, kept me hard at work for a month or two, and then I started off on a yachting expedition, intending to take in New Castle Light and spend some weeks in the neighborhood of Shoal Islands. But the Pates were against me. My yacht was driven out of its way in an awful storm, and a few days later we were run down by a trading vessel one foggy night. The yacht went down, and more than half the crew perished. I was adrift for a day and a night on an inverted boat; a vessel picked me up and I lay for weeks in a serious condition. Oh, Kelpie, my dear, you can't ever imagine how I thought of you and longed for the sound of your sweet voice and the touch of your soft little hands through all those dreadful days."

He paused and put forth his hand, expecting, no doubt, that Kelpie would give him hers, but she kept it hidden in her sleeve, and after a moment he went on again:

"One night, when I was able to sit up a little, a white sea bird that had been following the vessel all day fluttered into my stateroom. It is a messenger from Kelpie, I said to myself, and I caught it and kept it

with me for days. Then I put a tiny locket, containing my picture, on a slender gold chain and fastened it under the bird's white wings, and sent it across the sea, hoping it might find its way to New Castle Light and bear you my message. Wasn't it foolish?"

The slender gold chain glittered about Kelpie's fair throat that very moment, and the tiny locket rose and fell with every passionate throb of her girlish heart, but she only replied, with a soft little laugh:

"Very foolish, indeed."

"The young man looked at her keenly with a sudden feeling of irritation.

"She used to respond to my advances," he thought, "but she's like an iceberg now. What has changed her so?"

"You haven't told me yet," he said, after a moment, "what you are doing in New York."

"I am staying at Van Cortlandt Place at present."

"I beg your pardon, may I ask in what capacity?"

"Certainly," answered Kelpie, graciously; "as Mrs. van Cortlandt's companion."

"Ah, Mrs. van Cortlandt is a fortunate woman. But may I ask how in the world you came to drift here, my dear little girl?"

"Oh, I didn't drift. I came by appointment. New Castle Light isn't quite out of the world, Mr. Fitzhugh," replied Kelpie, with an amused laugh.

"But the story is a long one, and we can't be very far from Van Cortlandt Place now."

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"So I supposed. Look here, Mr. Fitzhugh, I'm going to ask a favor of you. Will you promise to grant it?"

"Yes, I promise to do anything you ask me, no matter at what risk," answered Carroll, with a fine show of gallantry.

"You are very kind, but the request I'm going to make won't require any risk at all. I think I understood you to say you were invited to a dinner at Van Cortlandt Place this evening?"

"You are right; that is what I said."

"You purpose going, I suppose?"

"I don't see how I can do otherwise. I've accepted the invitation. It is to meet Mrs. van Cortlandt's daughter, recently restored to her. I believe, and to escort the young lady to a theatre party later on. So, you see, it seems hardly possible, under the circumstances, to get out of it."

"I really don't see why you should want to get out of it," said Kelpie gravely.

(To be continued.)

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