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away with her outstretched hand. He caught it in both of his, laughing a little hoarsely. "You want me to say it first?" he asked. "Will you let me say it? Listen, then." He drew her hand up to his breast and laid the palm over his heart—she could feel the strong, regular beat of it, a trifle quickened just now, perhaps. "That's yours," he said, with an intensity of emphasis which made the simple words very ardent. "And—may I say it—may I tell you what is in it? Somehow I don't want to speak that word unless you let me. But I want to say it—even I—to you."

He was bending with his face close to hers. There was for some reason an irresistible quality in his love-making which went to the girl's head like wine. It was her first experience, with the exception of certain boy-and-girl affairs which had amounted to nothing, but that did not wholly account for it. There was a strong attraction in his personality; she had felt it from the first moment of her acquaintance with him. Besides this there was a genuineness about his fervor which made it very winning.

"May I say it?" he pleaded. "I'll say it so you'll never forget it if you'll let me. Tell me that I may, Jean."

Jean struggled hard with herself a moment; then an overwhelming consciousness of how much she did "care," and how utterly impossible it would be to put this thing away from her without at least one taste to the full, swept away all her defenses. The faintest possible nod of her down-bent head answered him.

He stood perfectly still for a moment. Then she felt his hands, one behind her head, one upon her cheek, so that he slowly and very gently turned her face toward his.

"Look at me," he whispered.

She hesitated for a moment, from an uncontrollable shyness; then, compelled by that strong influence which he had over her, she slowly lifted her eyes. His own went very deep into hers the moment they got the chance. They were fine eyes, and the July moon lit them into brilliancy; the girl remembered that look until she saw them again—and that was not soon.

"I love you," he said, and his lips met hers in a kiss, the memory of which kept company with that of his almost tragically happy face.

"I forbid you to see him again," said Mrs. Lockwood, in a voice which, while controlled, was as determined as that of a gray-haired matron with fixed principles regarding her children's marriages can be.

"If you disobey me and see him I shall bring the matter to your father's notice, and you know what that will mean. I shall have an interview with the young man himself. You think we are very cruel now, but in a few years, a very few, I trust, you will understand that we have acted for your best interests and for your happiness. I do not wish you to blame your sister for the devotion to those interests which led her to follow you last night. If she had not done so I do not know to what lengths the fellow might have gone. I have no doubt that he would have succeeded in extracting from you a promise of some sort. You are just young enough and romantic enough to give such a thing. I wonder at you, Jean. Are you blind that you cannot see the utter absurdity, the impossibility of such a match?"

The girl lifted a pale face, gave her mother the benefit of a long look from a pair of lovely, miserable eyes and turned her head away.

"We shall go at once to Pocasset Beach," went on Mrs. Lockwood, hurriedly. "The Wentworths are there, and the Langleys, and Bentley Browne, and young Mr. Eastwood. You will have a charming time. You will soon forget this little—episode. I do not altogether blame you, dear. Young girls will have their fancies; this was perhaps not unnatural. But when you are once away you will see the folly of it. We should be packing at this moment. Go now, darling, and get your things together. I will send Marie in soon to help you. And remember, Jean, you are not to see him again."

Strolling along the rocky beach at Pocasset one August afternoon Mrs. Winchester found herself unexpectedly joined by Bentley Browne, of Boston.

"I'd like to have a bit of a talk with you if you don't mind," he said, and Mrs. Winchester welcomed him cordially.

Bentley Browne represented her sisterly ambition for Jean. So far as he was concerned it looked very much as if her hopes were to be realized.

"It's about—er—Miss Jean," the young man began, without loss of time. "I can't understand her this summer at all. The last time I saw her, in the spring, you know, she was—well, she seemed to be a good friend of mine, to say the least. Now she's completely changed. She keeps me at arm's length—at a church-pew's length," he amplified, with a grim little smile. "You must know, Mrs. Winchester, how I feel about Jean. She's the—sweetest girl I know, and if I can't have her—" He broke off abruptly, staring hard at a white sail in the offing, as if it were of great importance to distinguish its identity.

Mrs. Winchester was conscious of a distinct longing to get possession of her unruly young sister and place her by main force, if by no more diplomatic means, in this man's arms. He was of a distinguished family, the possessor of an exceptional degree of culture, and had lately inherited a fortune of no inconsiderable size. And the girl did not appreciate her opportunity. It was incredible.

"My dear Mr. Browne," she began, with a charming smile, "I really believe you must have misinterpreted my little sister's attitude. You know she's very young yet, and she has kept to a quite remarkable degree her girlish shyness. She's quite an old-fashioned maiden with her quaint ways—"

"I find those delightful!" cried young Browne. "I don't complain of those. They're part of her charm. What I speak of is something new. She—she avoids me now—I'm sure she does. Not as if she were afraid of me, you know—that would encourage me—but as if either she disliked me or there was somebody else. You don't think there's anybody else, do you?" he begged.

"Oh, no!" said Mrs. Winchester, with an eagerness to reassure him which turned aside her regard for the truth, until her instantly following recognition of the fact that it might not be the part of good management to let him suppose Jean, unsought except by himself, caused her to add, slowly, "that is to say, nobody for whom she really cares. Of course, the child always has more attention than she knows what to do with, but that should not stand in your way."

Her smile was arch, and Bentley Browne smiled in return, visible relief in his tone as he said. "If I've no real rivals I'll win her if it's to be done. I have Mrs. Lockwood's permission; I have your goodwill, I hope, Mrs. Winchester?"

"If it were for my sister's happiness nothing could give me greater pleasure," she returned, cordially, and gave him her hand.

As they strolled on, talking lightly now of other things, Jean's pretty, young married sister was saying to herself, "As if she could for an instant fail to see the difference between two such men as Bentley Browne and that young fellow up in the country. If she will not see it, she must be made to, that's all."

It was two years afterward that Jean Lockwood, hurrying alone through a great railway-station to take a train for a suburban town to attend the wedding of an intimate friend, came face to face with a young man whose broad shoulders and finely poised head towered above the crowd. For an instant she stared at him, disbelieving her eyes; then, as his hat came off and his hand grasped hers, a wave of color flooded her face and a great joy filled her heart.

His greeting was as collected as if the meeting were an every-day affair, though a keen observer—which Jean herself was not capable of being just then—might have detected certain evidences of powerful repression of some strong feeling.

"Which way are you going?"

"To Elmsdale."

"By the 10:30?"

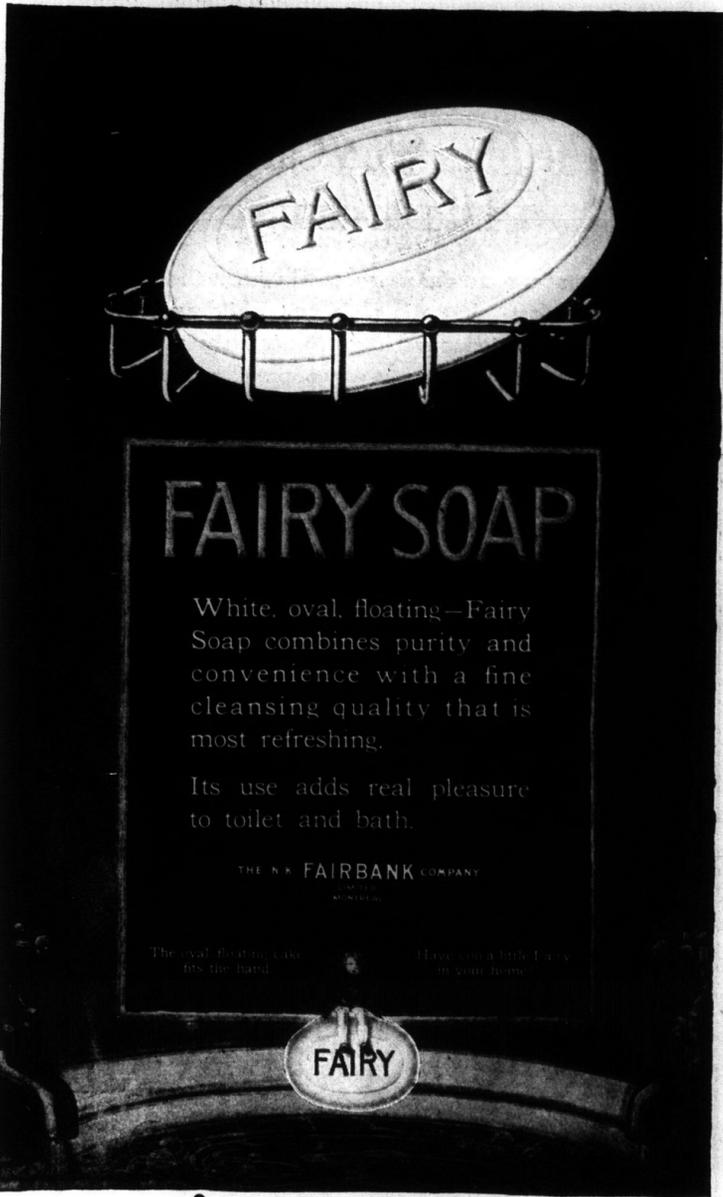
She nodded.

His voice dropped to a murmur.

"May I come? Don't say 'no.' I must come."

She well remembered that half-beseeching, half-commanding, wholly deferential manner of his which had dominated her through that brief, happy month two years ago; unconsciously to herself it had been her criterion by which to judge every man she had met since.

She looked up, smiling. "Please do," she said.



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