

telling her a tremendous rigmarole about Fairfields, and she is very anxious to visit it. I only hope she may not be bored to death after she gets there. Tell the girls that they must make every preparation to have things as gay as possible, and I will let you know, as soon as I can, when to expect us."

At this point the reader's voice ceases, and she looks up with amazement and dismay on her face.

"Miss Vaughn!" she says. "In the name of all that is wonderful, what can be bringing Miss Vaughn to Fairfields! Do you—do you think that she can mean to marry Randal?"

"As unlikely as possible," says Will. "Randal is a completely infatuated fool, who lets her make a convenience of him one day, and a foot-ball the next; and for some inscrutable caprice she is making a convenience of him now."

"This is fairly overwhelming," says Kate. "What on earth are we to do with such a fashionable and formidable beauty and belle?"

"You can study her," says Will. "It may be as good as an education for you poor creatures buried in the country."

"Kate is the only one to whom such an education would be of service," says Janet; "and she knows quite enough about flirting now."

"I know about flirting, Janet!" says Kate, looking injured. "That is the unkindest speech you ever made to me."

"Kate's flirtations are of the mild, bread-and-butter order—warranted to cause no serious harm," says Will; "while Miss Vaughn, unless report greatly belies her, belongs to the class 'man-eater'—and, if one may judge by Randal, she might as well devour her victims entirely, since they are fit for nothing after she is done with them."

"It must be very interesting to watch the process of devouring," observes Kate. "Don't you think you can offer yourself as a victim?"

"Not if I know myself!" replies Will, with more force than elegance. "If you are very anxious to watch the process, however, there's Proctor—he might immolate himself to oblige you."

"Perhaps he will immolate himself without any intention of obliging me."

"Then I know who would be sorry," says Janet, dryly.—"Will, if you are sufficiently rested, let us go down to the river and have that row."

No lovelier stream was ever sung by poets than the bright river which winds through the fertile lowlands of the Fairfields plantation. It is not more than a hundred yards from the foot of the lawn to a place where a boat is always moored, and thither Will and his companions take their way.

By the time they are fairly afloat in the middle of the current, the sun has sunk below the green heights which encompass the valley, and clouds luminous with his dying glory begin to fling a reflection of their tints upon the glassy breast of the water.

"This is the best time to be on the river," says Kate with a soft sigh. She has taken off her hat and is sitting bareheaded, while the evening breeze waves the light rings of hair back from her brow. "Sunset and moonlight—if I live to be a hundred years old I am sure I shall always love those two things."

"They are very good things in their way," says Will, "but there are some better things—a rousing chase at daylight, for instance. By-the-by, didn't I tell you that I brought some news from Arlington, besides the mail? You have not heard it yet."

"More news?" says Janet. "I supposed that the startling intelligence about Miss Vaughan was what you meant."

"On the contrary, the news about Miss Vaughan will startle you less than what I have in reserve. Who do you suppose I met in Arlington to-day?"

"You are insufferable with your conundrums!" says Janet, impatiently. "How can I possibly tell, when there are so many people whom you might have met?"

"But this was somebody whom I had not the least expectation of meeting—somebody uncommonly pleasant, too. Come, give a guess."

"Was it man or woman?"

"Can you ask? I should not think of attempting to enlist your interest in one of your own sex. It was a man."

"Bertie Anderson?"

"No—Frank Tarleton."

"Frank Tarleton!" cries Janet, roused to vivid interest at once. "Will, are you in earnest?"

"Never more so in my life. It was Tarleton himself—no room for mistake. You ought to have seen us meeting; like those ancient fellows—what were their names—who were so very intimate."

"Frank Tarleton!" repeats Janet. "I certainly am surprised! When did he come? What has brought him back?"

"He reached Arlington to-day. I did not ask what has brought him; but I fancy his business affairs have done so."

"By all accounts, it must be rather late to be looking after *them*," says Janet. "It is more likely that he has come because he had nowhere else in particular to go. Is he as handsome as ever?"

"Handsome, if anything. I always said Tarleton was too good looking to come to any good end. He has not—what is the expression women use about each other—gone off at all, and when you see him you will rave over him."

"I shall do nothing of the kind," returns Janet. "He has behaved too badly for anybody

to think of raving over him, no matter how handsome he may be."

"So you are ready to give up an old friend because the gossips have made themselves busy with his name? There's a world of charity, kindness, and good sense, in such a proceeding!"

Janet flushes; but, according to her usual custom, holds her own stoutly.

"Gossip is one thing," she says, "and fact is another. Everybody knows how Frank Tarleton has acted. As for his being an old friend, I am sure we have not seen him for nearly five years."

"And you have a statute of limitation for your friendships? Tarleton is one of the best of fellows, if he is rather a black sheep; and, though he has certainly been a fool, the majority of us are not sages."

"This is a very easy way to look at things," says Janet, "but I don't think it is a good way."

Kate, who had been listening to the conversation thus far with great interest, now breaks in:

"What has this poor Mr. Tarleton done?" she asks, "that Janet is so severe upon him?"

"He has been unkindly enough and foolish enough to make ducks and drakes of his fortune," answers Will, "and Janet agrees with the majority of the world that to lose money is the worst offense of which a man can be guilty."

"That is very unjust, Will," said Janet. "If Frank Tarleton had lost his fortune, it would be a different matter, but he has squandered it."

"And in squandering it he has harmed himself more than any one else, has he not?" asks Kate, who is as lax a moralist as Will. "At any rate, he is young and handsome and pleasant, you say—so he will be an acquisition to the neighbourhood, with or without a fortune."

Janet, whose wisdom is beyond her years, looks at her volatile cousin gravely.

"I am not so sure of that," she says.

Silence follows for a minute—silence only broken by the soft dip of the oars in the water—and, as the loveliness deepens in the sky and earth, Kate involuntarily begins to sing. She has a charming voice full of power and sweetness though untrained, and on the stillness of the evening air it rises full and clear:

Flow down, cold rivulet, to the sea,  
Thy tribute wave deliver;  
No more by thee my steps shall be  
Forever and forever.

Flow, softly flow, by lawn and lea,  
A rivulet, then a river;  
No more by thee my steps shall be  
Forever and forever.

"I call that a very mournful ditty, Kate," interposes Will, who is rowing in time to the measured cadence of the melody. Give us something more cheerful."

But Kate only smiles and goes on:

But here will I thine alder-tree,  
And here thine aspen sliver;  
And here by thee will hum the bee  
Forever and forever.

The ringing voice, together with the distinctly audible words of the song, attract the attention of a horseman who is riding along the road which borders the river. He pauses, listens, then dismounts, fastens his horse to a tree near by, and, approaching the bank, makes his way as silently as possible through the dense growth of willow and alder which fringes the stream, until he reaches a point whence, parting the green boughs, he looks out over the stream.

It is a lovely picture which rewards him. The emerald-tinted water is painted with gorgeous hues; while far and fair, melting into purple softness, spreads the level valley, bounded by rolling hills, on one of which the gabled roof of Fairfields shows "bosomed high in tufted trees." Above these hills the fires of sunset burn—flame-like scarlet, vivid crimson fading into soft rose, gold and aquamarine melting and throwing their radiance far and wide. The river, catching this radiance, holds it imprisoned in its liquid depths; and the boat seems floating on an enchanted current.

A thousand stars will stream on thee,  
A thousand moons will quiver—

so Kate is singing, and the eyes of the unseen gazer, falling on her face, do not wander from it until the boat passes beyond his sight, around a bend of the stream. Even then the end of the verse is wafted back to him:

But not by thee my steps shall be  
Forever and forever.

"Who on earth can she be?" he says to himself. "The man is Will Lawrence, and the other girl one of his sisters, but who can this girl possibly be?"

Since there is no one to answer the question, he retraces his steps, remounts his horse, and rides away, humming, as he goes, the haunting refrain:

No more by thee my steps shall be  
Forever and forever.

Meanwhile, Will is saying to his companions: "I am afraid we must be thinking of going back. I heard the sound of a horn not long ago, from which I infer that the hunters have returned."

"Yonder is the hunter's moon," says Kate, pointing to a silver crescent, the faint lines of which are half lost amid the splendors of the glowing west.

"You are the first to see it, Kate—and in a clear sky," says Janet. "That is good-luck."

Queen and huntress, chaste and fair—

Will begins, and breaks down at that point.

"If I had a horn I would give her a hunting salute," he says. "We must turn around, must we? Well, here goes! Now, girls, since I have to row against the current, lighten my labour with a song, and pray let it be cheerful—not like Kate's last."

The girls comply, and, with songs and gay talk and much laughter, they return to the landing, fasten the boat, and take their way back to the house, reaching it as the shades of twilight enwrap all the outer world.

### CHAPTER III.

"Good name in man and woman  
Is the immediate jewel of their souls."

The inmates of Fairfields, as usual at this hour, are assembled on the front piazza, where comfortable wicker chairs are placed, and bright-coloured cushions are scattered for the benefit of those who may prefer the lowliness of the steps.

On these steps Sophy Lawrence is seated, with a broad-shouldered gentleman by her side, who is no other than the Mr. Wilmer whom Kate prophesied would return with the hunting party, and whom Janet regards with aversion as a probable brother-in-law.

"Of course, he is there!" says the latter, in a tone of disgust. "If I were Sophy, I would suggest to him to stay at home a little—just a little."

"If you were Sophy, you would do nothing of the kind," laughs Kate; "you would be so glad to see him that you would be disappointed if he did not come every day. Wait till Mr. Jones, the widower of the future, appears, and then you, too, will sing—"

I hear his foot fall a music,  
I feel his presence near."

"If it is Proctor that you mean, Kate," says Will, "I don't know about his foot-fall's music, for he is sitting down; but you may certainly feel his presence, since I see him on the piazza."

The speaker winces the next instant, for Kate give him a sharp pinch, but, before she can express her indignation in words, they reach the steps, and Sophy addresses them:

"Where have you girls been? I sent for you an hour ago, but you were not to be found."

"We have been on the river," said Janet.

"Why did you send for us?"

"Carrie Norton was here and wanted to ask you to a croquet-party to-morrow afternoon. I knew you had no engagements, so I told her we would all go."

"I wish you had excused me," says Janet.

"I am tired of croquet."

"I am not," cries Kate. "I like it."

"I think you like everything, Miss Kate," says Mr. Wilmer. "I have never seen anyone so joy life so thoroughly as you do."

"Of course I do," replies the girl in her frank voice. "I am very sorry—oh, very sorry for people who do not enjoy it. I suppose there is some trouble and vexation in it, but I think that for everybody there must be a great deal of pleasure, if he only knows how to find it."

"That admits of a question," he says; "but I think you will always find it."

"I hope she will," says Sophy, as Kate passes on. "It would seem a cruel thing if life should use her as hardly as it does some people; and yet—"

She pauses, for a thought of wisdom comes to her. And yet why should not ill as well as good fall on this bright head, since both ill and good are gifts alike from the merciful hand of God? Ah, true as truth is it that, could we order the lives even of our dearest and best, our choice would be but blindly made. With eager hands we would pour unclouded sunshine over them, forgetting that the heroism which ennoble and the tenderness which sweetens life are alike born in darkness and struggle.

Will pauses on the veranda, where the enthusiastic huntsmen begin to describe for his benefit the run of the day; but Kate and Janet, mindful of the toilets unmade, enter the hall, whither they are followed by one of the group, a tall young man, who rises and hurries after them.

"I wish—I wished a hundred times to-day that you had been with us, Miss Kate," he says, eagerly; "we had the best chase of the season, and your namesake led the pack."

"Will says that she is the best hound in the country," replies Kate, pausing with a smile, while Janet pursues her way upstairs. "I am glad that you had a good chase," she goes on; "but would it not have been rather long for me? And then the bachelor dinner—I should have been dreadfully in the way there."

"You could not be in the way anywhere—not possibly," says the young man, quickly. "Speaking for myself, I am sure your presence would have made the dinner quite another affair."

"That is equivocal," says Kate, with her gay laugh. "Another affair might mean pleasantly—or the reverse. No, pray don't explain—a flavour of doubt gives zest to a compliment, and I suppose you meant to be complimentary."

"I must be very stupid if I didn't make that clear," he says, laughing in turn. "I was lucky enough to find the ferns you wanted," he proceeds, tugging at something in the breast-pocket of his coat, and finally drawing forth a memorandum-book, which he opens. Between the leaves are several feathery ferns of rare variety.

"How lovely!" cries Kate. "And how good of you to remember and bring them to me! I know how hard it is for a fox-hunter to stop for anything."

"I came near losing the hounds by stopping," says Mr. Proctor, who naturally wishes to make as much capital as possible of this heroic act; "but, as soon as I saw the ferns, I was determined you should have them."

"I am so much obliged!" she says. "They are just what I want for my splatter-work. I believe I promised my next piece to you," she adds, with an upward glance of the dark-fringed eyes, "so you see virtue will be its own reward. Whenever you look at that work of art you can proudly think, 'I should not possess this treasure if I had not stopped for those ferns that day.'"

"I shall certainly consider it a treasure," says Mr. Proctor, "and I hope I shall receive it before long. I am sure you will fulfill a promise better than Miss Janet does, who has been promising me a tobacco-bag for more than a year."

"I always fulfill my promises," says Kate.—"But I shall not be ready for tea at this rate," she adds with a start, as the hall-clock clangs forth seven. "I must go at once, for see what a state my dress is in from the grass and the boat!"

"And you'll wear some of the ferns in your hair, won't you?" says Mr. Proctor, following her to the foot of the staircase.

She nods and flits away, leaving him standing below, looking after her as one might look after some lovely, bright-plumaged bird that has spread its wings for flight. Then he heaves a sigh—from the region of his boots, apparently—and returns to the piazza where the chase is still proceeding.

Kate, meanwhile, takes her way to her chamber, smiling as she goes. Mr. Proctor's devotion annoys her sometimes, but more often amuses her, since, to a girl perfectly heart-whole and fancy-free, sentimental troubles seem only fit matter for mirth. We can realize a finger-ache even if our own fingers are exempt from pain; but, to realize a heart-ache when we have never known such a thing, is altogether beyond the average capability of light-hearted eighteen.

"Poor fellow—how absurd he is!" Kate says to herself; and this is the amount of sympathy which the sighing gentleman obtains.

"If you had staid to talk to Mr. Proctor much longer, Kate," says Janet, when she enters the room where that young lady is, "you might have spared yourself the trouble of changing your dress for tea. As it is, you will be very late."

"It does not matter," says Kate, cheerfully. "I can slip on my white muslin in a minute. See what lovely ferns!—will you have some for your hair?"

"No, thanks. Mr. Proctor would be no more pleased to see me wearing his offerings than I should be pleased to wear them. What a sim-pleton he is!"

"He is not very brilliant," Kate admits, "but I don't think it is fair to call him exactly a simpleton—at least I suppose he has sense about some things."

"Oh, I suppose he knows when to plant cotton and when to sow wheat," says Janet, with a careless shrug; but he does not know better than to make a great fool of himself about you. I suppose he can't help it, however. Shakepeare says that 'to be wise and love exceeds man's strength,' and, if it exceeds man's strength in general, it is not surprising that it should exceed Mr. Proctor's strength in particular.—There is the tea-bell, as I expected!—make haste and come down."

She goes as she speaks, and ten minutes later Kate follows. When the latter enters the room where tea is in progress, she finds that a name she has heard before is under discussion.

"I don't believe Tarleton is half as black as he is painted," Will is saying. "Reckless! yes, all the Tarletons are that—but recklessness is not a crime."

"It unfortunately leads to crime very often," Mr. Lawrence says. "I like Frank Tarleton, also—not only for his own sake but for that of his father, who was one of the best friends I ever had—and I shall be sorry to believe anything worse of him than that he has been sowing a very plentiful crop of wild-oats."

"It is a pity that sowing wild-oats is such an expensive business that most men by the time they have finished it have no capital left for any other crop," says Wilmer's pleasant voice.

"Tarleton's affairs must be in a pretty bad condition," observes Proctor. "I heard not long ago that Southdale will soon be in the market."

"I believe it is heavily mortgaged," says Will, "and Tar-ton may be forced to part with it, but I am sure he will never do so willingly."

"Is the Tarleton of whom you are talking," puts in General Murray—a white-moustached veteran who travels a hundred miles every Autumn for a fortnight's hunting at Fairfields—"the young fellow who has lately been conspicuous in turf-matters, and who owns the race-horse Cavalier?"

"The same," replies Will. "You know him, general?"

"I have met him once or twice. My most vivid recollection of him is in a steep-chase for gentleman-riders, when I expected to see him break his neck. Had he done so, it might have been some consolation to hope

That Heaven would yet have more mercy than man,  
On such a bold rider's soul."

"Unfortunately, bold riding does not greatly commend one to the mercy of Heaven," says Janet.

"Bold riding, moreover, is not the only accomplishment of this young gentleman," says