

[Illustration:

The figure standing close behind him scarcely breathed.

Frontispiece. Page 192.

]

Rena's Experiment

BY

MARY J. HOLMES

[Illustration: [Logo]]

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Rena's Experiment

CHAPTER I NANNIE'S WELL

A tall, angular woman, wearing a sun-bonnet and a big work apron which nearly covered her short dress, stood on the fence calling, "Charlotte Ann! Charlotte Ann! Charlotte Ann Parks! Where be you? Don't you know it's 'most noon, and the table not set? and Miss Bennett's very partic'lar about her digester; and there's a letter from the two summer boarders who are coming!"

The woman's voice, strong and clear, went echoing down a grassy lane which led to a small grove, or thicket, of pine-woods in which was a shallow well, now seldom used except during a summer drought, when the cattle, which fed in the pasture-land around the woods, were watered from it. The old bucket and curb had fallen apart, and pieces of them

were lying on the ground; but around the well were large, flat stones, one of which projected beyond the others a foot or more, so that a person standing upon it could look directly down into the centre of the water below. And it was on this projection that Charlotte Ann Parks was standing when her mother's voice came warning her that it was nearly noon, that the table was not set, that Miss Bennett was particular about her "digester," and there was a letter from the summer boarders.

Charlotte Ann, or Lottie, as she was usually called by all except her mother, heard the call, but paid no attention. Her ear was strained to catch the first sound of the town clock in the village two miles away which would tell her that it was noon, and her eyes were fixed intently upon the small square mirror she held in her hand as nearly over the centre of the well as possible. She was trying a charm, or a trick, as it was designated in the rural district of Oakfield, where the traditions of a century ago had been handed down from generation to generation, and believed in, or discarded, according to the susceptibility of the people for the marvellous. Lottie always scoffed at the stories told of her great-grandmother's time before the Revolution, when armies were seen passing and repassing in the heavens and the snow was like blood in the light of the Auroras; when houses were haunted and wizened old witch women rode through the air on broomsticks, or held their weird vigils in the woods which studded the wild New England coast. All this superstition had mostly died with the old people, whose gravestones in the Oakfield cemetery were sunken deep

in the ground and so covered with mold and moss that it was impossible to read the date of their birth or death. A few oldtime customs, however, still clung to the young people, because of the romance attaching to them, rather than from any real faith in their efficacy. One of these had to do with the well in the pine-grove and the tragedy connected with it, the story of which I heard on the summer afternoon when I alighted at the little country station of Oakfield, dusty and tired, and wondering how I was to get to the place of my destination.

I was a stenographer and bookkeeper in a large city firm, and was overworked in body and brain. Sleep and appetite had both forsaken me,

and I was sinking into a state of semi-invalidism, with little strength and less ambition. Rest I must have and a change of air, and when I saw an advertisement saying that Mrs. Eli Parks, who lived near the sea-coast and two miles from town, wanted summer boarders, and that her rooms were large and cool and quiet, and her house a hundred years old, I said: "That is the place for me; the fashionable world has not invaded Mrs. Parks. I can rest there. I will write her at once."

I did write her, with the result that on a day in early July I was standing by my trunk and asking the station master if there was no means of conveyance for strangers who visited Oakfield?

"Why, yes," he said; "of course there is. We ain't so far behind as that. There's a 'bus from town, here mostly for the trains. I don't know why 'tain't here now, only there don't many come at this hour, or if they are comin' they telegraph. Want to go to Miss Parks'? Well, you are in luck. That young chap there lives next to her. He'll take you in his rig and I'll send your traps bimeby. Hallo, you Sam! Come here!"

At the agent's call a young man, or boy, reined up suddenly, and I was soon driving with him along the pleasant country road toward Mrs. Parks'. The agent had introduced him as Sam Walker, and I found him inclined to be very sociable and ready to give me many items of interest concerning the neighborhood and its people.

"See that big stone house on the hill?" he asked, pointing to a large, gray-looking building in the distance with tall pillars in front and a square tower on the corner. "Well, that's the McPherson place—the richest man in town—or his half-brother was, and Mr. Colin has it in trust for a young man—Reginald Travers—who is visiting there now; some relation to old Sandy, I believe, and a big swell. He has money of his own, they say; and he'll get a pile more bimeby. That's the luck of some

folks.”

He was not very lucid in his remarks, but by questioning him I managed to learn that the house, of which he seemed very proud, had been the property of Sandy McPherson, a Scotchman and eccentric old man, who had

lived to be ninety and had died a few months before, leaving quite a fortune to his half-brother, Colin, thirty years his junior. Colin was also to have the use of the house as long as he lived, and at his death it was to belong to the “swell young man,” provided he married somebody,

Sam did not know whom. Some girl, he s’posed. Men mostly did marry girls

and anybody would be a fool to give up the McPherson house and the money

which went with it. “It was an awful funny will old Sandy made, and had something to do with a love affair when he was young. Seemed queer that

he could ever have been in love, he looked so old and his hair was so white, and his head kept shaking, and hands, too. Awful nice man, though, and had the biggest funeral you ever seen,” Sam said.

I was not particularly interested in Sandy McPherson’s funeral, and was silent until Sam asked suddenly, “Do you believe in _tricks_?” as he came in sight of a pine-grove in the distance.

I said I didn’t know what he meant by “tricks,” as I had never heard of one, and in a way he explained what he meant.

“Lots of young people are always trying ’em at the well in the middle of the woods. There’s a queer love-story, and a true one—old Sandy’s love-story—connected with it. Want to hear it?”

I was forty, and presumably past the age of romance, but I did want to hear the story, which I afterward heard two or three times, and which I give in my own words rather than in those of Sam, who rambled a good

deal and threw in various opinions of his own concerning the parties interested.

Sixty or seventy years before that July day Sandy McPherson had been a rich young farmer in the neighborhood and looked up to and respected by every one. He was not very handsome, with his light hair and eyes and freckled face, but his money and great kindness of heart made amends for what he lacked in his personal appearance, and there was scarcely a girl in the town who would not gladly have taken him with his freckled face, light hair and Scotch brogue. When his choice fell upon Nannie Wilkes much wonder was expressed at her indifference to his suit and her preference for Jack Bryan, a handsome, rollicking young man, who played fast and loose with all the girls, and with none more so than with pretty Nannie Wilkes, until he heard that in a fit of pique she had accepted Sandy and was to be married in a month. Then his real love for her showed itself, and many were the arguments used to dissuade her from her promise. But Nannie was firm. She had pledged her word to Sandy and would keep it. She did not care so very much for him, she said; he had too many freckles and talked with a brogue, but her mother was anxious for the match and he was rich, and could give her a piano and solid silver tea-set, and carryall with a top to it and two horses, to say nothing of his handsome house. Jack could give her nothing but a very humble home with his half-blind mother and a salary as grocer's clerk at eighteen dollars a week. And so the wedding day drew on apace, and Nannie's gowns were being made by a seamstress who went to Boston twice a year and was consequently posted on fashions.

Nearly every night Sandy went to Nannie's home, where the girl's eyes, full of unshed tears, seldom met his glance, and her little hands lay in his great warm ones, cold and passive, with no return of the loving

pressure he gave them. On the nights when he was not with her Nannie sat

in the pine-woods, with Jack's arm around her and Jack's face very near her own, while he pleaded with her to give up the marriage with Sandy and take him instead. He could not give her a piano nor silver tea-set, nor carryall with a top to it, but he could buy her a buggy. One had been offered him at a bargain. And he'd get her a melodeon, and his mother had lots of old china, and he would work like a beaver in the garden and yard to make them more like the McPherson grounds. But neither the second-hand buggy, nor the melodeon, nor the old china appealed to Nannie, who only shook her head.

"I'll tell you what," he said to her at last, when all his arguments had failed to elicit from her anything more than, "I've given my word and I can't break it. You should have spoken this way sooner."

"I'll tell you what. Try a trick at the well. I know how they do it. My aunt did it once, and mother, too. I heard them talking about it, and mother declared she saw father's face and nearly fell into the well. Hold a mirror over the well at exactly noon when the sun shines down into it, and wish that you may see the face of the one you are to marry. If my face looks in the glass by yours, I'm the chap. If Sandy's, then Sandy it is, and I've no more to say. Try it to-morrow noon. Will you?"

Nannie had little faith in the experiment, of which she had heard before, but to please Jack she promised, and the next day as it drew near the hour of noon when the oracle was supposed to be propitious, she

stood leaning over the curb, holding in her hands a small mirror, into which her white face was looking anxiously for the one which was to appear beside it just as the sun touched the meridian and shone down upon the water. She had said she had no faith in the charm, but in her room before she started on her errand she had knelt in an agony of tears and prayed that it might be Jack instead of Sandy. Somewhat comforted with a belief that God would hear her, and it would be Jack, she stole down to the woods and stood watching and waiting till the noonday sun

shining through a clearing in the pines struck the waters below.

Jack had fully intended to be on the spot hiding behind a tree which grew near, and when Nannie was absorbed in her task he meant to steal cautiously behind her on the carpet of soft pine-needles, which would give no sound, and by looking over the curb let his face appear beside hers in the mirror; then, before she recovered from her surprise, he could retreat backward, and when discovered declare he had just come upon the scene. But an unforeseen accident kept him away, and only a blackbird and bobolink among the pines saw the trembling girl, whose nerves were strained to their utmost, and whose disordered imagination grew more and more disordered as floating clouds flitted across the sun, shutting out some of its brightness. Then she fancied that shadowy lineaments were forming upon the mirror, that a pair of eyes were looking at her, and they were not the brown laughing eyes of Jack, but the blue ones of Sandy, whose rugged features spread themselves beside her own, while she stood riveted to the spot, her pale lips whispering, "It is Sandy, God help me!"

After that there was no wavering, and Jack's arguments and ridicule had no power to move her. She knew what she had seen. It was Sandy. She could not defy fate, and the wedding was appointed for Thursday night, when the McPherson house was to be thrown open and the marriage-feast held there after the ceremony.

Half the town was bidden and Sandy was the happiest of men, and on Wednesday evening, which he had spent with Nannie, he told her that the carryall had come and she was to have her first ride in it when she went to church as bride the next Sunday. The piano had also come, and a silver tea-set and a Brussels carpet for the great room, with lace curtains and a pier-glass in which she could see herself from her head to her feet; "and you will be the bonniest wife in the whole world and I the happiest man," he said.

Nannie listened without a word, or smile, or sign that she heard. At parting, however, she put her arms around his neck and kissed him, and said:

“I think you the best man in the world, and I thank you for all you have done for me. Always remember that; but I am not good enough for you.”

Sandy laughed his broad, good-humored laugh, which always grated a little on Nannie, as he paid her one kiss with many, and held her close for a moment.

“Not good enough for me, my pearl, my lily! I wish I were half as good as you,” he said, and the thought kept him laughing during his walk home, which lay through the woods and past the well, at which he stopped

to look, as his hired man had told him the curb was a little shaky.

“I’ll have it fixed after the wedding. Just now I can think of nothing but that and Nannie,” he said, as he continued his way home, trying to whistle, an accomplishment in which he was not an expert.

Arrived at home and alone in his room, he said to himself, “To-morrow at

this time she will be here, my very own,” and he stretched out his arms to embrace an imaginary form with brown hair and soft-gray eyes, and cheeks like the summer roses.

Alas for the morrow and the anguish it brought! and alas for the young girl who at midnight, when the moon was high in the heavens, stood again

by the fatal well, looking down into its depths with despair in her eyes and determination in her face! She could not marry Sandy, and she could not brave the world’s censure if she did not, and so she chose the coward’s part, to die. There was a hurried look around her, a thought of Jack, and a prayer to be forgiven, and then the cold, dark waters closed over her with a splashing, gurgling sound, and Nannie Wilkes had gone out into the great unknown, away from Sandy and away from

Jack—both dreaming of her and both waking on the morrow to a horror which filled them with dismay. A note was found in her room which read:

“I cannot marry Sandy because I love Jack. I have wanted to do right and cannot. I tried the charm at the well, hoping it would be Jack’s face I saw, but it was Sandy’s which came and stood by mine in the mirror. I saw it so plain, and I cannot marry him, and so I must die. I shall not jump into the well. I can push the curb aside, it is so loose, and shall slip down the stones into the water, so as not to be bruised. Tell Sandy I am sorry and hope he will forget me and take some girl for his wife better than I am. Tell Jack—but, no, don’t tell him anything, except that I loved him and died for him. Good-by.”

It was Sandy who took her from the well and laid her on the soft bed of needles under the pines, wringing the water from her dripping garments and her long hair which clung to her face and which he put back behind her ears, saying nothing except, “Poor little Nannie! If you had told me, you would not have been lying here dead. Poor Nannie! I wish I had known.”

He even tried to comfort Jack, whose grief at first was violent and noisy, but like such grief, was easily consoled when another pretty face caught his fancy. They buried Nannie in the McPherson lot, for Sandy would have it so, and he bought the headstone and put upon it simply, “Nannie, Aged 19.” Then he went about his usual business, with a pain in

his heart which time never fully healed. Naturally domestic in his nature, he wanted a home, with wife and children in it, and after a few years he married a Mrs. Travers, a young widow with an only son. He seemed happy, but Nannie was never forgotten, and not an hour of his life that he did not see her in fancy as she was when he kissed her in the moonlight, and again when he laid her upon the pine-needles, cold and dead, but with a look of peace on her face as if at the very last there had been upon her lips a prayer for forgiveness which God had

heard and answered. When his wife died, which she did within two years of his marriage, the great house was so silent and lonely that he soon married again, and this time a cousin of Nannie's, who, like his first wife, was a widow, with an only child, a little daughter, so that he had two stepchildren to whom he gave a father's care and love.

What came next after his second marriage is not essential to the story. His wife died. His stepchildren were married and had families of their own to the second generation, when they, too, died, and still old Sandy lived on, his only companion now his half-brother Colin, who had come from Scotland to join him. One by one the descendants of his wives died and were scattered until in his last years, when nearly ninety, he knew of only one, and that was Reginald Travers, great-grandson of his first wife, in whom he felt no particular interest, until Reginald, who had heard of the rather eccentric old man, came to call upon him and claim relationship through the great-grandmother, dead years and years ago. Something in the young man pleased the older one, who kept him for weeks and finally conceived the idea of making him heir to a part of his fortune, which had grown steadily and was greater than his brother would care for. Colin, to whom he broached the subject, and who, being so much younger, was his right hand and left hand and brain, made no objections, but said:

"Why leave everything to Reginald? There may be some member of the other branch of your family. You had two wives, you know, and one was Nannie's cousin."

"To be sure; to be sure, I did," Sandy answered, rubbing his bald head as if to recall an incident of more than fifty years ago. "You see I lived with Susie so short a time, and that girl of hers was married so young that things slip my mind, and sometimes it seems as if I was never

married at all. Nothing is real but Nannie, who is as fresh in my mind as she was that last night when I kissed her for the last time. Poor little Nannie! and Susie was her cousin and looked some like her. There must be somebody somewhere related to her. I wish you'd hunt it up."

Colin was accustomed to hunt up things for his brother, and as a result of this investigation he found that Irene Burdick, the great-granddaughter of Mrs. Sandy McPherson the second, who was a relative of Nannie, was an orphan, with some means of her own, and was living with her aunt in New York, and also that she was spending a part of the summer in New London. Greatly to Colin's surprise, the morning after he had imparted this information to his brother, he found him with his valise packed and himself dressed for a journey.

"I'm going to New London," he said, "going, incog., for a look at Ireny. She has some of Nannie's blood in her. Pretty thin by this time, running through so many channels, it is true, but if she suits me, all right; if not, all right, the same."

He went to New London and registered as Mr. McPherson. He thought the Sandy might betray him, forgetting that his name was as strange to Irene Burdick as hers was to him. She was at the hotel with her aunt and he saw her in the dining-room and on the piazza and in the water, where she could swim like a duck, and he watched her with a strange stir in his heart as he thought, "She is some relation to Nannie. Poor little Nannie, dead more than sixty years ago."

She was small, and thin, and brown-haired, and pale-faced, but her dark-gray eyes were wondrously beautiful, and once, when they flashed upon him as she ran past him on the beach in her dripping garments, he saw, or thought he saw, a look like Nannie, while the voice which said to him, "I beg your pardon," as she whisked past him was certainly like the voice he had never forgotten.

“Nannie’s eyes and voice have come down through all these years, and Ireny will do,” he said.

He did not make himself known to her, as he stood a little in awe of her aunt, a typical New York woman, but he watched the girl for a week, and after his return home, made one of the strangest wills ever put upon record.

To his brother Colin he gave fifty thousand dollars, with the use of the house and farm until it was taken possession of by the young people, Reginald Travers and Irene Burdick, with whom he was to make his home as long as he lived, and to whom he willed the remainder of his fortune, in case they married each other, said marriage not to take place until both had had plenty of time in which to consider it and know their own minds.

If either of them preferred some one else, he or she was to receive twenty thousand dollars, and the rest go to the other party. If the disaffection was mutual and neither cared for the other, each was to have ten thousand dollars, and the remainder of the property was to go half to Colin and half for the support of different missions named in the will. If both parties were agreeable to each other and the one died before the marriage took place, the survivor was to have the whole.

This will Sandy drew up himself after an immense amount of thought and many sleepless nights and consultations with Colin, who knew something of law and made some corrections and suggestions. When at last it was finished, duly executed and witnessed, Sandy put it with his private papers, telling no one except Colin, who had questioned the propriety of a will which might induce the young couple to marry whether they liked each other or not.

“That’s so,” Sandy said, recalling with a shudder his experience with Nannie. “They must not only be agreed, but they must love each other. There must be no one-sided affair. I’ll make that plain,” and he wrote a note which he put with his will, addressed to Reginald and Irene, charging them, as they hoped for happiness in this world and heaven in the next, not to enter into matrimony with each other unless their hearts were in it. “For be ye well assured that if any persons are joined together otherwise than as God’s word doth allow, their marriage is not lawful,” he wrote in conclusion. This sentence from the prayer-book Sandy knew by heart as he did the whole of the marriage ceremony. He had gone through with it twice and had repeated it to himself many and many a time when he thought it was to be Nannie standing by his side. This done he felt that he had performed his duty to his two wives by trying to bring their great-grandchildren together and giving them his money. It was due them, he thought, because Nannie had always stood between them and himself, and Irene was a distant relative and had her eyes and voice, and he ought to leave her something, as he must show respect to both his wives.

When he was first engaged to Nannie he had a very good likeness made of her by an artist sketching in the neighborhood, and after her death this was enlarged into a life-sized portrait, said by those who had known the girl to be very natural, especially the eyes. This picture hung in the drawing-room between the portraits of the first and second Mrs. McPherson, who looked rather stiff and prim and wholly unlike Nannie, with her soft brown hair and grayish-blue eyes, which followed one with a wistful, pathetic look, whose meaning Sandy understood as he had not when she was living. Many times a day Sandy stood before the portrait, studying the face and comparing it with that of the girl seen in New London. “They are alike,” he would say to himself, feeling more and more satisfied with his will. Several cautious inquiries he made at intervals with regard to Irene, hearing always the same report that she was sweet and pure and womanly; “not burdened with brains enough to make her

strong-minded, but she is altogether lovely,” one of her teachers wrote to him of her; and he was satisfied in the belief that he had done well for the young couple, and he was planning to bring them together without

their knowing his intentions, when death came suddenly, and on his ninetieth birthday he was found dead in his bed, with a lock of Nannie’s hair on the table beside him, and under his pillow a miniature of her, which had been made in Dresden from a photograph of the portrait in the drawing-room. They buried the miniature and the hair with the old man beside poor Nannie and between her and his first wife. They found the will and the whole town buzzed with its contents, wondering who Irene Burdick was and how she would take it and how Reginald Travers would

take it. Colin wrote to him with regard to it and invited him to visit the McPherson place again, but decided to wait before sending a copy to Irene, who was travelling in Europe. Then public curiosity abated a little and waited for what would come next. Nothing came at once. Irene remained abroad and no one knew anything of her. Reginald attended to his business, if he had any, while Colin lived his lonely life at the McPherson place and the affairs in the town went on as usual.

With Sandy’s death, however, a fresh impetus had been given to the interest felt by the young people in the charmed well where Nannie had ended her life.

“Beats all what fools some of us are,” Sam said, as he finished his story, adding that the swell young man visiting at the McPherson place was Reginald Travers, and “didn’t speak to nobody often, though when he did he was nice as a pin.”

Then he stopped for a moment on the top of a hill for me to look down upon the pine-woods in which was the well which bore Nannie’s name.

“I don’t believe there’s more than one or two girls hereabouts, or boys either, who hasn’t tried a trick at that well,” he said. “Why, there’s a

little box in a hollow pine tree and in it is a small square mirror to hold over the water when the sun is right overhead. I call it rot, and I don't believe Lottie has ever done such a silly thing."

"Who is Lottie?" I asked, and the crimson on his face and the look in his eyes told me what she was to him before he replied.

"Oh, don't you know? She's Charlotte Ann, Widow Parks' girl. I call her

Lottie for short. There she is now, in the yard, and that's the house, with the li-locks in front, and that is our house beyond, with the high board fence. Father and Widow Parks don't agree very well. Get up, Beauty."

He chirruped to his horse, who took us quickly to the old-fashioned house, whose open doors, and windows with white curtains blowing in and out, and the odor of roses and pinks and lilacs in the garden and yard gave promise of the comfort and rest it was mine to enjoy for two long, happy months.

CHAPTER II

THE FARM-HOUSE

At the sight of us the girl, who was gathering flowers, disappeared, and only Mrs. Parks came forward to meet me, her good-humored face beaming, and her large, helpful hands stretched out to relieve me of my bag and umbrella.

"So you brought her?" she said to Sam. "Wall, I'm glad you was there. I was afraid the 'bus wouldn't go this time of day, and I kinder hoped the McPherson carriage might happen to go down, as I heard they was expectin' another visitor up to the house, but nobody went by but Mr. Travers on hossback. Come right in. Your room is all ready for you when
Charlotte Ann gets a few more flowers. Put up your money. Sam don't

want
no pay.”

This last was said because I was opening my purse with a view to ask how much I was indebted to the young man, who shook his head and nodding a good-by drove off, after a wistful look at a blue skirt visible among the rose-bushes in the garden. Then I began to look around me at the quaint old house, with big rooms, wide hall, low ceilings, and open fireplaces, with pleasant views from every window, of wooded hills, and grassy valleys, and the pine-grove, with Nannie’s Well, which was beginning to interest me so much. But the object which attracted me most was the stone house on the hill—the McPherson place. Would the young people, Reginald Travers and Irene Burdick, ever come together? and how much truth was there in the story Sam had told me? I would ask Mrs. Parks when I knew her better, I thought. She was bustling about my room, a large, airy chamber, with four windows, a high-post bedstead, surmounted with what she called a “teaster” and surrounded with what she called a “balance.” Everything was old-fashioned, but scrupulously clean and comfortable to the last degree.

“You might like the south room across the hall the best,” she said, “and I’d give it to you, only it jines another, and I’m hopin’ to have two girls who’ll take the two rooms. Nobody sleeps with nobody nowadays; everybody must be separate; different from what it was when I was young, and three sometimes slep’ together if ’twas necessary; but Charlotte Ann says the world moves, and I s’pose it does. I’ve had a letter from them girls askin’ about ’em—the rooms, I mean.”

I assured her I wanted nothing better than the room I had, with the eastern sunshine in the morning and its cool north breeze all the day.

“Charlotte Ann, Charlotte Ann! Is that you? Miss Bennett’s come. Sam brought her, but he didn’t stop,” Mrs. Parks called over the balustrade, and a young girl came up the stairs with her hands full of roses, and cheeks which rivalled them in color, while her eyes at the mention of Sam had in them a look which reminded me of the boy when I asked him who Lottie was.

She was very pretty, and within a week we became great friends and as intimate as a woman of forty often is with a girl of seventeen. I knew all about Sam, for whom Lottie cared more than for the half-dozen other boys whom she called kids and who annoyed her with attentions. I knew, too, about Sam’s father, Ephraim Walker, who had quarrelled with her mother about a line fence and claimed two feet more land than belonged to him, to say nothing of his hens, which were always getting into Mrs. Parks’ garden, until Mr. Walker built a high board fence which shut out the hens and a view of his premises as well.

“Mother gave up the two feet for the sake of getting rid of the hens, and she has never spoken to him since,” Lottie said, with a snap in her eyes which told her opinion of Sam’s father, who, she added, “hates me like pisen.”

“Hates you! For what?” I asked, and after some hesitancy she replied, “I don’t mind telling you that Sam is carrying me now more than the other boys.”

I did not quite know what carrying her meant, but ventured to guess in my mind, and she went on—“and he comes here pretty often, and his father don’t like it and is crosser than a bear when Sam takes me out with Black Beauty, and once, when he found us in the McPherson pines sitting

on a log he threatened to horsewhip Sam if he found him there again philandering with me. Sam squared up to him and said, ‘Come on and try it, if you dare.’ He didn’t dare; I should think not! He whip Sam! I’d laugh!”

She did laugh a little bitterly, and, reminded, by her mention of the McPherson pines of Nannie’s Well, I asked her about it and heard much the same story Sam had told me, with a few more details concerning the superstition attaching to the well, and the number of young people who had tried the trick at noonday—some with success, they pretended, and more with none.

“I don’t believe in it, of course,” Lottie said, “but sometime I mean to try it just for fun. If those two girls come maybe they’ll try it, too. I don’t s’pose you’d care to, you are too——”

She stopped abruptly, not wishing to say “You are too old,” but I understood her and answered, “Yes, too old to be looking into a well at noon to find my future husband.” Then I questioned her about the girls who might be my neighbors.

“They are cousins,” she said, “and their name is Burdick; one of them, we suppose, is the girl old Sandy McPherson wanted Mr. Reginald Travers

to marry. It is the same name and she lives in New York with her aunt Mrs. Graham, and has just got home from Europe, and when mother asked

Mr. McPherson if it wasn’t the one, he said he wouldn’t wonder, and laughed. I can’t imagine why she is coming here unless she wants to see what kind of man Mr. Travers is. I should suppose she’d let him go after her, wouldn’t you?”

I did not express an opinion, but began to feel a good deal of interest in the romance likely to go on around me. Mr. Travers was a great swell, Lottie said, and as that was what Sam had called him, I was anxious to

see him. I did see him the next Sunday in the little church which, with Mrs. Parks and Lottie, I attended in the village. It was one of the oldest churches on the coast, Mrs. Parks said, and it looked its full age. There were not many Episcopalians in town; few of them had much money, except Colin McPherson, who paid three-fourths of the rector's salary and left the rest of the expense to the other parishioners and summer visitors. The windows were high, with small panes of glass; the carpet was faded; the backs of the pews were low; the seats were narrow and hard, and the small organ was frightfully out of tune. Accustomed as I was to city churches, I began to feel homesick in this shabby place, where the people looked nearly as forlorn as their surroundings. The organ had just commenced what was intended as a voluntary, which set my

nerves on edge, when there was a stir near the door, and the sexton in his creaky boots tiptoed up the aisle to a square pew with red cushions, which I had singled out as the McPherson pew. Nearly every one turned his head, and I with the rest, to look at the white-haired man carrying himself very erect, with his gold-bowed glasses on his nose and his big prayer-book held tightly in his hand. "Stiff, with a good face," was my mental comment, and then I scanned curiously the young man who walked

behind him, with aristocracy and polish and city stamped all over him from his collar and necktie to the shape of his shoes. I couldn't see the latter, it is true, but I felt sure of them, and that his trousers were creased as they should be and were of the latest fashion. He had a pale, refined face, with clearly cut features, a mouth which told of firmness rather than sweetness, and eyes which I was certain seldom brightened at a joke because they didn't see it. And yet there was about him something which I liked. He might be proud and probably was, but his

presence seemed to brighten the little church wonderfully, so that I forgot its shabbiness in watching him, and nearly forgot the service, which the rector tried to intone, and the harsh notes of the organ and the discords of the soprano.

What did he think of it all? I wondered. He was certainly very devout and only once gave any sign of annoyance, and that was when the organ was galloping madly through the Te Deum and the soprano was trying to keep up with the alto, and the bass and tenor were in full pursuit of the soprano. Then he shrugged his shoulders very slightly and turned toward the organ loft so that, for an instant our eyes met. In his I fancied there was a look of surprise and half wonder, a second searching glance, and then he turned to his book more devoutly than ever, and I heard a full, rich baritone joining with the organ and soprano and leading them steadily on to the end of the grand anthem. As he sat down he looked at me again with something like inquiry in his eyes. Could it be that he had heard of the expected arrival of Irene Burdick at Mrs. Parks' and wondered if I were she? If so, I knew he was thinking what his decision in the matter would be. He couldn't marry his grandmother.

Mrs. Parks was one who meant to do her duty by her boarders, and was a little proud of her acquaintance with Colin McPherson and liked to show it. As we left the church she managed to get herself and myself very near to him, and after asking how he was and telling him she was pretty well and it was a fine day she introduced me to him as Miss Rose Bennett

from Albany, while her eyes rested upon Mr. Travers standing close to him. Mr. McPherson took the hint and presented him after asking my name, which he had not quite caught, as he was rather deaf.

"Miss Benton! oh, yes, Miss Benton; good first-class name! Any relation to the Colonel? Mr. Travers, this is Mrs. Parks and Miss Benton," he said, while Mrs. Parks grasped the young man's hand effusively and said she was glad to know him and hoped he would call, and that she was expecting two young ladies, the Miss Burdicks, from New York.

Then over the cold, proud, pale face there broke a smile which changed its expression altogether and made it very attractive. "If he smiles like that on Irene she'll not go back on him," I thought, as I walked away after hearing him say something about being pleased to meet me

and
call.

That afternoon when dinner was over I went with Lottie to the pine-woods and saw Nannie's Well and the little mirror which Lottie took from its box in the hollow trunk of the tree and showed to me, saying it was the very one into which poor Nannie had looked. It had been sold by the Wilkes family and bought and sold again and again until some one gave it to the young people of the town.

"It would be easy for two faces to be seen in it," she said. "I wonder if there's anything in it. I don't believe so, but I shall try it to-morrow, if it's a bright day. Don't tell mother. She says it's all humbug, but owns that she tried it once."

I promised, and the next day about twenty minutes before twelve I saw Lottie going down the lane in the direction of the pine-woods, and felt a little curiosity as to the result of her experiment. I had been a week in the family and had learned their habits pretty well, while they had learned mine, and knew that I liked quiet and regular meals because, as Mrs. Parks said, my "digester was out of kilter and needed toning up," and it was my digester which she used as one argument to hurry up the delinquent Lottie, when she stood on the rail fence, calling: "Charlotte Ann! Charlotte Ann! Charlotte Ann Parks! Where be you?"

It was nearly half-past twelve when Lottie returned, looking flushed and excited. Like Sam, I believed the whole thing rot, but was anxious to hear what she had to tell me.

"Did you see Sam?" I asked, when we were alone.

"Yes, bodily," she answered with a laugh. "He saw me on the way to the woods and followed, and just as a shadow was beginning to come on the glass, or I thought it was, he seized me round my shoulders and said, 'Let me see how our faces look together!' I came near falling into the

well, and should have done so, if he had not held me back. He just spoiled it, but I mean to try again after the young ladies are here. They are coming to-morrow. Mother has a letter. Here it is.”

She handed it to me and I read as follows:

“New York, July —, 18—.

“Mrs. Parks,

“Madam:—You may expect me on Wednesday, with my cousin Rena.

“Yours, Miss Irene Burdick.”

The note sounded stiff and _uppish_, as Lottie said, and I at once conceived a dislike for Miss Irene, and a kind of sympathy for Rena, who

was probably a poor relation and would act in the capacity of maid. Irene, who wrote the note, was of course the Miss Burdick, and the large corner room across the hall from mine was assigned to her. It had four windows and a fireplace, an ingrain carpet and Boston rocker, a high-post bedstead with “teaster and balance” like mine. It had a terrible daub of Beatrice Cenci on the wall, taken there from the parlor because Miss Burdick had been abroad and would feel more at home with a

picture of the old masters, Mrs. Parks said, looking admiringly at the yellow-haired creation which bore but little resemblance to the original. There was a washstand in the room, with a hole on the top for the bowl to rest in, a piece of castile soap, and three towels on a line above the stand. There was a round cherry table which Mrs. Parks said was her grandmother’s and which she could have sold for a big price to some relic hunter, but Lottie wouldn’t let her, so she kept it, but didn’t see why there was such a craze for old things. The room adjoining Irene’s was long and narrow, with no fireplace. It had a rag carpet and single bedstead without “teaster” or “balance.” Its bureau of three drawers served as a washstand, and there were two towels on a line instead of three. But everything was clean and comfortable, and on

Wednesday we filled the rooms with flowers, especially the one intended

for Miss Irene. It was Mrs. Parks' idea to put the most there and the best vases. Rena had broken-nosed pitchers and bowls, and flowers a little faded, until there came from the McPherson place a quantity of hot-house roses and lilies for the Misses Burdick and Miss Bennett. Nixon, who brought them, further said that the McPherson carriage would

meet the young ladies at the station if Mrs. Parks would tell him on what train they were expected. She didn't know, but it would probably be

at four o'clock, and she nearly lost her head over the attention from Colin McPherson to her guests, and wondered how under the sun and moon

he knew they were coming that day.

A young man and friend of Mr. Travers had arrived at the house the night

before, Nixon said, and I began to think we might have some gay times with four city people in close proximity to each other. Mrs. Parks had taken possession of the flowers, and after giving me what she thought I ought to have, she put the larger proportion of the remainder in Irene's room, saying it was quite proper for her to have the most from the greenhouse which would probably be hers. A few roses and lilies were accorded to Rena and put in a large tumbler which Mrs. Parks said had been used by her grandfather to mix toddy in when the minister called. I was not satisfied with the allotment to Rena, for whom my sympathy kept

growing; and reserving for myself a single half-opened rose and one or two lilies, I took the rest to her room, putting them wherever I could find a place and in whatever I could find to put them. This done, the rooms were ready, and we waited with what patience we could for the train which was to bring the Burdicks. At half-past three we saw the McPherson carriage go by with Nixon. Half an hour later we heard the whistle of the train in the distance, and fifteen minutes later the McPherson carriage stopped at the gate, and while Lottie and I looked

cautiously from my window, Mrs. Parks, in a flutter of pleasure and pride, went down the walk to meet the occupants of the carriage. The Burdicks had come.

CHAPTER III RENA'S LETTER TO TOM GILES

(With remarks by Tom, as he read it)

“New York, June 10, 18—.

“Dear Old Tom:

“It is an age since I have heard from you. Don't you know we have been home from Europe six weeks, and you haven't been to see us. What kind of

a cousin is that, I'd like to know? Are you so busy in your office, earning your bread, as you said you were when I tried to have you come over to Paris and meet us? Well, by and by I may be in a position to give you your daily bread, as you did me when I was a poor little waif stranded at your mother's door before Uncle Reuben left me some money

and Aunt Mary took me up.

“I have a tremendous matrimonial speculation on hand, with thousands and thousands of dollars in it.”

(“The devil you have!” was Tom's exclamation, as he wiped his wet face, for the morning was hot and Rena's letter made him hotter. Then he read on:)

“I never knew about it till a little while ago when I got the queerest letter from a Mr. Colin McPherson, enclosing a copy of the stupidest, ridiculousest, absurdest, craziest will that was ever made. Did you ever hear of old Sandy McPherson, of Oakfield, a little town on the New

England coast, with nothing in it but rocks and ferns and huckleberries and sumac bushes? I never heard of it or him till I got his brother's letter. It seems Sandy was my great-step-grandfather, who was married twice. His second wife was a widow, a Mrs. Somebody, who had a daughter when she married him and she—the wife—was my great-grandmother. I never knew I had a great-grandmother, though I suppose I must have had. I certainly did not know that she married Sandy McPherson. But to return to the will.

“Sandy McPherson's first wife was also a widow, like the second. He was great on widows, and his first wife had a son, not his, but somebody else's. That would make him a stepson just as my grandmother was a stepdaughter. I hope you follow me. I had to read the letter over two or three times before I understood it. Where was I? Oh, I know. I was telling you about the first wife and her son, and along this line comes Mr. McPherson's great-step-grandson, Reginald Travers.”

(“Lord Harry!” and Tom nearly fell off his chair. Then straightening himself, he read on:)

“Now what possessed Sandy McPherson to pick out Reginald Travers and little, insignificant me to heir his property and marry each other, I don't know, but he did!”

(“The old idiot!” from Tom, down whose face the sweat was running in streams, as he continued reading:)

“Aunt Mary has heard about him and says he had some kind of a love affair before he married. I don't know what, but he got a twist in his head that he owed something to his two wives, or their relations on account of that love affair, and this is what he did: He gave one hundred thousand dollars to Mr. Travers and me in case we married each

other for love. He laid great stress on that. We must love each other. If we do not, that is, if I love him and he does not me and draws back, he is to have only twenty thousand and I eighty thousand. If, on the other hand, he likes me, and I do not like him, he is to get eighty and I twenty. If we are indifferent to each other and want somebody else, each is to have ten thousand, and the rest goes to some missions and his brother, who is to live with us if we marry, and he wishes to.

“Did you ever hear anything so insane? Of course I shall hate Reginald Travers. That’s a foregone conclusion. I hate him now, but I want to see him without his knowing who I am. I am great on trying experiments, and this is my last, which promises a lot of fun. I have thought it all out and am quite excited over it.

“You know my cousin Irene Burdick—your second cousin, just as I am—but no relation to that great-grandmother who married Sandy McPherson. You never liked her very well, but I do. She is so much cleverer than I am and used to help me so much in school, and is so nice to me every way. I persuaded Aunt Mary to let her join us in Europe for six months, and you don’t know how much the travel did for her. She might have royal blood the way she carried herself,—and was mistaken for a titled lady once or twice. She is now in her own home in Claremont—that poky, stuffy home—and is very unhappy—and why shouldn’t she be? I spent a week there once, and nearly went crazy with homesickness—factories, and factory hands—and ceilings so low I nearly bumped my head, and I am not tall. Irene, who is tall, had to stoop in her chamber. I am very sorry for her. Think of Claremont after Paris, will you?”

(“Don’t you know Irene makes a tool of you for her own purposes?” Tom growled, and read on:)

“Now this is my plan. I am going to change places with Irene. Aunt Mary has heard that Mr. Travers is to visit Colin McPherson in Oakfield, if he is not there now—going, perhaps, to spy out the goodly inheritance which may be his, and I mean to go there too!”

(“To Colin McPherson’s! Great Scott! Rena mustn’t do that! I won’t allow it!” Tom exclaimed; but Rena’s next sentence enlightened him as to her meaning:)

“Quite providentially I saw an ad. in a paper, saying that a Mrs. Parks in Oakfield would take a few summer boarders, and the description of her big old house was so alluring that I said at once ‘I’ll go there.’ I am not supposed to know that his excellency is to be in town. I go for quiet and rest. I am tired of Saratoga and Newport and all those places Aunt Mary likes so much, and then I spent such a lot in Europe that I must retrench, and Oakfield is the very place in which to do it. Aunt Mary is willing. I think she wants me to meet Mr. Travers, hoping I will marry him, but I won’t! So you see it is all right. I shall take Irene with me and let her pass as the head of the firm. She will be Miss Burdick, and I just Rena, a poor relation, if you please. She is older and so much taller than I am and handsomer and grander looking every way that people will naturally think her the girl intended for Mr. Travers if they have heard of the will, as I dare say they have. I shall not say so, of course. I would not tell a lie for anything; you know I would not. I shall hold my tongue, and let Irene take the lead, and if any one is rude enough to ask which is which I shall be rude enough to say ‘That is for you to find out.’ Mr. Travers, of course, will not ask. If he does, we shall wriggle out somehow, or Irene will. I can trust her. I am really getting greatly interested in the matter. It will be such fun to watch Mr. Travers thinking Irene is the one he must marry. When he finds his mistake, if he does, I shall rise to the occasion and make it all

right, trusting in Providence and Irene to help me out of the scrape. Of course he can't fall in love with me, with Irene in the way, and if he takes to her I shall be glad. What do you think of my project? Write and tell me, but don't try to dissuade me from it. My mind is made up, and you know I'm a stubborn little mule.

"Did you ever hear of Reginald Travers? Colin McPherson wrote that he was a graduate of Princeton. That's where you were. Maybe you know him.

If you do, write at once and tell me what manner of man he is, and if you ever heard of his great-step-grandfather, Sandy McPherson.

"Your loving cousin Rena."

CHAPTER IV REGINALD AND TOM

Tom Giles, Attorney at Law in Newton, Mass., sat in his office one hot summer morning, wondering if he should accept an invitation he had received by letter from his friend and college chum, Reginald Travers, to spend a few weeks with him in Oakfield.

"It is not a very gay town," Reginald wrote. "The young persons have mostly emigrated to fairer fields in the west, and the old ones stay because they cannot get away and are attached to their rocky farms and houses and customs of a century ago. Some of them are as full of superstition as the negroes of the South, and I am told that what few young people there are here actually look into wells at noon and walk round haystacks at night, hoping to see their future consorts. To you, who are a descendant of the believers in Salem witchcraft, this sort of thing will be delightful, and I have no doubt you will be looking into a well some day at noon. There is a famous one on Uncle Colin's farm, with a story attached to it.

"But no matter about the well, that is the least attraction. The air is fine and there are some pleasant drives and views, while Uncle Colin's house is roomy and hospitable, and Uncle Colin the most

genial of hosts. I call him uncle although he is in no way related to me. His brother, Sandy McPherson, married my great-grandmother, Mrs. Travers. She was a widow, with an only son, who was my grandfather. The Travers family must have been given to only sons, for my father was one and I am one, and, as you know, nearly alone in the world. Some time before Sandy McPherson's death, which occurred several months ago, I visited him and was greatly pleased with the canny old Scotchman. I think he was pleased with me, for he left a will, made after I was there, in which I figure conspicuously and not altogether satisfactorily. When I have made up my mind I may tell you about it. Until then don't bother me. You know I do not like to discuss my affairs with anybody, and this affair least of all. It is not pleasant. Don't fail to come. I want to see you awfully.

"Reginald Travers."

When Tom read this letter his first impulse was that he would accept the invitation. Then he began to waver. He had not a surplus of money to spend, and it might be better to stay at home and grind, as he called his office work. Then, too, he knew that in New York there was a little, dark-haired, brown-faced girl, whom he cared more to see than a dozen Reginalds. This was Rena, the pet name he had given her, although she was christened Irene. He had known her since she was three years old and

her mother had died suddenly at his home where she was visiting his mother, who was her cousin. There was no one to care for her, as her father was dead, and she had stayed on, the darling of the household, the object of his boyish admiration and then of his love, as both grew older and the young girl seemed to know exactly what chords to touch to make him her slave. At fifteen she had fallen heir to ten or fifteen thousand dollars from a bachelor uncle, and as Tom's mother died about that time Rena had gone to live with her Aunt Mary in New York, who, not

caring for her when she was a baby, now found that she wanted just such a bright young girl to add éclat to her surroundings and keep her from

growing old too fast.

Before she left for New York, Tom's love for her got the better of his judgment and he asked her to be his wife when she was older. There was a look almost of horror in Rena's gray eyes as she listened, and when he finished she began impetuously, "Tom Giles, are you crazy, making love to me, a child of fifteen, and you twenty-two and the same as my brother? I'd as soon marry my brother, if I had one. It is horrible, and almost makes me hate you. I shall hate you, if you ever say a word of this kind again."

She burst into a fit of weeping so violent that it frightened Tom, who tried to make amends for his blunder by saying that he was a fool and a brute and everything bad and never would speak to her of love again, if she would forgive him. That was six years ago, and the episode had seemingly passed from Rena's memory, or if she thought of it, it was as of something which would never be repeated, for Tom was one who kept his word. And so she went on teasing him with her pretty ways and blandishments and her open show of affection for and trust in him. He was the dearest old Tom, in whom she confided all her secrets and troubles, confident that he would never fail her, and all the while his great love for her was eating his heart out, and he sometimes felt that in spite of his word he must speak again.

"But I'll wait a while longer," he thought, "wait till I see some sign that she wants me to speak. She likes me now better than any one in the world, she says, and by and by, who knows?"

With this hope for the by and by, Tom contented himself, knowing that however much Rena might brother him, he could never think of her as a sister. He had soothed her with kisses and candy when her mother died. She had sat in his lap at her mother's funeral. She had cried herself to sleep in his arms many a night. She had teased and tyrannized over him in a thousand ways, but had never given the slightest sign that he was

more to her than dear old Tom, who was always to do her bidding, no matter what it was. And he had done it religiously, and was ready at any time to walk up to the cannon's mouth, if she so desired it. He had wanted to join her in Europe, when she wrote so earnestly for him to do so, but funds were low and his business must not be neglected. She was home now. She would be going somewhere with her aunt, and if possible he

meant to join her. That she was in any way connected with the will which

was not satisfactory to Reginald he did not dream until he received her letter. He had been Reginald's room-mate for two years in college, and there was a warm friendship between them, although they were entirely unlike each other. Reginald was naturally shy and proud, or seemed so, and awkward in ladies' society, and reticent to the last degree; slow to like or show his liking, but firm as a rock and true as steel when once he cared for a person, or thought a thing was right. In this respect Tom was like him, but in scarcely any other. He was frank and outspoken, fond of fun and joke, and ready to do a favor to a friend or foe, and knew just what to say to ladies, no matter what their calibre might be. Everybody liked Tom Giles, and not many liked Reginald Travers until they knew him intimately, and found that beneath his cold, impassive exterior there was a heart as warm, perhaps, as Tom's, when the right chord was touched. For women Reginald cared but little, and matrimony had had no part of his thoughts until he read a copy of Sandy McPherson's will. He was glad enough for the money, if he could have it

without the girl. She troubled him, and yet he never for a moment thought he should not try to fulfil his part of the contract. After a while, and he meant to make it a long while, he would find her, perhaps, and if she were at all desirable and seemed to fancy him, he would try conscientiously to manufacture a liking for her. He did not believe much in love anyway. Tom Giles went in for that sort of thing strong and was always mooning about a second cousin, Rena somebody, he had forgotten

the last name, so little did he care for his friend's love affairs. When he read that Irene Burdick was the girl intended for him, he had a vague

idea that he had heard the name before, but had no idea that it was the Rena Tom mooned over so much. Since leaving college he had seen but little of Tom, who was working up a law business in Newton, while he was attending to some property he owned in and near Richmond, Va., where he was born. But he had not forgotten his friend, and after he had been in Oakfield a few days there came over him a great longing to see him again, and perhaps tell him about the will, which was giving him so much trouble. He did not like to think of it and had, of his own accord, mentioned it but once to Mr. McPherson, asking him if he knew where the girl was and if he had ever seen her.

Mr. McPherson never had, "but Sandy saw her," he said. "I can't remember exactly what he thought of her. I only know he liked her build and fancied there was a look in her eyes like Nannie, who was some very distant relative of hers, and whose portrait, you know, hangs in the drawing-room between his two wives, one your great-grandmother, the other Irene's. She lives in New York with her aunt, a Mrs. Graham, and has not been home from Europe a great while."

"Does she know about the will? and what does she think of it?" Reginald asked, and Mr. McPherson replied: "When my brother died, I made some inquiries about her and heard she was in Europe, so I concluded not to send her a copy till she came home, which she did some weeks ago. Then I sent it at once and her aunt replied that her niece was a good deal upset by it and would write me what she thought later on. She has not written, and that is all I know. She is probably waiting for you to take the initiative and find her."

“Which I shall not do at present. I shall let Providence direct awhile,” was Reginald’s answer, and there the conversation dropped.

Reginald had heard of Nannie when he visited in Oakfield before, and had thought her a very foolish young girl to drown herself when she might have been mistress of Sandy’s fine house. Aside from that he had felt no particular interest in her. Now, however, if her eyes were like those of the girl he was to marry, he’d have a look at them. Watching his opportunity when Colin was out, he went into the room where the three portraits were hanging, the two great-grandmothers, his and Irene’s, with caps on their heads, as was the fashion of those times, and Nannie, looking very girlish in her low-necked gown, with her hair falling in long curls on her white shoulders. She was rather pretty, Reginald thought, especially her eyes, which followed him whichever way he turned, and gave him a queer kind of feeling, making him think of them even in his sleep. Still he did not speak of her to McPherson a second time, till the latter startled him one day by saying, “I saw a Mrs. Parks this morning, who lives in that big old house near the grove where the well is. She told me she had received a letter from a Mrs. Graham in New York asking her if her niece, Miss Irene Burdick, and a friend, cousin, I think, could be accommodated with board at her house a few weeks; and then she asked if I didn’t suppose it was the Miss Burdick your grandfather had in view for you. The will was so queer that it went like wildfire, and everybody knows about it, and the girl’s name and where she lives.”

Reginald grew very pale and then very red as he said, “Do you think it is she?”

Mr. McPherson knew it was, for after Reginald’s first conversation with him he had received a letter from Mrs. Graham, making some inquiries concerning Reginald.

“The old lady is after him, if the girl isn’t,” Colin had thought, and had at once replied that the young man was spending the summer with

him,
and she'd better come out and see him for herself.

When he heard she had written for board for her niece at Mrs. Parks', he had wondered a little that she, too, did not come as chaperone, but reflected that it was none of his business and he would let Providence run it as Reginald was doing. In reply to Reginald's question, "Do you think it is she?" he told of his correspondence with Mrs. Graham, and added, "I am sure of it, and shall be glad to see her."

After this Reginald grew very nervous and began to think of writing a second time to Tom, asking why he neither came nor answered his letter. He began, too, to wonder when Irene would arrive at Mrs. Parks', and when he saw me in church his first thought was, "she's come, and she's old enough to be my mother," and this accounted for the expression of his face when he first caught sight of me. Mrs. Parks' introduction reassured him, and his temperature went down a little. Still he was very anxious for Tom, who, he felt, would somehow be a help and a safeguard.

"He'll know just what to say to her," he thought. "He'll talk to her, while I look on and draw my own conclusions."

The next day he received a letter from Tom, very short and to the point.

"Old chap," Tom wrote, "Providence permitting and nothing happening to prevent, I'll pack my grip and be in Oakfield Tuesday.

"Tom."

There was a comfort in this, and Reginald began to feel better, never dreaming of the state of Tom's mind. Knowing Reginald, Tom did not believe Rena would fancy him, and there was hope in that. Of Reginald, he had no doubt. He could not help being interested in Rena, and what the outcome would be he could not guess. Irene, he was sure, would leave

nothing undone to attract Reginald and might possibly succeed.

“Well, let her,” he thought for a moment. “That will leave Rena for me.” Then his better nature and his great liking for Reginald came to the surface, and he continued: “It is unworthy of Rena to deceive Rex even for a few weeks. Let her go to Oakfield, if she goes at all, as herself and not as another. I shall try to persuade her to give up her experiment.”

That day he wrote to her:

“Dear Rena, I was never so shocked in my life as when I received your letter. You have been up to a good many escapades, larks, or experiments you call them, but this last is the craziest of them all; and I beg you to give it up. It is unworthy of you. It is unwomanly—excuse me for saying so—it is a deception, if not a positive lie, and an imposition upon a good man. I know Reginald Travers. We were in college together and room-mates for two years. He is my best friend and I don’t want him wronged. He is shy and reticent, not at all a ladies’ man. Has no small talk. Knows nothing of girls and their ways, and does not care to know. But he is a gentleman and the soul of honor and would never be guilty of a mean act, and on that account does not suspect meanness in others, and might be easily imposed upon. I do not think he is just your style, but he is a clean, splendid man, and I do not want him fooled by Irene. You say I do not like her, and I admit it. I know she is a fine specimen of flesh and blood, and as artful as she is beautiful. There is no deception at which she would stop, if she hoped to be benefited by it. I am sure of it. It is in her blood—not on your side of the house, not on the Burdick side, thank Heaven! but on her mother’s. She is useful to you because—excuse me, Rena—you do not like trouble, and she takes it all from you, and does it in a purring kind of way which soothes you to sleep, as it were, or shuts your eyes to her real character. Don’t take her to Oakfield. Don’t go there yourself. If you do not like the will and do not mean to have anything to do with it, or with Reginald, say so at once; or if

you have a curiosity to see him, wait and let him seek you, as he is sure to do in time, for if he thinks this will impose a duty on him he is going to fulfil it. He has invited me to visit him in Oakfield, and I had about made up my mind to decline, when I received your letter. Now, if you still persist in this crazy scheme, I shall accept Rex's invitation; for, Rena, O Rena! I cannot have you compromised in any way? I don't know as my presence in Oakfield will help you, but if you go, I shall go, too, not to betray you, of course. If you insist upon my keeping silent I promise to do so, for a while at least.

"Your loving cousin,
"Tom."

He sent the letter; and the answer came promptly, and hotly. Rena was very angry, and addressed him as "Mr. Thomas Giles," instead of "Dear old Tom," telling him to mind his business and she would mind hers. She

was doing nothing out of the way. She was not going to lie, as he seemed

to think, nor deceive, either. She was simply not going to blurt out to Reginald Travers, "I am the girl you are to marry." He probably knew she

was coming with her cousin, as her aunt had written about it to Mr. McPherson, and she was going to let him find out which was which. If he

asked her, or any one else asked her, she would tell the truth, instead of saying, "That is for you to find out," as she at first intended to do; and she hoped he'd be satisfied at that. As for Irene, she was to be Miss Burdick, and Rena was to be Rena. That was all. Then she went on to

say that she thought old Tom might let her have a little fun, and she didn't know whether she was glad he was to be at Oakfield or not. On the

whole, she guessed she was, but he was to hold his tongue. If questions were put to him he wasn't to lie; she could never respect him if he did;

but he must get out of it some way, and if there were blame she'd take it all upon herself and tell Mr. Travers it was one of her larks.

"He is not likely to fancy me, a little, dark, scrawny thing, when there is Irene in all her blonde beauty and style," she wrote, "and if he happens to fancy her, as I hope he will, the only wrong I can see is that he will think he is getting fifty thousand dollars with her, and may be disappointed when he finds he isn't; but if he is all you say he is, the soul of honor, and all that, and his love for Irene rises above his love of money, I mean to give him my share, ten thousand dollars. You can't say that it is not fair, or that I am such a little cat as your letter implied. I cried over it and had an awful headache, and I shall be very cool to you when I first meet you in Oakfield.

"Rena."

"P. S.—We are going next week Wednesday."

When Tom read this letter he decided at once to go to Oakfield the following Tuesday, and wrote to Reginald to that effect. Reginald met him at the station; and, grasping both his hands, said to him: "I am so glad you have come, more glad than you can guess."

He had never shown so much feeling before, and Tom looked at him curiously, thinking all the time of Rena, who was to arrive the next day. He knew Reginald well enough to know he would not speak of her at

present, perhaps not at all in connection with the will; but in some way he must let it be known that she was his cousin before she came. There could be no betrayal of confidence in that. Consequently when they were at dinner that night, he said, very indifferently, "Do you know a Mrs. Parks, who takes boarders?"

Reginald at once began to get nervous, and his hands shook as he replied, "I know there is such a woman. What of her?"

“Nothing much,” Tom answered. “Perhaps you may remember having heard me speak of my cousin Rena when we were in college. She lived with my mother when she was a little girl.”

“Oh, yes. I remember perfectly, but I don’t recall her last name,” Reginald said.

“Burdick,” Tom replied, with a sidelong look at his friend, who dropped his knife and fork suddenly upon his plate as he repeated, “Burdick! That is not a common name. I have heard it before.”

“Perhaps,” Tom answered. “I have two cousins by that name, or, rather, second cousins. One I call Rena, and the other Irene; their fathers were brothers. I hear from Rena that they have engaged board for the summer with a Mrs. Parks, and will be here to-morrow on the four o’clock train.”

Reginald resumed his knife and fork and said, with an attempt to laugh:

“Oh, yes, I see, and fancy it was Miss Rena who had something to do with your coming to Oakfield. What did you say of the other young lady, Irene you called her? Is she your cousin, too?”

“Second, I told you, same as Rena,” Tom answered, beginning to grow hot with a feeling that he was acting a lie by not telling the truth at once. “If Rex keeps on I shall tell him in spite of my promise,” he thought. But Reginald asked no more questions, nor did he in any way refer to the subject again that evening. He was, however, more than usually quiet, and looked the next morning as if he had not slept well.

“He is taking it hard,” Tom thought, as he watched him trying to seem natural and talk of what they would do that day.

“We might go into the billiard-room this morning and knock the balls round a little,” he said; “then in the afternoon I’ll take you for a drive over the hills, and—er—er—perhaps after dinner you will want to call upon your cousins—upon Miss Rena, and—er——”

He didn’t say “Irene.” The name seemed to cleave to the roof of his mouth, and he couldn’t speak it.

“Certainly,” Tom said. “I’ve not seen Rena since she came from Europe.”

“Oh-h! was she there with her cousin?” Reginald asked, and Tom answered:

“Yes, they were both there awhile,” and felt himself a worse deceiver than he had charged Rena with being.

After a moment Reginald looked across the table to Colin, who had taken no part in the conversation. Knowing he was a little deaf, Reginald said to him:

“The young ladies, the Misses Burdick, Tom’s cousins, come this afternoon to Mrs. Parks’.”

“Yes, I know,” Mr. McPherson replied, and Reginald continued, hesitatingly:

“How would it do to send them some flowers from the greenhouse? I noticed a good many roses in bloom yesterday.”

“I think it a good idea,” Mr. McPherson said. “I’ll have the carriage go for them, too. The village ’bus is a miserable old rattletrap, and may not be there.”

“Thank you,” Reginald answered, and there were two red spots on either cheek, while the rest of his face was very pale, as he finished his

breakfast and went out into the open air and then into the billiard-room.

“He does take it infernally hard,” Tom thought again, feeling a disposition to laugh at Reginald’s abstracted manner as he knocked the balls listlessly about, seldom hitting the mark, and apparently caring little whether he did or not.

The roses and lilies were gathered and sent and at the appointed time the McPherson carriage went to the station for the expected travellers. Reginald had asked Tom if he cared to go and meet the young ladies, and

Tom answered:

“I think not. I will wait and we will call this evening.”

“Yes, certainly; I’ll call, if you think I ought,” Rex said, and Tom replied:

“No ought about it that I know of. You must call some time, and may as well have it done with. You’ll find the young ladies charming.”

“A-all right,” Reginald answered, and the words sounded like a groan.

CHAPTER V THE BURDICKS

When Rena read Tom’s letter she was very angry for a few moments, and in the height of her passion commenced her reply, cooling somewhat as she wrote, but still feeling very sore because Tom had failed her in this the greatest scheme in which she had ever embarked.

“It is just for fun I’m doing it,” she said, “and the horrid old Tom calls me unwomanly and a lot more names, when I thought he liked me, and

I have liked him so much. I hate him now almost as much as I do Mr.

Travers—Reginald Travers,” she continued, “what a stiff, stuck-up name, just like its owner, I know, and not a bit rollicking like Tom Giles.” Then she read Tom’s letter again, noting particularly what he said about acting a lie. Rena prided herself upon being truthful to a fault, and began to waver a little with regard to the plan of her campaign. “I’ll give Irene some points,” she said, and after finishing Tom’s letter she began a second one to her cousin.

She had written her very fully on the subject, telling her what she expected her to do, and Irene had replied, “I am yours to the death. Where you lead I follow, your obedient slave; and if you wish me to entice Mr. Travers to make love to me, Delilah was never more seductive than I can be. If you wish me to be simply the Miss Burdick, I can play the grand lady to perfection. Of course I must pose as the head of the Burdicks, the one to whom you defer, and as a starter let me announce our intended arrival to Mrs. Parks.”

Something in the tone of this letter had struck Rena unpleasantly, but her infatuation for Irene and her belief that she could do no wrong was great. Where Rena loved and trusted, she trusted and loved with her whole soul, and she trusted and loved Irene, who, being the stronger character, “twisted her around her fingers,” Tom said, and having no real principle did not always influence her for good. In her second letter to her cousin, Rena began:

“O, Irene! such a horrid letter as I have had from Tom, calling me unwomanly, accusing me of deceit, if not of lying, if I let the people in Oakfield believe I am you and you are me. And he knows Mr. Travers, who was his room-mate in college two years and his best friend. Why didn’t he tell me he knew him? That’s just like a man, and Tom especially, never telling anything we want to know, and Mr. Travers is ten times worse. I am sure he is. Tom says he is a gentleman. As if I didn’t know that, or Sandy McPherson would never have selected him for me. He says, too, he is the soul of honor, and

a lot more things. Let me see what he did say.” Here she stopped and re-read some part of Tom’s letter with a rain of tears, which she dashed away and began to write again. “He said he was bashful and reticent, not a bit of a ladies’ man; has no small talk; knows nothing of girls and does not care to. (He must be horrid.) He would never be guilty of a mean act, nor suspect treachery in others; might be easily imposed upon, and isn’t my style, but a clean, splendid man every way. What did he mean by that, I’d like to know? Maybe he takes two baths a day instead of one; and just as if a splendid man couldn’t be my style! I was mad enough at Tom for his letter, and I intend to be very snippy at first in Oakfield, for he is going there ostensibly to visit his best friend, but really to keep an eye on us and see that we do not harm Mr. Travers. In view of all this we must change our programme. We mustn’t try to make them think we are somebody else. We will simply go as Miss Irene Burdick and Miss Rena Burdick, and let them draw their own conclusions; and if any one asks me square if I am the one meant in the will, I shall say yes, and you must do the same. The fun will be spoiled, of course, but Tom will be satisfied and not think me quite so much of an unwomanly liar as he intimated in his letter. You can announce our arrival as you proposed, and I shall not take my best Paris gowns, which might seem out of place on one who was nobody but Rena. I suppose Tom might say that was a lie, too. Oh, why did that old man make such a ridiculous will and put me in it, and why were you not his great-step-granddaughter instead of me? I fancy you would suit Mr. Travers perfectly. If he has no small talk and does not care for ladies’ society, you are just the one to bring him out. My head aches with crying so much over old Tom’s letter and I must stop. Shall expect you on Saturday. Aunt Mary is off for Saratoga some time next week, and the house will be closed. With love,

“Rena.”

This letter found Irene Burdick at her home in Claremont, which she hated, rebelling against it and the station of life in which she had been born and resolving to get out of it by marrying for money, if she

could do so, and marrying without it, if she could not. "And with my face I ought to get money," she would say, when contemplating herself in

her mirror, which showed her a grand specimen of beautiful young womanhood with scarcely a flaw in her makeup. She was very tall and erect, with a splendid physique, telling of perfect health and spirits. Unlike Rena, she was a decided blonde, with regular features and fair hair, which she wore à la Pompadour, with wide braids supplemented with

false ones coiled around her head like a coronet. In her neck one or two short loose curls occasionally strayed from the mass of braids as if by accident, and with no hint of the time spent in giving them their careless appearance. Everything Irene did was done for effect, and there was nothing natural about her. Reared in poverty, she early learned to cater to the whims and wishes of people whose notice she wished to attract. What they thought and believed, she believed and thought; while her skilful hands and active, well-balanced brain were always ready to help in any emergency. To Rena's slightest wish she was a slave—toady,

Tom called her, and Rena repaid her with a love which saw no fault in her. Nothing could dissuade her from her faith in and affection for Irene, who seemed to return the love bestowed upon her. She had heard of

the will which affected Rena so unpleasantly and like her had wished that she might have been born the step-great-granddaughter of Sandy McPherson, instead of one of many children where there was a constant fight for daily bread. Her father was overseer in a cotton mill, where one of her brothers worked and where she, too, had once been employed for several months. How she loathed the thought of it, with the roar of the machinery, the heat and close air, and the associates around her. "Factory bugs," some called them, and she was one of them, and despised

herself for it, and when after Rena received her Uncle Reuben's legacy she wrote offering to pay her cousin's expenses at the same school with herself, she turned her back on Claremont and the factory, and for three years was a student with Rena at a young ladies' school in New York.

For nearly every good which had come into her life she was indebted to Rena, who had paid for her trip to Europe and the rather elaborate wardrobe she had bought in Paris and which was to do her good service now in the rôle marked out for her. She heard of the plan with a great deal of pleasure. Nothing would suit her better than the excitement of it, and then—. She laughed as she thought, "Give me a chance, and I will win this Mr. Travers, if what I can learn of him is satisfactory." She was very happy now, for Oakfield opened up to her a wonderful field of adventure, and she was anticipating it greatly when Rena's second letter came, and put a little different coloring upon the matter.

"It's all Tom's work," she said, "and I dislike him as much as he dislikes me and always has. Acting a lie! Of course it is, if one chooses to give it that harsh name, but are not all our lives a lie? Do any of us declare our inner thoughts and motives upon the housetops, or issue daily bulletins with regard to what we intend to do? If I am to act the part of the Miss Burdick, the prospective bride of Reginald Travers, I shall do it well, or not at all. There is nothing half-way about me, and if I can win Reginald Travers, I shall do it. Rena will never care for him. She is in love with Tom, much as she says she hates him. I am glad Mr. Travers' antecedents are all right. Family is something, when one has none to boast of."

On the receipt of Rena's first letter she had set on foot inquiries concerning Mr. Travers, and learned more of him than Rena herself knew.

He belonged to a fine Virginia family, which became impoverished during the war. He had, however, inherited something from his parents, both of whom were dead. There was a house in Richmond, where he was born, a plantation in tolerably good condition a few miles from the city, and a small income, sufficient for him to lead the life of a gentleman of leisure, if he kept his wants within his means. With this knowledge Irene was ready to take Mr. Travers without Sandy McPherson's money,

if

he proved at all desirable. She had the matter fully in hand and was only anxious to commence operations. As to Mr. Travers' character she had not inquired, nor did she particularly care. An F. F. V. must be correct, and Rena's description of him did not disconcert her in the least, but rather raised her spirits. A bashful man who had no small talk and did not care for ladies' society, would be easier to manage than one up to all the tricks of women, she argued, and she had little fear of the result. If she succeeded in interesting Reginald in her for herself she knew exactly the pretty devices she would use in explaining the mistake when he learned who she really was. She had rehearsed it more than once in the privacy of her room. She knew the words she would

use, the gestures she would make in her distress, and even the expression of her eyes, which could look unutterable things when she willed to have them. Her mirror showed her all this and she practised before it daily, arguing that it was just as much one's duty to educate and train the expression of the eyes and face and smile as to walk and speak correctly. She had met a good many gentlemen, but they were either

too small fishes for her net, or they saw through her little deceits and tired of a beauty behind which there was so much that was not real.

Now,

however, she meant to succeed, and laid her plans accordingly. She was twenty-three; she was poor; she hated her humble home. She wanted to marry, and if she could win Reginald Travers she would do so and lay all

the blame of the deception on Rena, who had persuaded her to it.

There were a few days spent in New York with Rena, whom she thought a

little mopish and stupid and not at all like the bright, sunny girl she had always known. Rena was beginning to wish she were not going to Oakfield, and that she had written frankly to Mr. Travers that she withdrew from the marriage proposition, leaving the field to him. Mingled with this was a thought of Tom, whose good opinion was

everything to her. She had displeased him and he had scolded her. "Called me a liar," she said often to herself; "and I hate him, and sometimes I don't care whether his bosom friend is wronged or not."

This was Rena's attitude and feeling when with Irene she took her seat in the train which was to take her to Oakfield, the last place in the world she would have chosen for her summer outing, if it had not been for that wretched will. Irene was in high spirits. Her two large trunks were full of foreign dresses and a number of articles bought in New York

with Rena's money. She wore a tailor-made suit from Redfern's, London.

Her tall collar and shirt-waist and boots were up to date. The feather, or quill in her hat was exquisite in its kind; her manner was *_à la duchesse_* to perfection, and had a stranger been told that here were a grand lady and maid he would have had no hesitancy in identifying Irene as the lady and Rena as the maid, in her travelling-dress of dark-blue serge, her sailor hat with only a plain band of ribbon upon it, and her modest and quiet manner.

Rena was not very happy. The experiment did not look to her as it did before she received Tom's letter. The word liar kept sounding in her ears, and but for Irene she would have ended the farce. But Irene's influence was over her, keeping her silent and rather moody until the train stopped before the little way station where the McPherson carriage was waiting. When "Oakfield!" was shouted at the door of the car a young

man arose and came forward, offering to take their parcels. It was Sam Walker, who was returning from a neighboring town. He had heard from Lottie of the expected arrivals that day and the moment he entered the car and saw the two young ladies he said, under his breath, "That's them, and gewhitaker-whiz, ain't she a stunner!" the "she" referring to Irene, whom he singled out as the Miss Burdick about whom Lottie was so curious.

There was no doubt in his mind as to which was which, and he barely glanced at Rena, who chose to carry her own umbrella and bag, but whose eyes, as she declined his services, flashed upon him a smile which made him think “she ain’t bad, neither; but, my! what a swell t’other one is!”

He had Irene’s belongings and helped her from the car, and when he saw her looking at the McPherson carriage, he said: “That’s the McPhersons. I’ll bet it has come for you, if you are Miss Burdick. There’s nobody else on the train.”

“Oh,” Irene exclaimed, “look, Rena!” and she nodded toward the handsome turnout and the highly respectable-looking coachman advancing toward her and touching his hat as he came.

“Miss Burdick?” he said, without looking at Rena, and Irene answered:

“I am Miss Burdick—yes.”

The man touched his hat again, and said: “Mr. McPherson has sent his carriage for you. This way, please.”

“Oh, thanks! It was very kind in him,” Irene replied, entirely ignoring Rena, who followed meekly to the carriage, which Irene entered before her, while Sam handed in her bag and umbrella, and then stood a moment while Nixon unhitched the horses and prepared to mount to his seat.

Seeing Sam there still, he said to him:

“Jump up, Sam. May as well ride as walk this hot day;” then to the ladies, or rather to Irene, “You don’t mind my givin’ him a lift. This is Sam Walker; lives next to the Widow Parks’, where you are goin’.”

Irene's head, which was always held high, went up a little higher as she nodded condescendingly, but with an air that would have told Nixon that she resented being introduced to Sam Walker, if it had been in his nature to understand it. Rena on the contrary leaned forward and said: "Certainly, let him ride; he looks tired and warm," and again her beautiful eyes beamed on Sam a look which made him change his mind a

little as to Irene's superiority over her. In a moment he was on the seat with Nixon, but turned toward the ladies, with whom he was inclined

to be sociable, and knowing no reason why he should not be so. Nor was he at all abashed by the coolness with which Irene listened to him. He could see Rena's eyes and the dimples in her cheeks and her smile at his loquacity, which amused her. He told them who lived in the few houses they passed, and finally pointed out the McPherson place on the brow of a hill in the distance. Both girls were now interested and Irene put up her veil and used her handsome lorgnette, which Sam thought long-handled

spectacles, wondering if her sight were poor. In her rôle as the Miss Burdick, Irene thought it hardly becoming to make any comment, especially as Sam was watching her curiously. Rena on the contrary stood

up a moment to look at the imposing house, with its spacious grounds sloping down to a valley through which a little brook, sometimes dignified by the name of river, was running.

"It must be very pleasant there," she said, resuming her seat, while Sam rejoined:

"Well, you bet! and it or'to be, for Mr. McPherson spent piles of money on it while he lived. Got company there now, two of 'em—young men, I mean."

"Oh, has he come?" Rena asked, impulsively, thinking of Tom, while Irene said, under her breath,

“Don’t give yourself away.”

Sam could not hear the words, but something in Irene’s manner made him think that perhaps he was too familiar, and he at once turned his back to her. He would like to have told them of Nannie’s Well, as they were now on a rise of ground looking down to the pine-grove, but Irene’s face was not encouraging to further conversation, and he kept quiet, while Nixon urged on the horses to a pace which soon brought them to their destination, where Mrs. Parks stood ready to greet them.

CHAPTER VI

THE FIRST EVENING

“Oh, what a cool, pleasant place! I shall like it here!” Rena exclaimed, her spirits rising as they drove up to the house with the big maple-trees in front, the honeysuckle climbing up the lattice, which shut off the rear of the house, the few roses still in bloom, with here and there a clump of peonies, which had not fallen to the ground, and tall stalks of tiger-lilies flaunting their gay colors in the sunshine.

Irene said nothing. She was accustomed to old country houses. She was born in one with a slanting roof and she cared nothing for climbing honeysuckle and wild clematis and peonies and tiger-lilies. They were common and old-fashioned. The brick walls of a city suited her better, with the noise and traffic and heat. That was life; that was progress, and made her blood move faster than the finest rural scene. But Rena loved the country and everything pertaining to it. Even the ledge of rocks in the pasture opposite Mrs. Parks’, where the low huckleberry bushes were growing, was lovely in her eyes, which sparkled with excitement, as she sprang from the carriage and looked around. Irene alighted leisurely, assisted by Sam, while through the half-closed blind of my room Lottie and I watched the strangers and made our comments. There was no doubt in our minds that the tall, graceful blonde, carrying herself so proudly, was the Miss Burdick. Everything about her led to that conclusion.

“She’s handsome, isn’t she?” Lottie said in a whisper, “and where in the world did they pick up Sam? and won’t you see him bringing Miss Burdick’s things up the walk just as polite as he can be? I wonder what she thinks of him. He has on his good clothes, anyway.” She was evidently proud of Sam, and proud that he was favored with the honor of waiting upon Miss Burdick. “I wonder where their baggage is?” she continued, and a moment after a truckman drove up with two large Saratoga trunks, marked “I. Burdick,” and a smaller one marked “Burdick.”

Naturally the larger ones belonged to Irene, and without questioning they were ordered to her room, while the smaller one was taken to the room intended for Rena, who had not yet attracted a great share of our notice. We had seen Miss Irene take Mrs. Parks’ hand and hold it very high, reminding me of a picture I once saw of some Congo women shaking their clenched fists in token of their pleasure at meeting each other. What Irene said we could not hear distinctly, except that it was something about “being pleased to see you”; then, without a look at the McPherson coachman, or Sam, who had sprung to his seat with Nixon, after a glance around for a sight of Lottie, she came up the walk, followed by Rena. Unlike her cousin, Rena had stopped a moment to speak to Nixon, and as her voice was of that quality which is readily heard at a distance, we heard her say, “Please tell Mr. McPherson that the Misses Burdick thank him for his kindness in sending his carriage for them;” then to Sam: “Good-by, boy. I don’t remember your name. It was nice in you to help us and tell us the places.”

“Sam, a boy, and he nineteen! I like that!” Lottie said, her lip curling scornfully, while Rena would have fallen in her estimation, if there had been any estimation to fall from.

She was so overshadowed by her stately cousin that we had scarcely thought of her except that she was short and slight and plainly dressed, compared with Irene, who, if she had had Paris, and London, and New

York

placarded on her back, could not have advertised them better than she did with her attire. They were in the house by this time, coming up the stairs, and were soon in their rooms, where Mrs. Parks, who was with them, hoped they would find themselves comfortable.

“I shall like mine,” Rena said, “and such lovely roses. Did they grow in your garden? I smelled them the moment I came in.”

She had her face close to the fruit-jar in which I had put a cluster of the finest roses from my room.

“No, they came from Mr. McPherson. He sent ’em with his compliments,”

Mrs. Parks replied, and instantly Rena’s cheeks were like the flowers whose perfumes she was inhaling.

“Mr. McPherson,” Irene repeated, beginning to notice the flowers, for which she did not really care as Rena did. “What a delightful old man he must be. I hope we may see him, and perhaps we ought to send him a note of thanks.”

Rena did not respond. There was a strange feeling of unrest stirring in her heart as she thought of the attention which was unquestionably offered because of herself.

“I almost wish I were myself,” she was thinking, when Mrs. Parks, who was standing in the door between the two rooms, asked if there was anything she could do.

She spoke to Irene, who replied:

“No, thanks; or, yes, if your maid would be so good as to bring me a glass of ice-water. I am very thirsty.”

At the mention of maid Mrs. Parks looked flurried a moment, then in her straightforward way, she said:

“Certainly, yes; I have no maid. I do my own work, Charlotte Anne and I—Charlotte Anne is my daughter. I don’t know where she is, not to come and be introduced. I will get you some water—not ice. We don’t have it here in the country, but our well is the coldest and best in town.”

She left the room for the water, and the moment she was gone, Rena exclaimed:

“Irene, for pity’s sake, drop your fine-lady airs, and don’t go to calling for maids and ice-water. You might have known there were none here.”

Irene laughed and said:

“I must be a fine lady if I play the rôle you have assigned me, and don’t you go and spoil everything because of Tom’s letter. Let’s have some fun a little while. It is not my fault that Mrs. Parks has evidently mistaken me for you. She has asked no questions and I have told no lies, and we are not supposed to know what she thinks. So, *_soyez tranquille, ma chère cousine_*.”

At this point Mrs. Parks returned with the water, wondering again where Charlotte Anne was that she didn’t come to be introduced.

“There’s a Miss Bennett from Albany boarding here—not as young as you be, but a very nice woman. I’m sure you’ll like her,” she said, again addressing herself to Irene, who bowed, but did not manifest any desire to be presented to either Miss Bennett or Charlotte Anne, the latter of whom stole quietly down the back stairs, while I stayed in my room wondering how I should like the newcomers and if life at the farmhouse would be as pleasant with them as it had been without them.

Meanwhile the young ladies were discussing whether it was worth the trouble to change their dresses; deciding finally that it was not, as they were very tired and there were only Mrs. Parks, Charlotte Anne and Miss Bennett to see them. In the midst of their discussion there was a knock at Rena's door. This time it was Charlotte Anne, who held a note in her hand directed to Miss Rena Burdick.

"Mr. McPherson's man brought it. I suppose it's for you," she said, passing it to Rena, who recognized Tom's handwriting.

"It is for me—yes," she said, taking the note in which were only a few lines to the effect that Tom and Reginald would call that evening about eight, or half-past.

"Then I shall change my dress," Irene said, when the note was read to her, and she began at once to unpack her trunk.

Rena, however, stood by her first decision. She was tired and her head ached, and she didn't care for Tom anyway and less for Mr. Travers. She would put on a clean shirt-waist, with fresh collar and cuffs, and that was all. But Irene proceeded to make an elaborate toilet, taking a great deal of pains with her hair, which, with the help of a false braid, was piled higher than usual upon her head and made her seem as tall as an ordinary man.

"I think I shall wear this," she said, selecting a sheer light organdy, with frills and bertha of lace, and knots of ribbon here and there, tied and placed as only French fingers could place and tie them.

Before commencing operations she had looked for a bell and finding none had called over the banister to Mrs. Parks, whose voice she heard in the hall:

"Will you please show me the way to the bath-room?" she said.

In a state of great agitation, Mrs. Parks went up the stairs after a few moments with a pail of hot water in one hand, a foot-tub in the other, and a bath towel over her arm.

“I’m awfully sorry,” she said, “but we haven’t a real bath-room. We or’to have one, I know, and mean to sometime, but I’ve brought you this,” and she put down the pail of hot water and the foot-tub. “There’s more in the range, and I hope you can make a sponge do. Miss Bennett does.”

Irene looked surprised, and said:

“No bath-room! How do you live without one, especially in summer? Yes, I suppose I can make that do. Please, what time do you dine?”

Again poor Mrs. Parks looked distressed. To dine at night was not on her programme, and she replied, apologetically and confusedly:

“We don’t dine in the country—nowhere except at the McPherson’s. We have tea at six, and dinner at noon sharp. We are particular about that on account of Miss Bennett, whose digester is out of kilter and has to have her meals reg’lar. Will the t’other one have a sponge, too?”

She nodded toward Rena, who was dashing cold water over her face and neck and arms, and who replied:

“No, thanks. I am doing very well.” To Irene, as soon as they were alone, she said: “Are you crazy? asking for a bath-room and dinner at night! When all your life at home you have had your dinner at noon and bathed in a tin basin or pail. Don’t drive that woman wild, or I shall certainly shriek out some day, ‘I am the Miss Burdick and she is only Irene!’”

She spoke lightly and laughingly, but Irene, who felt that she was in earnest, decided to come down from her stilts and conform to the

customs

of the house. She could not, however, divest herself of the _grande duchesse_ manner, which was in a way natural to her, and no one would ever have suspected that the tall, queenly girl, who at about half-past five sailed into Mrs. Parks' best room, looking as fresh as if she had bathed in the sea instead of a foot-tub, was not to the purple born and always accustomed to every luxury money could buy. Mrs. Parks was in the

kitchen and Lottie and I were left to introduce ourselves, which we might have done awkwardly enough, if it had not been for Rena, who came

up to me at once and said:

"I am sure you are Miss Bennett and this is Charlotte Anne," turning to Lottie. "I hope we shall be friends."

"Yes," I replied, "I am Miss Bennett, and this is Lottie, Mrs. Parks' daughter, and you are both Miss Burdick."

I glanced at Irene, who smiled and bowed her head, while Rena replied:

"Yes, both Burdicks, and both Irene, but I am called Rena, for short."

I think her conscience felt easier after she had given her real name, which, however, made no impression either on myself or Lottie. Our minds

were made up as to the identity of the two young ladies. The tall blonde was "the" Miss Burdick; the little dark-haired girl was Rena, a poor relation, probably. But how she won upon me during the half hour before

supper was announced, and how beautiful I thought her large, lustrous eyes with the heavy brows and long lashes, and how sweet her smile, which brought the dimples to her cheeks, which were rather pale than otherwise. In a short time I came to think her more attractive than her cousin, with all her queenly beauty and her many little graces of manner. At the supper-table Irene was very gracious, praising everything

and finally declaring herself more than delighted with her surroundings.

“Just the place for a quiet summer after the fatigue of Europe and the gaieties of Paris,” she said, and then Mrs. Parks remarked:

“You have never lived much in the country, I suppose.”

There was a peculiar look in Rena’s eyes as they turned toward Irene, who, under the fire of those eyes, replied:

“Oh, yes, I have. I was born in the country, and know all about it, but cannot say I like it as well as the city. I shall like it here, though. Have you many neighbors—visitors, I mean?”

“Quite a few,” Mrs. Parks replied. “There’s Mrs. Ephraim Walker—next door—would run in any time and bring her work, if it weren’t for her husband, who dislikes me because I object to his hens and to his having his line fence two feet on my land. His boy, Sam, rode home with you from the station. He comes here pretty often. And there’s Miss Staples and Upham—nice folks, all of ’em. Then, there’s Mr. McPherson—different from the rest of ’em, and the young man visiting him, Mr. Travers. Maybe you know him?”

This was said to see what effect the mention of Mr. Travers would have upon Irene, who replied: “I have not that pleasure,” while Rena’s face was scarlet for a moment; then the bright color receded, leaving it pale as before.

When supper was over, I went with the ladies out upon the piazza, where I usually sat, and tried to entertain them, finding that Irene was more ready to talk than Rena, who seemed abstracted, with a troubled look in her eyes which I could not understand. At every sound of wheels she started and looked anxiously down the road as if expecting some one, while Irene chatted on as composedly as if her ear, too, were not constantly strained and her eyes on the alert. As it began to grow dark

a lamp was brought into the parlor where I seldom sat, it was so stiff and dreary, with its large-patterned, oldtime carpet, its haircloth rocker, which threw your body forward instead of back, its long, black sofa and six chairs standing in a straight line against the wall, its centre-table with a red cover, and its mirror, ornamented with peacock feathers on the sides and top. It was not a room in which to stay on a hot night when there was the cool piazza with its comfortable seats and the scent of the honeysuckle and roses in the air. Irene, however, seemed to prefer it, and as soon as the lamp was lighted, arose, saying to me:

“I think I’ll go in; it is getting damp.” Then to Rena, who began to protest, she said in a low tone not designed for me to hear, “Don’t you know we can’t see how he looks out here? Come in.”

“You can go. I shall stay with Miss Bennett,” Rena replied, and Irene went in alone, trying the rocking-chair first, but leaving it at once as altogether too uncomfortable and too ill suited to the graceful attitude she meant to assume.

One chair after another was tried until a choice was made and a position chosen where the lamplight would fall fully upon her, while she could see herself in the mirror opposite. She knew she could bear the strongest light and that she was as near the perfection of youth and beauty and grace as one well could be, as she sat fanning herself and waiting, while outside the darkness deepened and I sat talking to Rena, who was waiting and listening quite as intently as Irene.

“It must be nearly nine,” she said at last; then started suddenly to her feet and sat down as quickly, as up the walk two gentlemen came, pausing a moment at the foot of the steps to take out their cards.

We were in the shadow where they could not see us, but I could see them, and knowing that Lottie had stolen out with Sam and that Mrs. Parks

was
busy with some domestic duty in the kitchen, I went forward to meet the
strangers.

“Are the ladies—the Misses Burdick in, and yes, Miss Bennett, too?”
Mr.

Travers asked, adding me to the list as he saw who I was.

He had only two cards in his hand, for he had forgotten me entirely, but
it did not matter. I meant to be present when he first met his intended
bride, and I answered:

“We are all in, or rather Miss Burdick is in the parlor, and Miss Rena
and I are on the piazza, but we will come in.”

Rena was sitting in the shadow, with her hands clasped tightly together,
but as I turned toward her she came forward very slowly, until the light
streaming from the window fell upon her and upon the other gentleman,
now a little in advance of Mr. Travers, who had fallen behind as if
loath to go in first. Rena had meant to be very cool toward Tom, whose
letter was still rankling, and there was a slight upward tilt of her
nose and chin, as she said.

“O Tom! is it you? How late you are. I had nearly given you up, and was
thinking of going to bed!”

She was expecting him and knew him then, and I, who knew nothing of
the
contents of the note, or in fact that one had come, stood back in
surprise, while Tom, without replying directly to Rena’s greeting, took
her hand and presented her to Reginald Travers as “My cousin, Miss
Rena
Burdick.”

CHAPTER VII

THE CALL

Reginald had been very nervous all day. He had played billiards awhile with Tom and been badly beaten, had gone with him to the stables and through the grounds, sitting down often in the latter as if he were tired and wanted to rest.

“The day is very hot, isn’t it?” he said, wiping the sweat from his face, which was red and pale by turns.

Tom said the day was hot, but thought:

“Not hot enough, old fellow, to keep you sweating as you do. What a fool you are, if you did but know it; and what a charming wife old Sandy picked out for you; but I hope she will keep as far from you as you seem now to be from her.”

They took a long drive before lunch and on their return passed the Parks house, the doors and blinds of which were closed to keep out the heat. Reginald, who was driving, said casually, without turning his head:

“That’s Mrs. Parks’ place.”

Tom knew perfectly well what he meant, but feigned ignorance.

“Mrs. Parks,” he repeated; “who is she?”

“Why—er—you know. You asked about her, and I told you. She is to board the—your cousins—you know.”

“Oh, yes, I remember,” and Tom looked back at the house, and wondered which was to be Rena’s room, and if he would ever sit with her on the circular seat under the big maple, and if Reginald would fall in love with her, or would pretend that he did in order to get the money. “That isn’t like Rex,” he said to himself. “There isn’t a deceptive hair in his head, and mine is bristling with them.” Then he remarked:

“It must be pleasant for Mrs. Parks to have two young girls with her.”

“Yes, I dare say—and she has an oldish kind of young lady there now, whose name has slipped my mind,” Reginald replied, adding after a pause,

“I promised to call upon her, but have not done so. My sins of omission are very great.”

“You can ask for her to-night when we call upon the Misses Burdick,” Tom

suggested, and he could see Rex’s hands grow limp and his head droop between his shoulders, as he said:

“Yes. O Tom! must we call? I believe I’d rather jump into the sea. I don’t know what to say to ladies, especially these from New York.”

“Rex, you are a fool! Yes, an everlasting fool!” was Tom’s outspoken answer. “Why, there isn’t a more beautiful girl in the State than Irene, nor a sweeter, lovelier one than Rena; and as for talk, you needn’t worry. Irene is a steam-engine and will probably walk right into you, while Rena—well, she will listen and not talk so much.”

“I believe then I shall like her the better,” Reginald said, touching up his horse.

“No, you won’t; you mustn’t,” Tom answered, almost fiercely, while Reginald looked curiously at him a moment; then burst into a laugh and replied:

“Oh, I see. I remember; you used to be writing Rena on bits of note paper, and once you put her name instead of your own to an exercise. That was at school before we went to college, and Prof. ——, who was sometimes guilty of mild profanity, thought it a joke played on him, and asked who the d—l Rena was? I know who she was now and will not trespass

on your preserves. I’m not the trespassing kind. I don’t care for women. I never did. I don’t believe I ever shall. Rena may be well enough for

you, but, Tom!” he exclaimed vehemently; but if the intention to confide in his friend had entered his mind, it left it quickly, and he said no more, until Tom, after laughing at the reminiscence of his school-days when Rena’s name had figured at the end of one of his exercises, asked:

“Well, Rex, what is it? You said Tom, as if there were something you wanted to tell me.”

“Oh, nothing, nothing,” Reginald answered, “only I am a fool, that’s all.”

Tom had called him one two or three times that morning, and he did not dispute it, and as they had now reached home the conversation ceased. Tom, who was full of life and activity, found Reginald rather a stupid companion that afternoon. His head ached, in fact it ached most of the time, he said, and if Tom didn’t mind he would lie down after lunch, and Tom advised him to do so and rest, by all means, so as to be fresh for the evening. There was a hunted look in Reginald’s eyes as they met those of Tom, who began to pity him, while mentally calling him weak and a coward.

“He can’t help it, though,” he thought, “any more than I can help feeling happier with a woman’s skirt in sight than I am when alone. He was born that way. Poor Rex! I wonder what the outcome will be. Not Rena; no, not Rena, for whom I am acting a lie, and am actually feeling a good deal of interest in the drama, having this advantage that I know both sides of the story.”

What Tom had denounced to Rena as a deception did not seem quite so black now that he was in it, and he began to anticipate the evening with a good deal of interest, anxious to see Rena, and anxious to witness the meeting between her and Rex.

About four o’clock Reginald left his room and went down to the piazza, where he sat listening for the first sound that would herald the approach of the train at the station, and then watching for Nixon’s

return. Sam Walker was with him when he came. He had found his father

near the road and been sent on by him with a message for Mr. McPherson.

As the carriage came up Reginald did not speak, but Tom, who was with him, asked:

“Did the ladies come?”

“Yes, sir!” Sam answered, “and you bet she’s a buster!”

“Which she? There is more than one,” Tom said, and Sam replied:

“The tall, fair one, who carries herself so grand.”

“And what of the other?” Tom asked, and Sam rejoined:

“The little one? Oh, she is some, too, and her eyes are like stars when she laughs and the holes show in her cheeks. I b’lieve I liked her best after all, she was so friendly, while the other held herself so stiff and proud like; but she’s a stunner, and no mistake.”

This last he said because of something he saw in Reginald’s face which reminded him of the possible relation in which the stunner stood to him.

When Sam was gone in quest of Mr. McPherson, Reginald complained again

of a headache and went to his room until dinner was announced, when he

appeared looking paler than before, and more unstrung.

“Better take some brandy to brace you up,” Colin said, with a twinkle in his eyes as he guessed the cause of Reginald’s discomposure.

Reginald declined the brandy; said he was hot enough without it and would be all right when it was cooler. Tom was in high spirits, and when dinner was over said cheerily, as they were going upstairs to make some

little change in their toilets:

“Now for the stunner and the girl with holes in her cheeks and eyes like stars.”

Reginald did not answer, and Tom fancied that he shut the door with a jerk, as he disappeared in his dressing-room. Tom was one who scarcely needed any accessories of dress to add to his personal appearance, he was so tall and straight and square-shouldered, with a kind of military air about him, which made strangers think he belonged to the army.

“If I am half-way in the fashion I am satisfied,” he was wont to say in college, where he was always singled out as the best-looking man in a crowd, while Reginald was the most aristocratic-looking, and best dressed.

On this occasion he was immaculate in his attire when he came down to the hall where Tom was waiting for him. He had taken a bath—in fact he had taken two that day, hoping to cool the fever in his veins, and was literally clean without and within, as Tom had written of him to Rena. He had also taken a good deal of pains with his toilet and looked as if fresh from the hands of his laundress and tailor as he stood trying to pull on a new glove which stuck at the thumb.

“Going to wear gloves?” Tom said, in some surprise, “I am not. It is too hot, and my hands are too sweaty to get them on if I tried.”

“You think she won’t care?” Reginald asked, removing the obstinate glove.

“I am sure she won’t; but hurry up. Rena is an early bird, and I should not be surprised if we found her in bed,” Tom said.

To hurry Reginald was never an easy matter, and now he was worse than ever, and lagged so on the way that Tom stopped once and said:

“What’s the matter, old fellow? You act as if you were going to be hung.”

“I feel as if I were,” Reginald replied. “You know I never could talk to ladies, and this _buster_, as that boy called Miss Irene, takes my breath away. If it were only Rena——”

“Hang Rena!” Tom said, involuntarily, and with a twinge of jealousy. “She’s a little spitfire when she tries to be. She is angry with me just now, and maybe will be sulky, but the other is all amiability and will be very gracious to you.”

Something in Tom’s tone, as he said “you,” struck Reginald with sudden alarm. Did Tom know what he was trying to keep from him and what he hoped the girl would keep to herself until her mind was made up?

“Tom,” he said at last, taking his arm. “How long since you saw your cousin Irene? The _buster_ I mean.”

“Two years—yes, nearer three,” was Tom’s answer, and Reginald continued:

“You correspond, of course?”

“Never! Her royal highness does not like me. We used to fight when we were children, and I teased her unmercifully. Cut off the head of her rag baby, or was it Rena’s? Anyway I once put an angle worm on Irene’s neck and she never forgave me. We are friends, of course, but nothing more. There’s a free field for you, if you wish to go in.”

“Oh, I don’t want to, or, I beg your pardon. I do not mean any disrespect to your cousin!” Reginald exclaimed, “but I am not a marrying man like you—never meant to marry—never thought of it till lately.”

Here he stopped short with a feeling that he might be giving himself away, but Tom did not seem to notice, and Reginald’s spirits rose a

little and he was conscious of a better feeling toward Irene, who had not told Tom, who replied, "I don't know what that has to do with your calling upon two girls. You are not obliged to marry them because you call. Don't be such a coward. Irene won't hurt you, or Rena either."

"That's so—that's so. I am a coward where women are concerned,"

Reginald

said, trying his best to keep up with Tom.

They were in sight of the house by this time and could see the light in the parlor, and as they drew nearer they could see the graceful figure sitting with her elbow on the table and her head upon one hand, while with the other she gently fanned herself.

"That's she. That's Irene," Tom said in a whisper. "Come on."

"Oh, yes; hold on a minute till I get my breath and wipe my face. I was never so hot in my life. You've run me here at a race-horse speed in your haste to see Rena," Reginald gasped, stumbling a little in the dark and then stopping short, while Tom laughed softly, knowing how slowly they had come and what hard work it had been to get Rex along at a snail's pace, let alone a race-horse's.

If he had dared he would have liked to roar at the ridiculousness of the whole affair, but he was too near the house for that. Waiting a minute, while Reginald wiped his face, and mentally cursing himself for not having given the whole thing up, he said: "Brace up, there's nothing to fear, I tell you." And Reginald braced up, and was the first on the piazza and the first to ask if the ladies were in; then he fell back and stopped, while Tom presented Rena to him. She was very pale and there was a wistful look in her eyes which she lifted to Tom as if for help and then turned full upon Mr. Travers, who took her slim, white hand in one almost as white and slim and "horribly cold and clammy" she afterward confided to Tom, when telling him how Mr. Travers scarcely looked at her in his eagerness to get to Irene. That young lady had heard the sound of footsteps and voices on the piazza, but knowing that

her attitude was perfect she did not move except to push her loose sleeves a little further up so as to show more of her round, white arm. She was a born actress and would have made a success on the stage with very little training. She was there to win Reginald Travers, and no art of which she was mistress would be left undone to secure the desired result; and she sat waiting for the first move in the game she was playing.

As I entered the room, followed by Mr. Travers, Rena and Tom, the latter of whom had Rena's hand and was squeezing it rather hard, while she was trying to disengage it, Irene exclaimed:

"O Miss Bennett! is that you?" then, with a pretty gesture of surprise, she rose to her feet and bowed gracefully as I presented her to Mr. Travers. She did not offer him her hand, thinking a certain amount of reserve was befitting her introduction to him.

"I am very pleased to meet you," she said. "Pray be seated. Oh, not in that dreadful chair; they are all bad enough, but that is the worst of all," she added, with a laugh, as Reginald dropped into the haircloth rocker, saying:

"Thanks, this will do very well."

He was glad of any haven and did not mind the poise of the back which threw him forward rather awkwardly. With his whole soul he was looking at Irene, who stood so near him that her organdie skirt just touched his knees and he detected the faint perfume she always had about her. He hated perfumes as a rule, and heliotrope the most of all, but he forgot it in his surprise at the girl's beauty.

"Tom didn't tell me more than half the truth," he thought, as she greeted Tom in a most cousinly manner.

Evidently she had forgotten the angle worm on her neck, a part of which was bare in front. Reginald didn't like bare necks, but this was so much like a piece of polished marble that he rather admired it, and watched her while she chided Tom for never writing to her, or coming to see her for so long a time. Tom returned her banter playfully, but was looking at Rena, who was sitting where the lamplight fell upon her as it did upon Irene, bringing out her delicate features in profile and showing her beautiful eyes which rested very often, but very furtively, upon the man in the rocker. He was ill at ease, fidgeting a good deal, and acting as if he didn't know what to do with his hands or his feet, the latter of which were stretched out in front of him so far that it seemed as if he were in danger of slipping to the floor. To add to his discomfiture Mrs. Parks came bustling in from the kitchen, pulling down her sleeves as she came, and exclaiming:

“For the land's sake, company and only the one lamp! Where's Charlotte Anne! Let me light the reflector.”

She held a match to the lamp on the wall, and the room was at once flooded with light which showed more perfectly the people in it—Tom Giles, with a comical expression on his handsome face; Mr. Travers, looking as if he wanted to get out of sight by sliding down into the cellar; Rena, with a look I could not understand in her eyes; and Irene, the central figure, wholly self-possessed, but with an air of very becoming shyness about her whenever she looked at Mr. Travers and caught

him looking at her. She and Tom did the talking at first, and when he saw nothing was expected of him, Mr. Travers gradually came out of his shell and straightening up looked more like the elegant gentleman I had seen in church. He did not talk much, nor was it necessary, for when Tom, in response to Irene's question as to what there was to do or see in the neighborhood, replied that he had been there too short a time to know, she must ask Mr. Travers, or better yet, Mrs. Parks, that lady who had seated herself as if the call included her, began volubly to descant upon the different points of interest to be visited. The drives, the pond, the sea, where there were two or three bath-houses, the old mine,

where a burglar was once hidden for a week, and at last—Nannie's Well! I

felt sure she would reach it in time and wondered if Mr. Travers had heard of it.

"You know about it, of course, and maybe you don't want to hear it again," she said to him, as she settled herself more squarely in her chair.

Reginald bowed and said:

"I have heard of it, but don't mind me if the rest would like it."

"Oh, tell it, please!" Irene exclaimed, in the pretty way of a child asking for a story.

"Very well; but where is Charlotte Anne? She or'to be here to keep me straight. She knows the whole thing from A to Izzard, and I surmise has looked in the well. Most everybody in these parts has," Mrs. Parks said, and going to the door she gave a shrill call for Charlotte Anne, who was down in the pine-grove with Sam, and did not answer.

Resuming her chair, Mrs. Parks began the story of Nannie's tragic death and the superstition which had clung around the well ever since. She did not say who the deserted bridegroom was, omitting his name out of respect to Reginald and Irene, as his step-descendants. Without the slightest change in the expression of his face Reginald listened to the story which he had heard in substance from Colin McPherson, but not in detail as he heard it now, for Mrs. Parks gave full particulars and grew quite eloquent as she described the dead girl lying upon the pine-needles, with her long, wet hair clinging to her white face, and the man who was to have been her husband bending over her and saying, "Poor little Nannie! if I had known, you needn't have drowned yourself."

"Oh!" Irene said under her breath, "it makes one feel cold and creepy and afraid to be alone;" and she moved a little nearer to Mr. Travers,

who must also have felt cold and creepy, for he, too, hitched a little nearer to Tom, who at once moved closer to Rena, shivering as if he were afraid.

In Rena's wide open eyes there had been a look of horror as Mrs. Parks described the bringing of the body from the well to the pines, and the lover's lamentations over it. But when Tom feigned nervousness and fear and clutched her arm as if for protection, the look changed and there was a laugh in her eyes which made Reginald start, it was so like a look in the eyes of the picture on the wall in the McPherson drawing-room. Colin McPherson had told him that his brother Sandy had seen the same look in the girl on the beach. That was Irene, of course, and he turned toward her to see if in her eyes he could recognize the look. They were not at all like Nannie's nor like Rena's. They were blue as the summer sky and never could have laughed like Rena's or looked like Nannie's. "Sandy was mistaken," he thought, and then turned his attention to Mrs. Parks, and listened patiently while she finished her narrative, dwelling at some length upon the superstition which clung around the well, of the many young people who tried the charm, and of the mirror in the hollow tree, said to be the same which poor Nannie had used, when her disordered mind conjured up a face she did not wish to see.

"That's jolly," Tom said, when the story was ended; "not poor Nannie, of course, but the well, and the mirror, and the trick—is that what they call it? You wrote me something about it, Rex, don't you remember? Have you ever tried it?"

"I!" Mr. Travis replied in a tone of surprise. "Do you think me crazy? I do not believe in such trash. Do you?"

"Believe in it? No," Tom said, "but I'd try it for fun. What do you say, Rena?"

“That I mean to try it sometime,” Rena answered. “I’ve heard of such things before, and it’s no worse than eating a thimbleful of salt and going to bed backward so as to dream of some one. I did that once and had a horrid nightmare and woke myself up, calling for water which was just in my reach and which I could not get.”

Everybody laughed except Mr. Travers and Irene, who, taking her cue from

him, smiled a kind of pitying smile that Rena could be so foolish. Rena saw it, and in a spirit of mischief continued, “Irene did it, too, and slept like a log till I woke her up screaming for water. You remember it? We were at Miss Prentiss’ school, and you hurt your ankle against a rocker, as you were going backward in the dark.”

She looked at Irene, who seemed annoyed, but laughed as she answered:

“Yes, I do now. There were a lot of us, and we did some foolish things, as schoolgirls are apt to do.”

“And neither of you dreamed of the coming man?” Tom asked, while Irene replied:

“Neither. Rena might, perhaps, if she had not been so thirsty, and I might if she had not woke me up. I never tried it again.”

At this point Mr. Travers consulted his watch. He had heard enough about

looking in wells, eating salt and going to bed backward. He knew nothing

of girls and their tricks and did not care to know. Irene and Rena were rather frivolous, he feared—Rena more so than Irene, and yet she pleased

him the more, he could not tell why. She was a dainty little body, whom either he or Tom could hold in his arms, if he wanted to; and he didn’t blame Tom for being in love with her, as he undoubtedly was. As for Irene, she was very beautiful and graceful and bright, but too tall,

with all that hair piled so high on her head, he thought, as, when he arose, saying it was time to go, she too rose and stood beside him. He liked short women better than tall ones, and Irene's height troubled him, but he gave her his hand and said he hoped she would like Oakfield and that he should see her again, and then he turned to Rena.

The moon had risen by this time and was lighting up the yard and road and fields beyond.

"Oh, what a lovely night, and so cool now! I almost envy you your walk home," Irene said, as the party moved to the door and stood upon the piazza.

"Why not go with us part of the way? and—by George, that's just the thing!—let's go and have a look at Nannie's Well. You know the way, Miss Bennett. You'll go and chaperon us," Tom said, looking at me, who had been but a figure-head, taking little part in the conversation.

I had only looked on and listened and watched Mr. Travers and Irene, making up my mind that they were ill suited to each other, he was so reserved and cold, and she so full of dash and push. Too much so, I thought, but possibly contact with him would tone her down, while contact with her might tone him up.

"Certainly, I'll go with you," I said to Tom, who repeated his question as to whether I would show them the way to the well.

Mrs. Parks, who had left the room a moment in quest of Charlotte Anne, whom she wished to present to the gentlemen, came back in time to hear my reply, and began at once to protest.

"For the land's sake, Miss Bennett, you don't mean you are goin' out in the damp, with your digester. You'll catch your never-get-over. You'd better let the young folks go alone, though I warn them there's a heavy dew and they'll get wet as sop."

“I’ll wrap this around me,” I said, throwing a knitted shawl over my shoulders, while Rena took her hat and jacket.

Irene declined Mrs. Parks’ offer of her cape.

“I never take cold,” she said, “nor need any one unless she chooses. There’s no such thing as a cold. It’s only a mortal belief.”

“Oh, ho! Christian Science, are you? The last thing I heard, your fad was Theosophy,” Tom said, “and the getting into an occult body.”

Reginald looked alarmed. What if Irene should take to Theosophy, and Christian Science and Spiritualism, and all the other isms of the day! He believed he should follow Nannie into the well, or do something desperate. Well, he needn’t be in a hurry. The will distinctly gave them time to know their own minds, and he meant to know his before he made the plunge either into the well or into matrimony, or hinted at the will to Irene, or any one.

As we left the house by the front door Lottie entered it by the back door, and I caught sight of Sam vaulting over a low part of the board fence which divided his father’s premises from Mrs. Parks’. They had just returned from the grove to which we were going, I in advance, as I knew the way, Tom and Rena behind me, he with his hand on her arm and talking to her in tones I could not understand. At a little distance from them were Reginald and Irene. There was no lagging on his part now.

He was trying to keep up with us while Irene was evidently trying to hold him back. The opportunity was favorable for a tête-à-tête and she meant to have it, if possible. Reginald, on the contrary, did not seem disposed for it. Once as Irene stumbled over a stone it occurred to him that he ought to offer his arm. He could not remember when he had offered it to a girl; never, he believed, but he must do it now, especially as Irene again struck a small stone in the path and exclaimed against it.

“Take my arm,” he said; “the road seems rough.”

“No, thanks,” Irene answered. “I must have both my hands at liberty to hold my dress and keep it from being dragged. I had no idea the grass was so wet, or I would not have worn these thin boots. They are drenched already, and if you do not mind waiting I’ll run back and change them for something thicker. It will not take me long.”

“Certainly not,” Reginald replied. “Let me walk back with you, or can I go for you?”

“And change my boots? No,” and Irene laughed merrily. “I shall be gone no time, and we can easily overtake the others. Tell them not to wait.”

She was off like the wind, and when, as we missed the sound of her voice, we looked around, she was not to be seen, and Reginald was sitting alone on a flat boulder at the side of the lane.

“What has happened?” Tom said. “What’s the matter? Where’s Irene?”

“She found the grass too wet and has gone to change her shoes,” was the reply, as Reginald arose and came toward us.

Just then Irene came flying down the lane, looking disconcerted when she

saw that we were waiting for her, thus spoiling her little manœuvre to keep Reginald to herself far behind us.

“Had to change your shoes for fear of taking cold, did you?” Tom said, as she came up. “I thought you never took cold.”

“Nor do I,” Irene answered. “It was not a cold I feared; it was spoiling my boots. They were nearly soaked. All the science in the world couldn’t keep them dry.”

She was holding her white skirts above the tops of her boots, which looked much like the pair she had declared drenched with the dew which lay so heavy upon the grass.

“Didn’t take you long to change them,” Tom said dryly, with a look Irene understood and hated him for.

Her plan had failed, and there was nothing to do but keep with us until the grove was reached. The moon had risen higher by this time and was casting broad bars of light upon the trees and ground, and the well, which Irene spied first, and darting toward it, exclaimed:

“So, this is the charmed well where Nannie drowned herself, and into which foolish young people look, hoping to see their future mates. I wonder if I could see mine by moonlight.” And standing on the projecting stone she bent forward and looked into the well, while Rena called:

“Come away, Irene. You will certainly fall in.”

“Suppose I do, who would go in after me, I wonder,” Irene answered with a laugh, and Tom replied:

“I suppose I’d have to, but I don’t crave the job. I should get my shoes wet, too. Come away, Irene.”

She didn’t move, except to straighten herself up and turn her face toward us and up to the moonlight; and such a beautiful face it was, and such a lovely picture she made, standing over that dark water into which she might at any moment fall, for the stones were wet and slippery with the dew. “Is she crazy as Nannie must have been when she threw herself into that well?” Reginald thought. She was a distant relative of Nannie, there might be a taint of insanity in her blood, and it was his duty to interfere. Going up to her and taking her hand, he said authoritatively, rather than entreatingly:

“Come away, Miss Burdick. You make us all very nervous. Come with me.”

He held her hand in his as he led her to the bench under the pines, where she sat down very docile and quiet. She had succeeded in rousing in him some life and interest. He had held her hand even after he was sitting on the bench beside her; he was looking curiously at her as if frightened, or fascinated, or both, and Tom knew that this was one of the little flank movements with which she had commenced her siege against the citadel of Reginald’s heart.

“By George! I didn’t suppose she was going in so strong,” he thought. “I understood she was to pass for Rena if people chose to make the mistake, and here she is walking into Rex within an hour after she meets him, and I am aiding and abetting her by my silence.”

Tom hated himself with great hatred for his part in the deception, but he had given his promise to Rena and he would keep it until she released him from it, as she would do soon, he was sure. She had tried to be cool and distant at first, and on their way to the grove had managed to say some sharp things, at which he had laughed, knowing by a certain tone in her voice that it was the loss of his good opinion which had hurt her most.

“I am not acting so big a lie as you seem to think,” she said. “We have come as the Misses Burdick, as we are, and I am not obliged to say to him, ‘I am your girl.’ It would be immodest, and I shan’t do it. If he is at all bright he will find out which is which, if he cares to do so.”

“Never mind,” Tom said, soothingly, “I am in the experiment now, and the partaker is as bad as the thief. We’ll see it through together for a while. What do you think of him?”

“Nothing except that he is stiff and shy. I could never talk to him as I do to you and could never like him as that will expects me to. Oh, Tom!——”

Her voice was like a child’s cry for something it wanted, and Tom answered by pressing her arm and bringing her a little closer to him as they kept on their way to the pines, where, after Irene had left the well, she sat beside him very silent, thinking of Nannie’s story and trying to remember when or where she had heard something like it.

“Irene,” he said, at last, “did you ever hear that one of our ancestors away back ever so many years ago, drowned herself in a well?”

“Mercy, no!” Irene replied. “I hope it isn’t so, for if she did she must have been crazy, and her craziness has trickled down to me, who never stand looking from a height, whether in doors or out, that I do not feel a desire to jump, just as now there came over me a strong temptation to throw myself into the well; and I might have done so but for Mr. Travers, who deserves my thanks for breaking the spell.”

Reginald bowed, but said nothing. He was looking at Rena, who was now

talking to Tom about the mirror and wishing she could see it, and I was asked if I knew where it was. I did know, and Tom soon had it in his hands, examining it carefully, while Irene reached out for it, saying, “And this is the famous mirror in which Nannie saw Sandy’s face.

Please

let me take it and look in it over the well, to see how it seems.”

She made a movement as if to rise, but Reginald held her back, as she meant he should.

“Sit still,” he said, in the same commanding tone he had used when he bade her come away from the well. “You disturb me very much.”

He looked upon her acting as real, and did not care for any such catastrophe as had happened to Nannie.

“What a softie he must be,” was Irene’s mental comment, as she yielded gracefully to his command, and said, “Thank you, Mr. Travers, for caring what I do. Few people except Rena have ever cared.”

“You are very fond of your cousin, I see,” Reginald said.

“Fond of her!” Irene replied, speaking truthfully. “I rather think I am. How can I help it, when she is the sweetest, jolliest little girl in the world?”

The word jolliest grated on Reginald’s ears. In his ignorance of girls, a jolly one savored of a fast one, for whom he could have no liking. As yet he had seen nothing approaching to fast, or jolly, in Rena, on whose face the moonlight was falling, bringing out all its beauty and making him wonder that he had not at first noticed how pretty she was. Irene, who was watching him, followed the direction of his eyes and was herself

struck with the sweetness of Rena’s face. “I believe he is admiring her more than me,” she thought, with a sharp pang of jealousy lest she should find Rena a formidable rival in her path. This would never do, and with her usual swiftness of action she said:

“Tom shares my opinion of Rena. See how happy he looks.”

“Yes,” Reginald answered, glancing at Tom, who did look supremely happy with Rena beside him brushing some pine-needles from his sleeve; and for a moment Reginald found himself wondering how he should feel with Irene brushing his coat-sleeve.

On the whole, he would not care to have her, he thought, and lest such a thing should happen he moved from under a pine branch which hung over him. She was a superb creature, more beautiful than any woman he had

ever seen, and very likely she would be his wife, when he had made up his mind, if he ever did. But he was nervous and tired and wanted to go home, and at last asked Tom if he had any idea how late it was, and if they were not keeping the ladies out in the damp air too long. Tom would

willingly have stayed there all night with Rena near him brushing the pine-needles from his arm and once picking one from his neck where it had fallen. He was sitting under the extreme end of a long branch of a tree and thus caught the dead needles when they dropped. But he didn't mind, and the touch of Rena's fingers sent the blood rushing through his veins at a headlong speed, making him long to imprison the little hand in his and cover it with kisses. He did take it as he rose in response to Reginald's question, and held it while he said:

"Is it late? I had not thought of the time. I was enjoying myself so hugely—but, yes, by Jove, there's the village clock striking eleven, as I live! and we really must go." Then he added: "This is a jolly place to sit. Let's come here often, and—" turning to Rena, "if you ever want to look in the well, either by moonlight, or starlight, or sunlight, I am the man to hold the glass and see that you don't fall in, and Rex, I am sure, will do the same for Irene; hey, Rex?"

"I? oh, excuse me," and Rex started to his feet with a feeling that he had been sitting in a pool of water. "I feel rather damp," he said.

"This bench must have been wet with the dew. I hope you haven't taken cold."

None of us knew to whom this last remark was addressed, for he did not look at either of us, but Irene appropriated it and answered:

"Oh, no. I told you I never take cold. It is all in your mind, and like Tom I have enjoyed being out of doors immensely."

"I hope you don't take cold either, Miss Rena—" Reginald continued. The

last word was spoken involuntarily, and with a start he exclaimed: "I

beg your pardon. I should have said, Miss Burdick; but, you see, there are so many of you, it is rather confusing. I didn't know there were two until recently."

He was talking at random and Tom thought he had lost his senses, while Irene frowned and bit her lips with vexation. Rena, on the contrary, laughed and said:

"Two Miss Burdicks and two Irenes are enough to rattle any one. Please let me be Miss Rena, if you like. It will suit me perfectly and is what every one calls me."

"Thanks, I will," Reginald said, keeping rather close to Tom and Rena as we left the pines.

We had protested against the gentlemen accompanying us home, as the gate in the lane where they would leave us for the McPherson place was very near the house. But they persisted, and when we reached the yard Tom sat down upon the bench under the maple as if he intended to spend the night. Reginald was in a hurry and said so, and gave his hand to Rena to say good-night, wondering why he felt such a sudden glow in his whole body. No dampness now, no thought that he had been sitting in a pool of water, no thought of anything except that he was very warm and the warmth was communicated to him by the girl's hand resting in his. With the pressure of Irene's hand which he took next the dampness returned and he could have sworn that he had sat in a bucket of water all the evening. Still he was very gracious as he said good-night, hoping to see her again and asking if she was fond of driving. She was a coward, afraid even of old farm-horses, but she answered promptly:

"Oh, so much! There is nothing I like better, especially in the country," while visions of a tête-à-tête with him and no Tom to look on flitted through her mind. But Rex had no idea of a drive alone with her, and her illusion was at once dispelled by his saying:

“I hope your cousin likes it, too. I know Tom does, and we will go to-morrow, perhaps, if it is fine. Or, no, not so soon as that, perhaps. You will wish to get over the fatigue of your journey.”

He was beginning to draw back, thinking he might be a little too fast in his attentions, but Irene disclaimed all thoughts of fatigue.

“I am never tired, any more than I take cold,” she said. “Both are fallacies.”

Reginald looked startled, wondering a second time if she were given to new fads and isms and what he should do if she were—he, who was so matter-of-fact that it took him a long time to believe anything out of the ordinary. He was very anxious to get away, and in his anxiety came near forgetting to bid me good-night. He remembered it, however, at last, and lifting his hat to us all walked rapidly away.

“What’s your awful hurry?” Tom said, nothing loath to linger in the soft night air, with Rena’s eyes shining on him.

Reginald did not answer, nor turn his head, and saying good-by to us Tom started down the lane with long strides which soon brought him up to his friend.

CHAPTER VIII

CONFIDENCES AND COMMUNINGS

Irene had not passed a very pleasant evening and was in a bad humor, and as we entered the house she complained loudly of the condition of her organdie, which she declared spoiled with the dew, beside having a big spot of mud upon it.

“I had no business to sit there so long in that damp, poky place. I am chilled through, and Mr. Travers was just as uncomfortable as I was and wanted to get away.”

Neither of us answered her, and she said no more until she was in her room, divesting herself of her limp organdie and wet boots.

“Well!” she began, a little sharply, and Rena, from her room, answered:

“Well?”

Then there was silence until Irene had unbuttoned her boots and kicked them off across the floor, when she continued:

“What did you think of him?”

After a moment Rena replied:

“It is evident he is not a ladies’ man, but he is a gentleman.”

“He may be a gentleman, but is the most awkward specimen I ever saw,” Irene rejoined. “Think how he sat in the parlor, with his neck bent forward in that dreadful chair, and his feet sprawled out in front of him.”

“That was the fault of the chair,” Rena said, and Irene replied:

“Why didn’t he take another? I tried to have him, and not make such a spectacle of himself, acting as if looking for some place in which to hide every time I spoke to him! I call him a muff, a stone, on whom I could not make the least impression. Small talk! He don’t know the meaning of the words, and I never spent a more stupid time than I did sitting there in the woods, trying to make him talk.”

Rena was bathing her face as she listened to this tirade and did not at once reply. She was rather happy than otherwise. She had made up with Tom, who had put himself on the same plane with herself in deception, and Tom’s good opinion was everything to her. He was her dear old Tom

again, although it did not seem to her she could use that term as freely as she once had done. She could say it to herself and think it, but

there had come over her a change removing Tom from her in one way and bringing him nearer to her in another, and the change had been brought about by contrasting him with Reginald Travers. She had watched the latter very closely. Nothing had escaped her, and while saying to herself, "I never could have loved him," she had mentally made excuses for what seemed shy and awkward in him, and had felt a pity for him that he was being deceived, and a contempt for herself for deceiving him. "Tom was right; he is not the man to be tricked," she thought, while the peculiar relation in which she stood to him made her wish to defend him against Irene's attacks.

"He is certainly a gentleman," she repeated. "Not as handsome as Tom, of course; few men are; but still good-looking. Naturally he would be nervous under the circumstances. He will appear better by and by, and I really do not dislike him as I thought I should, but I wish that horrid will had never been made, or being made that I had been left out of it or you put in my place."

"I!" and Irene spoke scornfully. "Haven't I told you that I made no more impression upon him than if he had been a stone? He was all the time wanting to get up and run away when we were sitting under the pines. He did show some concern when I stood by the well. I wish I had thrown myself in. I would if I had been sure of not being drowned. I am not quite ready yet to go after Nannie."

Why Irene should be in such a temper Rena could not understand. For herself it did not matter what Mr. Travers was, or how he appeared. He could never be anything to her. She had settled that before she saw him, and the conviction had been strengthened when she walked and sat with Tom in the moonlight. There was but one man in the world for her and that was Tom, she thought, as she bade Irene good-night, and left the young lady stalking about her room like a restless spirit. She did not

think as badly of Reginald as she had pretended, and had ridiculed him to Rena with a view to disenchant her should she by any chance fancy him. He was bashful and awkward in many respects, and seemingly wholly

impervious to her charms, and that irritated her. "But I'll conquer yet, I am resolved," she said to herself as she sat down in her dressing-gown by the open window and looked across the fields to the hill or plateau on which the McPherson house stood. She could see its tower and chimneys

and roof and felt sure it was a palace compared with the house in Claremont, with its ceilings so low that she could almost touch them as she walked. How she hated it, with all its dull routine of duties, its sweeping and dusting and dish-washing three times every day, and its terrible Monday's wash, and Tuesday's ironing, and Wednesday's baking.

"Ugh!" she said, going over with the list which her hard-worked mother was left so often to struggle with alone, while she was enjoying herself in Europe and elsewhere. "I'll get out of it, and through Mr. Travers, if possible, no matter how cold and stiff he is, and proud. I wonder what he would say if he knew I had once been a factory bug! It was horrid—the time I worked there—up in the cold wintry mornings before light—and hurrying for fear I should be late and docked—I am worthy of a better position and I will have it, too—and this proud Reginald Travers shall yet make love to me or my name is not Irene."

Just what the probability was of Reginald's ever owning the McPherson place she was not quite sure. That part of the will was a little hazy in her mind, except the fact that in any event Mr. Travers was to have ten thousand dollars of old Sandy's money. "That is something with what he already has," she said, "and he is worth trying for. He was not pleased with me and would a great deal rather have talked with Rena. I saw it and felt it, but I'll make him care for me, or at least go so far in his attentions that when he learns his mistake and how much I am interested, he will have too much honor to give me up, especially as there is no

hope of Rena. I was rather too forward, perhaps, to-night, to suit his prudish views. Hereafter Barkis will not be quite as _willin'_. I'll try Rena's kittenish ways, though it will be something like a cat aping the pranks of its offspring."

She laughed as she thought this, and then, conscious that she was growing cold, she cast a last look at the tower and roof of the McPherson place, and kissing her hand to it said softly:

"Good-night, my dear. Sleep well. You will find an Irene _à la Rena_ next time we meet."

"Did you speak?" Rena asked, rousing up, and Irene replied:

"I said 'good-night, my dear,' that's all."

"Good-night," Rena answered, drowsily, while Irene crept to bed and fell asleep with the thought in her mind: "This is the chance of my life and I shall improve it."

Meanwhile at the McPherson place there were half confidences exchanged between the young men and secret communings on the part of both. There had been comparative silence on the way home, Reginald keeping in advance of Tom, who tried in vain to keep up.

"Looks as if he were running away from somebody," Tom thought, and once he called out: "Don't go so fast. There's nobody behind you but me."

Rex did not answer, but kept on until they reached the house, when he went at once to his room. Tom stayed outside and lighting a cigar sat down upon the piazza to enjoy the beauty of the night and think of Rena's eyes as they looked at him under the pines and feel in fancy the touch of her fingers as she brushed his sleeve and picked a pine-needle

from his neck.

“I believe she is coming to time,” he thought, “and if it were not for this infernal will business she’d soon be where I could speak again. But I know Rena. She’s got it in her little wilful head that she must study Rex, or some such nonsense. Then there is this confounded farce with Irene posing as Rena, and Rena as Irene, and I looking on and compounding a felony and beginning not to care after all my high and mighty protests against it. I don’t believe I want to break it up now, for, by George! Rex would go in strong for Rena, if he knew she was the one. I saw his eyes shine two or three times when she was talking, while Irene never moved him any more than a fly moves an elephant when it lights on him. I know what she is up to. She means to make him so much in love that when he finds his mistake he’ll stick to her, as he would, if he were half-way interested and thought she cared. That’s Rex. Poor Rex, I shall have to go down on my knees to him yet. I wonder if he has gone to bed.”

Going to the door of Rex’s room he knocked and then entered unceremoniously. Rex was standing with his back to him removing his coat and vest and did not at once look round.

“I won’t keep you up more than a minute,” Tom said, “I just wanted to know what you thought of the girls. You hurried home so fast I couldn’t ask you. Isn’t Irene a stunner?”

“Why, yes,” Reginald replied, putting on the vest he had just taken off. “She nearly took my wits away. I never had many, you know, and I believe

I was more stupid than usual to-night. Why, I didn’t know anything when

Miss Burdick’s eyes were on me, and it was worse with the little one, Rena you call her. I caught her looking at me a great deal. Why did she, I wonder, do you know?”

Tom laughed and said:

“A cat may look at a king. Perhaps Rena admired you. Irene did, I am sure. I saw it in her eyes. They are very handsome.”

“Yes,” Rex said, “very handsome and sharp to see through a fellow and I never felt so small in my life, or appeared so badly as to-night, sitting in that abominable chair in that hot room, and again under the pines on a damp board. I could not be myself. Did Rena notice it, or say anything about it?”

“Upon my word he is getting a good deal rattled,” Tom thought, as Rex removed his vest a second time and began to put it on again wrong side out. “See here,” he said, “something has made bad work with what few brains you have. You’d better go to bed. No, Rena said nothing about you. Why should she? Good-night.”

“Good-night,” Rex responded, then added hastily, “eh, Tom——”

“Well, what is it? Hurry up. I’m half asleep,” Tom answered, with a feeling that Rex was about to speak of the will, in which case he felt that he should tell the truth at all hazards.

Just for a minute it had crossed Rex’s mind to make Tom his confidant, and had he been encouraged he might have done so. But Tom’s answer was not inviting, and he replied:

“Nothing—that is, nothing much; it will keep. Good-night again.”

He closed the door upon Tom, and long after that young man was asleep and dreaming of Rena, he sat by his window, looking across the fields in the direction of Mrs. Parks’ house, just as Irene was looking across the fields toward the McPherson place. He had been anxious to see the girl selected for him by Sandy McPherson and had determined to like her, if possible. In fact he had a kind of morbid idea that it was his duty to like her, if she seemed to care for him. There had been no doubt in his

mind as to which was the one. The will had said distinctly Irene Burdick, not Rena, and he had accepted Irene without questioning, or a thought that he was mistaken. Tom had prepared him somewhat for Irene's

beauty, but not altogether. He had seen a great many pretty girls north and south, but never one like her. She had thought him shy and indifferent, and he was all that, but nothing about her had escaped him, and her face and figure came up distinctly before him as he sat by his window, coatless and half undressed, but never thinking of the wind which was blowing up from the sea.

"She is superb," he thought. "Perfect in form and feature, a little too tall, with too much hair on the top of her head. Splendid hair, though. I wonder how she would look with it down. She carries herself like a queen, and there is no one in Richmond to compare with her, but there was something somewhere, I don't know what, which rasped—yes, that's the

word—rasped my nerves like a file. Now the little one rested me and I rather liked meeting her eyes, which are more like Nannie's than Miss Irene's. I believe I could—no, I don't believe I could, either. I was never cut out to marry any one, never meant to, and don't know as I mean

to now. I don't want to, and I won't be driven into it, either, just for money, though that is a consideration, for I have not a very large bank account and should like a little more, and if this girl should happen to fancy me, I shall try my best to reciprocate. She did look grand, standing on that well curb, with her arm raised like the goddess of Liberty. She is beautiful and the next time I see her I shall try and be more like Tom, who well might look happy, with no bewildering will to worry him, and the little one beside him."

When an idea or name was lodged in Reginald's mind it generally stayed there. Rena was the little one as compared with Irene, and his last conscious thought as he went shivering to bed was of the little one whose eyes were like Nannie's.

CHAPTER IX

COLIN McPHERSON'S CALL

The next day was hot and sultry, with signs of rain, which began to fall heavily by eight o'clock, but not so heavily that Nixon did not get through it with a basket of cut flowers from Mr. McPherson, who, he said, would call in the afternoon. There was also a note from Reginald for Irene saying that as the rain might continue all day and if it did not the roads would be very muddy, the proposed drive must be postponed

to some later date. The arrival of the flowers and note created a little diversion in the household and helped to clear the atmosphere. Mrs. Parks, who was usually all amiability, was somewhat ruffled in spirits. "She felt wrong end up and didn't know whether she was on foot or horseback," she confided to me, said deplorable state having been brought about first by the lateness of the hour when we came in. She did not blame me as much as she did the young folks. As a rule they were regular night owls. For her part she could never get to sleep when she knew anybody was out. She kept listening for 'em till her hair began to twist, she got so nervous. It was nigh on to twelve when we came in, she said, and the tardiness of the young ladies at breakfast was another grievance. This meal, which was usually served with the utmost regularity at half-past seven, had waited until eight, and the good woman was greatly distressed for her muffins and my digester, which was sure to suffer from the delay.

"Well, set down anyway," she said, just as Rena appeared, full of apologies as she took her seat at the table, her eyes dancing when Mrs. Parks explained that she was rather particular about her hours for meals, as things was apt to spile if they stood, and then Miss Bennett's digester was bad and had to be reg'lar.

"I'm sorry if I have spoiled things and injured Miss Bennett's digester. It shall not occur again," Rena said, with a mischievous look at me which I understood.

It was fully ten minutes before Irene came down, seeming languid and dispirited, but brightening when she took the note and saw the flowers which Nixon had brought, and heard that Mr. McPherson would call in the

afternoon. It was something to have Reginald write to her and she read his note two or three times but not aloud. She merely explained that the drive was postponed on account of the rain, while her manner indicated that there was more she could tell if she would. The prospect of meeting Mr. McPherson delighted her. To stand well with him might be a means of

advancing her cause with Reginald. "Beauty and good dressing take with every old man," she thought, and her toilet was faultless when, after dinner, she came out upon the piazza where I was sitting with Rena. Her gown, which fell in soft folds around her perfect figure, was black, with no color to relieve it except the roses she had pinned on the bosom of her dress.

"O Irene!" Rena exclaimed, "how lovely you look! I always like you best in black, and the roses are the color of your cheeks."

"Thank you," Irene said, smiling very graciously as she took her seat near us and remarked upon the beauty of the country now that the rain was over.

She was in the best of humors, and during the half hour which followed I found her intensely agreeable, as I listened to her animated descriptions of what she had seen abroad. Occasionally it occurred to me that Rena's eyes opened very wide at some things Irene said and which seemed to me overdrawn. I did not then know that her theory was, "if you

are telling anything make it interesting, if you have to add to do so."

She was interesting me very much with her adventure on the _mer-de-glace_, making up half of it, at least, when there was the sound of wheels coming down the road and the McPherson carriage stopped at the

gate. It devolved upon me to present Mr. McPherson to the young ladies, and I must have spoken their names indistinctly, or he was more deaf than usual, for he said, "Which is Miss Burdick, and which is Miss—" he hesitated and looked at Rena.

"I am Miss Rena; she is Miss Burdick," and she motioned toward Irene, who looked regally beautiful as she bowed and held out her hand, saying:

"Both Burdicks, both Irenes, and both very glad to meet you and thank you for your thoughtful kindness in sending your carriage for us to the station—and for the lovely flowers."

"Hey, what?" he said, "carriage and flowers? Rex must have the credit of the flowers yesterday, but was too modest to have them presented in his name. Fine fellow—that Rex!"

He looked steadily at Irene, who blushed becomingly, while Rena seemed troubled as if she felt herself in the shadow of her brilliant cousin. If so the feeling only lasted a moment before she smiled again at something he said. This time his sharp, black eyes looked quickly at her through his gold rimmed glasses, scanning her closely. Then, putting his hand on her shoulder and turning her to the light, he said, "Excuse an old man who might be your grandfather; but, you are more like the picture in our drawing-room than your cousin, who should resemble her. Are you both related to Nannie—Nannie Wilkes, I mean, who drowned herself?"

Mr. McPherson was not one who minced matters at all, but called a spade a spade when he knew it was one. He had heard his brother say many times that the artist had been most happy in getting the right expression in

Nannie's eyes, and that the eyes of the girl seen on the beach were like them. He fancied, too, that Sandy had said she was small, like Nannie, and yet here was this tall blonde, with eyes as blue as the waters of Loch Katrine among the heather hills of Scotland, presented as Miss Burdick. The Miss Burdick, of course—Rex's fiancée, if he would have it

so. No look in her eyes like Nannie. No look like Nannie anywhere in her

face. But in the great gray eyes of the other, there was certainly a strong resemblance to Nannie. He knew that look too well to be mistaken.

He had seen it for years in the girlish face of his brother's first love, and he expected to find it in Irene, instead of Rena, whom he would have selected as the great-step-granddaughter, had he made his choice unaided. Hence his question, "Are you both relatives of Nannie?"

Both Irene and Rena were puzzled, and it was Irene who replied, "We must

have the same ancestors on one side of our family, as we are cousins, but I never heard of Nannie till I came here."

"Nor I," Rena said, "although it seems to me as if I had heard of some relative away back who drowned herself like Nannie. Aunt Mary may know.

I'll write and ask her. Am I really like the picture? I shall be so glad to see it."

"You are very like it, dimples and all," Mr. McPherson said, looking admiringly at her, while Irene began to grow hot with envy and anger which she had the tact to conceal.

It would never do to show her chagrin to this shrewd man, whose keen eyes made her so uncomfortable.

"I'll have to win Rex through him," she thought, and never was her voice

softer, nor her smile sweeter than during the half hour she sat chatting with Colin, who asked her at last if, while she was abroad, she visited Scotland?

“Oh, Scotland!” she exclaimed, remembering that he was Scotch, “Certainly, I did; and the memory of it is a joy forever.”

Colin was delighted and said next:

“And Glasgow, where I was born—did you go there?”

Just for an instant Irene hesitated. Of all the cities visited in Europe, Glasgow was the one she liked the least. She had been there but two days—one of which was rainy—and in that time she saw more squalor and hard faces in the streets among the poor than she had ever seen before in her life, to say nothing of three street fights, one between a girl and a newsboy directly in front of the hotel. She disliked Glasgow and was glad to leave it, but it would not do to decry Colin’s native city, which she assured him she enjoyed so much, especially the parks and drives. In short, Glasgow was charming, and Scotland still more so.

“And you?” he said, turning to Rena. “Were you with your cousin, and did you like Glasgow and Scotland?”

“Scotland, yes, very much; but really, I didn’t care so much for Glasgow as for some other cities, Edinburgh, for instance,” was Rena’s truthful answer.

“Umph!” came a little testily from Mr. McPherson, who turned again to Irene, listening with rapt attention while she talked, drawing a good deal upon her imagination, but doing it so well that Rena wondered where she was when Irene saw all she was describing and wished she had seen it, too!

Irene knew how to use her eyes and hands when talking, and if the former were not like Nannie's, they were so effective and did their work so well that Mr. McPherson was as fully impressed as she could have desired. A clause in his brother's will was to the effect that although he was to have a life interest in the house, Reginald was to live there after his marriage as much of the time as he chose. On this account Colin was especially interested in the girl who was to be Reginald's wife and anxious to see her.

"She'll do. She is just the one to grace our house," was his mental verdict, as he arose to go.

"By the way," he said, "I came near forgetting one part of my errand, I have been so well entertained. I have arranged to have you to dinner to-morrow at six. The carriage will come for you at five, and Miss Rena, and the other lady—Miss Bennett."

Irene was profuse in her thanks. She would like to see the McPherson house, of which she had heard so much, she said.

"You will come, of course. I want to compare you with Nannie," Colin said to Rena, putting his hand on her hair in a caressing kind of way as if she had been a child he wanted to pet.

She did seem to him much younger than Irene, she was so short and slim, and the expression of her face was so frank and open and innocent.

"Yes, I'll come," she said, while I, too, accepted rather reluctantly, feeling that I might be *_de trop_* with the young people.

Irene seemed very happy the remainder of the day, talking of the dinner and looking over her wardrobe and trying on dress after dress to see which was the most suitable and becoming. She was more fully resolved than ever upon winning Reginald. Of Rena as a rival she had but little fear. Tom stood as a strong wall against any advance from Reginald and

her way seemed comparatively clear, now that she had sounded the Scotchman and felt tolerably sure of him as an ally.

“Only talk Glasgow to him and he is all right,” she thought, wishing she had visited more places of interest, or that she had some book in which she could read up and post herself.

Perhaps there was one in the house, she thought. She would inquire. Fortunately for her, a former boarder had left a Harper’s Guide Book which Lottie found for her, and when Rena asked what she was going to do with that musty old volume she answered, “Refresh my memory;” and that night after Rena was asleep she did refresh it to the extent of knowing all there was in it about the Cathedral and the Royal Exchange and Royal Bank and Merchants’ Institute, the Picture Gallery and Museum and Stewart Memorial Fountain. She could scarcely recall one of them, neither had she seen them all, but she had them at her tongue’s end and felt quite ready to meet the old Scotchman on his native heather, if he were disposed to take her there again.

CHAPTER X

THE DINNER-PARTY

“There’s a girl with a head on her, and as handsome as they make ’em,” Colin soliloquized on his way home. “Appreciated Glasgow! About the first American I ever met who didn’t begin at once to talk about the dirty people in some of the streets, as if that was all there was of Glasgow. I don’t believe she saw ’em. If she did she had the good taste not to mention ’em. Yes, she has a head on her, and such a head and face. Rex is in luck to have such a wife made to hand, and nothing to do but to take her. I wonder he didn’t tell me how handsome she was. But that’s his way, not to talk. I don’t believe he takes very kindly to the will, at least to the girl there is in it. Isn’t a marrying man. Guess I’ll have to give him a little boost and tell him what I think of her.”

He found Reginald reading alone in the library, Tom having gone for a stroll which he meant should take him by Mrs. Parks', where he hoped to see Rena.

"By George! Rex," the old man said, bustling in, "I've seen a girl with a head on her; yes, I have."

Rex looked up and asked:

"Did you ever see a girl without a head on her?"

"Of course not, but you know what I mean," Colin answered. "A girl with no nonsense, and such a face and such an air and manner. I congratulate you, my boy; yes, I do. Sandy did well for you."

Rex began to feel damp again as he had the night before, but he closed his book and said:

"You mean Miss Burdick?"

"Certainly. Whom should I mean?" Mr. McPherson replied. "The other one!
What is her name?"

"Rena," Rex said, and he went on: "Yes, Miss Rena is a nice little girl, with wonderful eyes like Nannie's, but she can't hold a candle to Irene. Didn't like Glasgow, and told me so, but you ought to hear the other one talk about Scotland and what she saw there. You'll have a chance to-morrow, for she is coming to dinner."

"Oh," and Rex felt the cold chills run down his back. "She is not coming alone?"

"Alone, no! I have asked Rena and that Miss Bennett, who seems a sensible woman and does not talk. That will make six—just enough for

the

small round table which I will have laid in the breakfast-room as more cozy than the big dining-room. As Irene is the guest of honor I naturally must take her in to dinner, and you and Mr. Giles will suit yourselves with the other two.”

Colin was full of his dinner-party, asking Reginald which he supposed would suit Irene most, green turtle soup or ox-tail, and failing to gain any information from him he hurried away to consult his housekeeper, Mrs. Fry, as to what he ought to have and how it should be served, deciding finally upon green turtle, his favorite soup. Rex tried to seem interested, and the next morning fortified himself with a plunge in the sea, although the waves were rolling high and the undertow carried him farther out than seemed safe to Tom, who was looking on and did not feel

the need of a bath in that dangerous surf. It was enough for him that Rena was coming and he was to take her in to dinner, for so Rex had arranged it, appropriating Miss Bennett to himself with a great wrench of self-denial, but planning to have Rena on his left. The bath did him good, bracing up his nerves, and by the time he went to his room in the afternoon to dress, he was outwardly composed, though inwardly shaking

like a leaf. He said to Tom, who was whistling cheerily in his dressing-room as he made his toilet:

“Do I look as if I were all in a tremble at the thought of meeting three ladies?” Rex asked, standing a moment in Tom’s door and trying to button his collar.

“Not a bit of it,” Tom answered, and Reginald continued:

“But I am. It’s lucky my trousers are so wide, or you’d see my legs wabbling around in them. I’ve tried that new fad, you know—denying things. I’ve said I hadn’t any nerves, nor any legs, nor any trousers, and couldn’t have, but, by George, I seem to have all three. Did you

ever see such a fool?"

"Never! and I'm ashamed of you," Tom answered so decidedly that Reginald

began again to pull himself together with such success that by the time the carriage, sent at five for the ladies, was driving into the yard, he was wondering at his own calmness and self-possession.

Perhaps it was the contempt in Tom's voice as he said, "I am ashamed of you," which wrought the change and perhaps it was the thought which repeated itself over and over in his mind: "There is no hurry. No one can make me marry against my will, and I have a year or more if I choose

in which to decide. I may get accustomed to thinking of a wife by that time, though the Lord knows I never wanted one; and possibly the girl may not want such a stick as I am. I hope she won't. I am not at all like her."

Thus reassured, he became quite himself, rather shy, but a courteous, polished gentleman, as he went forward to meet their guests. Naturally Irene was the first to alight. There was a feeling with us all that she was the guest of honor and she accepted the situation gracefully.

Yesterday she had been all in black, to-day she was all in white, with a few pink roses nestling in the fluffy folds of her waist, and nothing could be more modest than her manner as she stepped from the carriage and shook hands with Mr. McPherson, then with Tom and last with Reginald. She could blush when she chose to do so, and she blushed now

very prettily as she looked up at him and then let her eyes fall coyly and modestly as she stood aside for Rena. Of the two girls Rena had been

more nervous about the dinner-party than Irene. She was anxious to see the place and Nannie's picture, but she was feeling herself more and more an impostor and wishing she had never tried to deceive Reginald Travers, who, because she was deceiving him, interested her more than he

would otherwise have done. With her whole heart she loved Tom, but she pitied Reginald, and her manner toward him was like that of one who feels he has done a wrong and is seeking to redress it. She, too, was looking her best, in a soft cream-colored cashmere, with red roses on her bosom and an exquisite pin of pearls and turquoise at her throat, and Reginald felt the charm in her manner, and a smile of genuine pleasure broke over his face as he greeted her and said he hoped she had suffered no inconvenience from her visit to the pines two nights before. "Not the least," she said, "I'd like to go again."

A close observer would have seen Irene's eyes glance quickly around at the house and grounds, of which she seemed a fitting mistress, as she went up the stone steps, past the Ionic pillars, to the wide piazza; to which Mr. McPherson had brought rugs and chairs, and where was a small

table, with silver urn and the daintiest of china cups from which we were to have coffee after dinner. Here we sat down to enjoy the view of hills and meadows and a strip of woods, through which an opening had been cut, showing a glimpse of the sea in the distance. Taking a seat by Irene, Mr. McPherson plunged at once into his favorite theme, Scotland and Glasgow. Irene was ready for him to a certain extent and discoursed of the places in Glasgow in which she had become posted, while Tom listened open-mouthed and Rena open-eyed, with a recollection of the one

rainy day in Glasgow and the one fair day, and Irene's disgust with the city and haste to get out of it. When it came to the picture-gallery and Irene was asked which picture of all she preferred, she found herself stranded, but said their stay was so limited that they had not given the gallery as much time as she could wish and she could hardly recall any one picture better than the other where all were so fine, and then, knowing she was at the end of her Glasgow rope, she gave a most natural

turn to the conversation and swooped down on the Highlands and the Trossachs, where she felt more at home, growing very eloquent over Lochs

Lomond and Katrine and quoting a line or two from the “Lady of the Lake,” which she said she believed she knew by heart and had since she was a child.

Tom, who was sitting by Rena, whispered to her:

“How many lies is she telling? A pile of them, I’ll wager.”

“Hush-sh!” Rena answered, fascinated by Irene’s eloquence, which also interested Reginald.

He had no suspicion of lies and only thought what a wonderful command of language Irene possessed and how well her animation became her. When the Trossachs were exhausted, Tom, who had had enough of it, began to talk of something else, while Rena wondered if they were never going to see Nannie’s picture and that of her great-grandmother. The hands of the long clock on the stair-landing in the hall pointed to six and at the first stroke a maid appeared, courtesying to the guests, and saying to her master, “Dinner is served.”

“And, by George! I am ready for it. We didn’t have much for lunch,” Colin said, offering his arm to Irene, who seemed more erect and taller than usual as she walked beside him, and on whose train, which spread out far behind her, Tom inadvertently planted his foot. No woman likes to feel her skirt pulled back suddenly, and Irene was not an exception.

Ordinarily she would have been angry, but now she was on her good behavior, and to Tom’s “I beg your pardon; I had no business to be so careless,” she answered, sweetly: “No matter, it ought to be stepped on. It is quite too long.”

With a graceful sweep she gathered it up and we moved on to the breakfast-room and the elegantly appointed table, with damask and cut glass and silver and flowers and two servants—a man and a maid—to serve

us. Mr. McPherson was in a joking mood, and when the soup was brought in, said to Irene:

“I hope you like green turtle, Miss Burdick? I had to chance it, as I didn’t know your taste. Neither did Rex when I asked him. But he’ll improve; he’ll know it by and by.”

Pleased with his own joke the old man shut one of his eyes and with the other winked at Irene, whose blushes were genuine and whose face for a moment was scarlet, for she felt the bad taste of the insinuation and knew that Reginald was displeased. If there was one soup more than another which she detested it was green turtle, but she declared that nothing could have suited her better, while taking it down in gulps, each one of which nauseated her frightfully. After this the dinner proceeded quietly and we were again upon the piazza, where Irene presided at the tea-table and poured coffee, which Reginald and Tom handed to us, and all the time Rena was chafing for a sight of the pictures, fearing it might get too late to see them distinctly. It was near sunset when Tom, who knew Rena’s anxiety, said to our host:

“Excuse me, Mr. McPherson. It is delightful out here, but the young ladies want to see Nannie.”

“Why, yes, bless my soul!” Mr. McPherson exclaimed, starting up. “I came near forgetting it, I am enjoying myself so well. Come this way. Rex, I’ll let you have Miss Burdick a while.”

Rex bowed and gave Irene his arm, thinking as he did what a fine-looking woman she was, but wishing she were not quite so tall and wondering if she wouldn’t look shorter if she did not wear her hair coiled in so many braids around her head like a coronet, which added to her height. He had noticed her hair when he first saw her, and thought of it again while taking his coffee, wondering in a vague kind of way, as he had once

before, how long and thick it was and if it did not take her more time to arrange it than it took Rena to twist her brown tresses into the flat knot low in her neck, which he liked better than Irene's crown. They were now in the drawing-room, standing before the three portraits ranged side by side on the wall, Nannie between the two Mrs. McPherson's, with their caps and puffs of hair. Nannie's hair was in curls, as she wore it when Sandy first knew her, and in her low-necked dress and short sleeves she looked as if she might have been the daughter of either of the prim ladies beside her.

"This is Nannie," Mr. McPherson said, addressing himself to Irene, "and this Rex's great-grandmother, Sandy's first wife, you know, and this your great-grandmother, Sandy's second wife."

The consciousness of the part she was acting kept Irene silent, while Mr. McPherson went on: "You don't look like her, as I see, nor like Nannie, either, though Sandy said you did. He saw you on the beach, you know. You don't remember him, of course." Irene still kept silent, while Colin continued: "Your cousin is more like Nannie. The eyes are much the same," he added, as he turned to Rena, who was gazing into Nannie's beautiful eyes, which seemed to smile a recognition upon her.

"You are like her," Reginald said, coming to Rena's side and looking at her so earnestly that she found herself blushing, and moved nearer to Tom.

She, too, was feeling uncomfortable, and wishing more and more that she had never entered into the deception.

“I can’t tell now,” she thought. “I must wait and consult Tom. I wonder how Irene can seem so composed.”

Irene had recovered from her little pricks of conscience, and was looking quite unmoved at the portrait supposed to be her great-grandmother’s and listening to Mr. McPherson’s question as to what her maiden name was.

“My memory is so bad it has slipped my mind,” he said.

Irene had forgotten, too, if she ever knew, which was doubtful, she said, as she feared she had not been as anxious about her pedigree as she ought to be. Then, lest she should be asked more troublesome questions, she turned from the portraits to other pictures in the room, the originals of some of which she had seen abroad and about which she could talk fluently.

“Perhaps you’d like to see the rest of the house?” Mr. McPherson said to her at last, as if she were the only one present interested in it.

If she were to live there, or spend her summers there, she must be glad to see her future home, and he led the way through the rooms of the first floor, and then to the second, where he stopped at the door of a large, airy chamber, with a fine outlook over the grounds and down to the sea.

“This was Sandy’s room,” he said. “Here he sat a great deal with his two wives, both of whom died in that bed,” and he pointed to a high poster, with a lace canopy over it. “His first died on the right side, and his second on the left, he told me. Sandy died in it, too,” he added, very reverently; while Irene stood with her head a little bent and eyes cast down, like one praying, while in reality she was trying to repress a smile at the idea of Mrs. McPherson the first dying on the right side of the bed, and Mrs. McPherson the second on the left, and Sandy probably in the middle, she thought.

Tom was thinking the same and whispering it to Rena, when Colin pointed to the large bay window at the extremity of the long room.

“The window is kept sacred to Nannie,” he said. “That low rocker was bought for her, but she never sat in it, nor saw it, nor the silver tea-set on the table by it—her work-table it was to be—nor the piano crosswise in the window. He had them all brought to his room after she died, and his two wives let him keep them here. The second one, though, put a curtain across the alcove to shut them off when she felt like it. Nobody ever sat in the chair, that I know, or used the tea-set, or touched the piano. That was Sandy’s fad. He said, though, that Rex’s wife might try it. Shall I open it?”

He was standing by the spindle-legged instrument and Irene was close to him. Just what answer she would have given was prevented by Rena, who exclaimed: “No, oh, no, it would be sacrilege not to respect the dear old man’s wishes. How he must have loved poor Nannie.”

There were tears in Rena’s eyes as she followed Colin to another part of the room, while he went on: “That was Sandy’s chair over by the desk where he wrote his will and that chair by the west window was his first wife’s, and that by the south window was his second wife’s—your great-grandmother, Miss Burdick. Sit down in it and see how you look!”

“No!” Rena said again, grasping Irene’s arm as she was seating herself in the wooden rocking-chair, with its faded chintz-cover and frill.

Irene stared at her impatiently; then catching Mr. McPherson’s look of inquiry, she said, with a laugh:

“I believe Rena is superstitious about sitting in chairs which have not been used for so long.”

“It isn’t that,” Rena answered. “I hardly know what it is. I want to get out of this room, which seems so full of the dead.”

She was very white and Reginald, who was near her, said to her:

“I think it is grewsome, too. Let’s go out.”

He put his hand on her arm and led her into the hall, followed by the others, Mr. McPherson bringing up the rear with Irene. As he was a little deaf himself he always talked rather loud, and as they were going down the hall he said so distinctly that we all heard him:

“It was Sandy’s wish that his room should be kept as it is. I hope Rex’s wife will respect his wishes. She can have any other room in the house.”

What Irene’s answer was I could not hear, but that it was satisfactory was proven by Mr. McPherson’s hearty:

“Thank you, I was sure you would feel that way.”

Reginald, who still held Rena’s arm, clutched it so tight that she gave a little cry and wrenched herself from him.

“I’ve hurt you,” he said, in great distress. “I am always doing something stupid. I am so sorry.”

“It does not matter at all,” Rena replied. “Nothing matters but myself, Mr. Travers.”

She was looking at him with such pleading in her eyes that he felt sure there was something the matter, and said to her in a voice she had never heard from him before:

“What is it? Can I do anything for you?”

She wanted to tell him the truth then and there without waiting to consult Tom, but her courage failed her. She couldn’t do it, and it was not the place either.

“No, thanks,” was her answer. “I am a little nervous with those chairs and things which belonged to the dead. That is all, and I think it is

time we were going home. The sun is down, you see.”

Irene was not at all anxious to go, but Rena was so persistent that the carriage was brought to the door and we were soon saying good-night to the three gentlemen, who stood waving their hands to us as we drove down the avenue, one of them, certainly, looking relieved that the affair was over.

CHAPTER XI DRIFTING

The next morning Tom came to the farmhouse and sat with Rena under the great tree in Mrs. Parks’ yard. Irene was not feeling quite well, and kept her room, leaving Rena alone with Tom. There had been a few words between herself and Rena with regard to the deception which the latter wished to end and Irene had met the proposal with an insinuation that it looked very much as if Rena was jealous of the attentions paid to her by Mr. McPherson and wished to transfer them to herself. Rena was silenced but not convinced, and when alone with Tom she opened her heart to him and asked what she ought to do!

“Do you think you could care for Rex?” Tom asked, a great gulp in his throat as he thought of the possibility.

“Not the way you mean,” Rena answered; “but I wish you would tell him I am the Irene meant in the will, but can never care for him except as a friend; then, everything will be honest and fair, and we can have such a good time. I am miserable now. Will you tell him?”

She put her hand on Tom’s, and he felt every nerve quiver from the touch

of her fingers. Just for a moment he did not speak, while many conflicting thoughts ran through his mind. Rex ought to be told, but he had seen that in his friend which warned him of danger. Once let him know the truth and he would turn to Rena, first as a duty, perhaps, and then for the girl herself, while she—He was not quite so sure what she might do under pressure, she was so impulsive, and he could not lose her now.

“Rena,” he said at last, “let it drift for a while now we are in it. Rex has taken Irene for you without asking a question. If he speaks to me of the will I shall tell him the truth. Until he does better let him alone unless you think you might care for him. You are sure you could not?”

“Only as a friend,” Rena replied, while for a moment there was silence between them.

Then, taking her hand, Tom said:

“Is there any one you could care for—me, for instance?”

There was a look in Rena’s eyes like a startled fawn as she raised them to Tom’s face, and her lips quivered as if she were about to cry.

“O Tom!” she said, “don’t ask me now. Everything is so mixed and wrong.

I don’t know what I want or who I am exactly. Wait ever so long, and maybe I shall know.”

“I’ll wait for years,” Tom answered, with a heaving of his broad chest and a feeling that Rena was as absolutely his as if her word had been pledged to him.

After that it seemed easier to tell Rex.

“Let him give me his confidence and my way will be clear,” Tom thought;
and as just then Irene appeared in the door and came toward them the

conversation between him and Rena ceased. After that matters drifted as matters usually do where four young people are concerned, two as good as

engaged, one trying her best to be engaged, and the other not knowing what he wanted or ought to do. There were drives along the pleasant country roads, rambles in the woods, calls at Mrs. Parks', and five o'clock teas at the McPherson place, where Irene was looked upon by Colin as the future mistress of the house. Greatly to the disgust of the old man, Reginald gave no special sign of coming to the point. He was very polite to Irene, who in all the drives and rambles fell to him naturally, and was never more fascinating and womanly than now when trying her best to enslave him. Sometimes she thought she gained a little, especially as he consulted her once with regard to some change Colin thought of making in the greenhouse, and again about the removal of a tree which obstructed the view from the window of his room. As a whole, however, he was always a quiet, reserved and taciturn man, following obediently where she led and leaving the most of the talking to her. No allusion to the will was ever made, nor did she mean there should be for the present, if she could help it.

"If he does speak of it I must either tell the truth, or feign entire ignorance, and so exonerate myself from all blame, trusting that neither Rena nor Tom will betray me," she thought, and with this conclusion she kept steadily on, bending every energy and every art to the accomplishment of her purpose.

Just what Rex thought of her he hardly knew himself. He was far more at ease with her now than he had been at first. Once he had perpetrated some joke upon her, and once when a hairpin had fallen from her heavy braids, he had picked it up and rather awkwardly fastened it in its place, making some remark as he did so about the quality and quantity of her hair and asking her how long it was.

"Oh, I don't know," she said, putting her hands to her head to see if her false braids were in place and wondering what he would say if he

knew how much she took off at night.

Three or four times the young ladies had tried the sea-bathing near the McPherson bath-house, but the surf was so heavy and the undertow so strong that they never ventured far out unless Tom or Rex were near them. One day, however, Irene, who was somewhat daring and liked to show

her skill, went out so far that the strong out-going tide took her with it beyond her depth and was carrying her further and further away when Rex, who was near to her, heard her cry, "O Rex, save me!" and struck out swiftly for her. Exhausted and overcome with fright, she had sunk once before he reached her, but just as she was going down a second time

he caught at the mop of hair and holding fast to it swam quickly to the shore where Tom and Rena, who had not been in the water, received her and took her to the bath-house. Returning to the beach Tom saw Reginald

holding in his hand a thick braid of blonde hair at which he was looking curiously and turning it over as if greatly perplexed.

"Tom!" he gasped, "see what I have done, and she never gave a cry, although it must have hurt her fearfully. I don't quite understand it."

"Rex, are you an idiot, that you know nothing of false hair and girl's toilets?" Tom said, as he took the braid and held it dripping with water before Rex, who gasped:

"You don't mean it wasn't growing there?"

"I don't mean anything else," Tom answered. "Do you suppose any girl could stand having her scalp pulled off and make no protest? You certainly are a fool!"

"Yes, I am; but how should I know?" Rex said, "I, who have no sisters nor mother nor near female relation, and have scarcely been near a girl until this summer. Do they all—does the little one wear false hair?"

“No, sir!” Tom answered promptly. “Many girls do wear it, though. There is no harm in it that I see. No girl has as much hair of her own as Irene wears. You might know that with half an eye; but come on and change your wet clothes, and not stand there staring at this hair as if it were a live thing.”

“Yes,” Rex stammered, “but what shall we do with it?”

“Do with it?” Tom repeated. “Give it to Irene, of course. It is valuable. False braids like this cost money.”

“But,” Rex began again. “Will she like to know that—that we know it? Won’t it mortify her? Hadn’t we better throw it into the sea and say nothing? That will save her feelings. She’ll think she lost it there.”

“Rex, you are a gentleman, if you don’t know anything! I should never have thought of sparing Irene that way,” Tom said, tossing the hair far out to meet an incoming wave which when it receded carried with it Irene’s heaviest and most expensive braid which had given way under Rex’s firm grasp.

“Yes, that’s better than telling her,” Rex said, standing a moment and watching the hair as it drifted further and further away until it was lost to view. “Yes, better be there than on her head; but I’ll confess I am surprised. I have a great deal to learn about girls. Yes, a great deal, and I don’t like it,” was the last Tom heard as they separated at the door of Rex’s bath-room.

When alone, Tom bent himself double to smother his laughter, while saying to himself:

“I’d like nothing better than to see Irene’s face when Rex gave her back her hair, if he had done so; but then I’m a brute and Rex is a gentleman through and through, but a good deal of a simpleton. I believe, though, I’d be as big a one, to have his kindness of heart and delicacy of feeling which prompted him not to mortify Irene needlessly.”

Meanwhile Irene had dried and dressed herself and was sitting out in the sunshine, with little thrills of delight in her heart as she thought that Rex had saved her. Just how or where he had seized her she did not know, she was so frightened; by her arm, most likely, and she was waiting for him to appear and thinking what she should say to thank him, when Rena came to her side, bringing her hat and umbrella. In the excitement of caring for her cousin she had not noticed her hair, but she did now, and exclaimed:

“Irene, Irene, what has happened? Half your head is gone! Put up your hand and see.”

Irene sprang to her feet, put her hand to her head, and realized her loss, while like a flash came the thought, “Did he see it? Did he pull it off? Does he know?”

“Oh, heavens!” she said, sinking back to her seat. “I’ve lost my beautiful braid of hair, for which I gave so much. I must look like a guy. Do you think he saw it? Mr. Travers, I mean. I don’t care for Tom! Put on my hat, quick, before they come.”

She seemed in great distress, while Rena tried to comfort her, saying: “He must have pulled it off, but I would not care.”

“I think you look better without it, and at least two inches shorter.”

Irene was proud of her height and proud of her crown, and that was gone—where, she could not guess, but she hoped anywhere so that Reginald

did not see it, though that was unlikely. She was a good deal upset and very nervous, and had intended to play the rôle of an invalid in order to have him go home with her, but she changed her mind, and when he appeared with Tom, he found her as erect as ever, declaring herself none the worse for her fright, and thanking him very graciously for coming to her aid, and saying she was beginning to see stars when he grasped her.

“You had a loud call, that’s a fact. Didn’t you lose your head, nor anything?” Tom asked, with a twinkle in his eyes which made Irene suspect at once.

“The wretch!” she thought. “I believe he knows something about it.” Then, with her ready tact, she replied, “I didn’t lose my head, but I did a switch which I sometimes wear. It was made from my hair cut when I had fever and it began to come out. Did you see it? It does not matter, though, for I only cared for it because it was a part of myself.”

Rena had never heard of the fever and looked astonished, while Tom whistled softly and turned away to keep from laughing. Reginald, however, felt relieved. In his ignorance of a lady’s toilet anything false struck him unpleasantly. He had heard of powder and paint and false hair, but had always associated them with actresses and second class people, and never with people like Irene, who might, perhaps, be his wife. This case, however, was different. The lost braid was a part of Irene. It had once grown on her head and not on that of some frowsy foreigner. He could forgive the falseness, especially as Irene had been so frank about it, but inwardly he was glad that the thing was riding the waves of the Atlantic. He was very attentive and insisted upon going home with her, and made her take his arm, as he was sure she must feel weak and the road was not very smooth, and he was so kind and thoughtful

that Irene would have felt repaid for her fright, if it were not for the loss of her hair and wishing to know where it was. That troubled her, and when they reached the house and Reginald stepped into the garden to see a species of hibiscus just in blossom, of which Mrs. Parks was very proud, she turned to Tom and said:

“Where is my hair? I am sure you know by your looks. Is it in your pocket?”

“No, madam,” Tom answered, with a comical smile. “The last I saw it was drifting out to sea. It is miles away by this time, if some mermaid has not appropriated it.”

CHAPTER XII

TOM AND RENA AT THE WELL

In spite of her assertion that she could not take cold, Irene took one, which, with the nervous shock, confined her to the house for a few days, greatly to her annoyance and the discomfort of the family generally. She was not the most amiable of invalids and was very exacting in her demands upon Rena, who was kept going up and down stairs after things Irene wanted or fancied she did. Every day inquiries for her had come from the McPhersons, with flowers; and every day Tom had called in person to ask after her, and to talk with Rena when she could be spared from her office as nurse; and it was Tom who saw Irene first on the piazza, looking a little pale from her recent illness. He had received a letter from one of his clients which made it necessary for him to go home for a week or so, and as he was to leave that night he had come to say good-by to his cousins. I told him Rena had gone for a walk, adding that I thought she was down in the pine-grove, by Nannie’s Well, as that was her favorite resort.

“Gone to look in?” Tom asked, and I replied, “Possibly. I heard her say she meant to try it sometime.”

“All right. I’ll find her and look in, too,” Tom answered. “But I must see Irene first. Where is she?”

I told him, and he was soon with her, and saying:

“I am glad to see you in so good order. I didn’t know for a minute but you were a goner when you went out of sight, and I began to think of all the mean things I ever did and said to you, even to the angleworm I put on your neck years ago. I really did, and if you had been drowned I believe I should have worn crêpe. I should have jumped in after you if

Rex had not got ahead of me. He swims like a fish and the way he brought you to land was beautiful to see. And, I say, that ducking improved your looks, if they could be improved. The loss of your topknot was a good thing.”

“What do you mean?” Irene asked, and Tom replied:

“I mean that you look better with that Eifel tower off your head. It made you too tall.”

“Five feet nine, that’s all,” Irene answered, a little crisply.

“In reality, perhaps; but five ten in appearance—taller than Rex, and that won’t do,” was Tom’s rejoinder, while Irene asked:

“Did he ever criticise my height?”

“Why, no; not exactly,” Tom replied, with a feeling that he was getting into hot water. “He has said something about your being rather tall, but with your hair as it is now, and that topknot half-way across the Atlantic, as it must be by this time, you are all right, and I never saw you look so well.”

Irene knew Tom meant all he said, and her face brightened a little, but there was still a shadow on it as she said:

“Do please be serious and sensible for once, and tell me if Mr. Travers saw the braid I lost?”

For a moment Tom hesitated; then he replied:

“Saw it? of course he did. How could he help it when he pulled it off your head and thought he had a part of your scalp with it? You never saw so distressed a fellow as he was holding it gingerly as if it were a live thing, and he was so relieved when I told him it had never grown on

the top of your head, 'the place where the wool ought to grow.' You know that medley."

"O Tom! why will you worry me so?" Irene asked, and Tom replied:

"I'm not worrying you. I'm only telling you how badly Rex felt when he thought he had torn off part of your head in trying to save you, and how relieved he was when I set him right. You see he lost his mother when he was a baby, and never had any sisters, or cousins, or aunts—was reared by an old mammy, who was once a slave in the family, and he knows nothing of girls' little arts and make-ups, and supposed, of course, that every hair of that steeple was natural. I think he is glad it was not and that a part of it has gone to the mermaids. I am."

Tom was sitting very close to Irene, with his hand on the arm of her chair, and was talking to her as he did not often talk. His compliments pleased her and she was thinking him not so bad a cousin, after all, when he startled her by saying:

"I say, Irene, how long are we going to keep up this farce of deceiving Rex?"

Irene bridled at once, and the chords in her neck began to show as they did when she was getting angry, and little red spots came out on her face.

"That's for you and Rena to decide," she said. "It was none of my getting up. I should never have thought of it. I am simply Rena's tool and doing her bidding and you are as deep in it as I am, and deeper."

"That's so," Tom answered, good-humoredly. "I got into it and could not very well get out, but it seems to me it has gone far enough. I had thought I'd wait till Rex told me of the will. This he does not seem disposed to do, although I have tried to lead up to it a dozen times. He always sheers off as if he hated to speak of it. I don't believe he takes to it kindly. I am going home to-night on business, and when I

come back I have concluded to tell Rex of his mistake and take every whit of the blame myself. Don't look so scared," he continued, as he saw how white Irene turned. "If Rex Travers cares for you he is not the man to give you up because there is no money with you. And, Irene, pardon me, my great friendship for Rex is my excuse for what I'm about to say. If he does care for you, will you try your best to make him a good, true wife?"

"What do you mean? What do you take me for? A good, true wife, indeed!

As if I'd be anything else!" Irene answered, hotly, and Tom replied:

"I've put my foot in it and I may as well be plain. We never agreed very well. I know you thoroughly. You have your good points. You are very clever and handsome. Yes, the handsomest woman I ever saw." Irene's face

began to soften, but clouded again as Tom went on: "You can be an angel

when you feel like it, and something else when you don't. You are not open as the day, and it would hurt Rex cruelly to find you in any little underhand tricks such as you practice. You know you do. You study every

act with a view to the result. Rex never told a lie in his life, nor acted one, and could scarcely forgive his wife if he caught her in one. Then you are pretty peppery, and Rex hasn't a bit of that condiment in his makeup, and your voice, which can be like a turtle-dove when you choose, would frighten him if he heard it as croaky as I have heard it."

Tom was saying pretty hard things, and Irene was thoroughly angry for a moment, and there was not much of the turtle-dove in her voice as she said:

"Tom Giles, you are insulting me!"

"I believe my soul I am," Tom answered, "and I beg your pardon, and I don't know why I have been so plain, except that I want Rex to be

happy.”

Irene knew that Tom could help or hinder her cause, and with a great effort she controlled herself and said:

“It is not probable that Mr. Travers will ever ask me to be his wife. If he does I shall accept him and try to be to him all even you could wish me to be, and—Tom—” she hesitated, while the tears began to fill her eyes—“and, Tom, don’t throw obstacles in my way. You will get Rena and be happy. She does not want Mr. Travers. If she did I believe she could get him. She wants you. Take her and let me be happy, too. I have not much that is pleasant in my home life. You know I haven’t.”

She was a good deal agitated, and Tom was not proof against the pathetic look in her eyes.

“Don’t worry,” he said. “I shall let Rex paddle his own canoe after he knows which canoe he is in, but I shall tell him the truth when I come back. And now I must be going. It is getting toward noon, and I must find Rena.”

Bidding her good-by, he walked rapidly away in the direction of the pine-grove, where he found Rena with the mirror in her hand.

“Upon my word,” he thought, “I believe she is going to look in the well. I wish I could hide and steal up behind her.”

He couldn’t do this, for Rena saw him nearly as soon as he saw her and involuntarily dropped the mirror as she went forward to meet him.

“I’ve caught you,” he said, passing his arm around her. “You were about to look into the well. Go ahead, and if you see anybody or don’t, I’ll take a hand after you.”

“O Tom!” Rena cried, trying to extricate herself from him. “I was going to take a peep in the well, the day is so fine, and the sun so bright. Just for fun, you know. I don’t believe a thing in it. And now you’ve spoiled everything.”

“No, I haven’t,” Tom answered. “I tell you go ahead, and when you are through I’ll try my luck. Hurry up! You’ve only a minute before noon, and you ought to be there now working yourself into a proper frame of mind to receive the spectre. Be sure you don’t fall in.”

He had released her, and was holding his watch in one hand, while with the other he picked up the mirror, wiped a speck of dirt from it, and handed it to her. She took it rather reluctantly and said:

“Do you think you ought to be here?”

“Certainly,” he answered. “Wouldn’t it be rather uncanny for you to be alone when a man’s face comes staring at you in the mirror—Rex’s, for instance.”

“Tom!” was Rena’s only answer, as she stepped upon the stone projecting over the well.

“See that you don’t fall when he comes,” Tom said. “You have just ten seconds before he ought to be starting. Shall I count?”

He began counting very deliberately and loudly, while Rena held her breath wishing he would stop. He did stop just as the village bell began to strike the hour of noon.

“Now for it,” he said. “Look close; don’t miss him. Do you see him yet? I believe I hear a rustling in the air.”

Rena did not reply, and after a moment Tom called again. “Time he was there unless you are to be an old maid.”

“Tom Giles, will you stop!” Rena exclaimed, “How can I keep in a proper frame of mind if you go on like that?”

For half a minute Tom was silent; then he called again:

“Has he come?”

“No, and never will with you here bothering me so,” was the answer, while Tom drew stealthily nearer to her, and with a quick movement threw his arm around her and put his head down until his face touched hers and was reflected in the mirror beside her.

“Do you see him now?” he asked. “I do!”

There was a little scream and Rena fell back, pale and trembling.

“How dare you frighten me so and spoil it all!” she said. “Just for a moment when the shadow of a great bushy head began to come in sight I thought somebody was really coming, and it was only you, after all.” This was not very reassuring, but Tom didn’t mind. He knew Rena, and keeping his arm around her he led her to the seat under the pines, where he sat with her the first night of their visit to the well and she picked the needles from his sleeve and neck.

“Rena,” he began, and there was no banter in the tone of his voice, which was low and earnest and made Rena’s heart beat faster than it did when she first saw the shadow on the glass, “suppose I had not been here and my great bushy head had appeared beside you just the same and you had known it was I—old Tom you used to call me—would you have been more ready to say yes to me than you are now that I am here in flesh and blood, loving you with my whole soul, as I have done ever since you were a little toddling girl whose hand I held to steady her walk? It was such a little fat, dimpled hand, and the fingers clung to mine so confidently

that I feel the touch yet. That hand is a woman's now, and I want it for my own. I said I would wait for years for your answer, if necessary, but I can't do it, and I ask you now to be my wife; but think first how the matter stands. I have not much to offer you. With Rex you would get fifty thousand dollars in your own right, and this, you know, you lose if you marry me, who have very little beside my profession to depend upon. You will be a poor man's wife."

"There's that ten thousand I am to have of Sandy McPherson's money, no matter whom I marry; that's something, besides what I already have. We shall not starve," came in a smothered voice from Tom's bosom, against which Rena's face was pressed, and Tom knew the victory was won.

She had not said she would be his wife, but he was satisfied, and kissed her passionately again and again, and might have gone on kissing her if his Elysium had not been broken in upon by a shrill voice shouting, "Miss Rena, Miss Rena! where be you? It's half-past twelve, and dinner is getting cold."

It was Mrs. Parks calling as she had once called for Charlotte Anne. Dinner was ready and Miss Bennett's digester in danger of getting more out of kilter by waiting than it already was. "I must go," Rena said, freeing herself from Tom and smoothing her rumpled hair and collar. Tom

did not try to detain her, but told her he was going to Newton that night, and should tell Rex before he left of his engagement. Then they parted and Rena hurried to the house, her cheeks like roses and her eyes bright as stars, as she took her seat with us at the table and apologized for being so late. Irene watched her curiously, and when they were alone in their room she said, "Miss Bennett told Tom you had gone to the well. Did you look in?"

"Yes," Rena answered, "I looked in."

"And you saw——?"

“Tom!” was Rena’s prompt reply.

“Really?” Irene exclaimed in astonishment.

“Yes, really; but a flesh-and-blood Tom, not a spirit,” Rena said, repeating some of the incidents of her adventure, while Irene listened with keen interest.

“And didn’t you hear him at all as he came up behind you?” she asked.

“No, not at all,” Rena replied. “The ground is soft, you know, and the pine-needles so thick that his step made no sound. I half believe old Sandy played that same trick on poor Nannie, though she would, of course, have seen him a moment after and known he was there. He could do it.”

“Yes,” Irene said, slowly and thoughtfully, “and was Tom’s face distinct beside yours?”

“Not all of it, but enough for me to have known it was Tom if he had vanished in air instead of seizing my arm.”

Irene was more interested in the well business than in Rena’s engagement, the news of which she received with no surprise. She had expected it, she said, and congratulated Rena and hoped she would be happy. Then, saying she was tired and must rest, she shut the door of her room and gave herself up to a train of thought, which she meant should bear fruit. If she could bring Rex to a proposal before Tom came back and spoiled everything, she believed he would keep faith with her, especially as Rena was lost to him. With her quick intuition she always felt that Rena attracted Rex more than she did, but that did not matter now; Rena was engaged, and there was nothing in the way of her own advancement. She could explain the deception into which she had been persuaded so that Rex would not blame her, and she began to feel very happy and confident.

Meanwhile Rex was in Tom's room watching him as he packed his valise, and telling him how sorry he was to have him go. Tom had told him of his engagement, and like Irene he heard the news without much surprise.

"I fancied it was already settled," he said, "and I congratulate you and know you will be happy. How long will you be gone at the farthest?"

"A week anyway, perhaps two," Tom replied.

"Make it one, if possible," Rex answered. "I am nothing without you—and—and—I may want to consult you about something when you get back."

"Why not consult me now?" Tom asked; and Rex replied, "It will take too long and involves too much, and I must feel surer of myself than I do now. The fact is this hot weather or something is affecting my head, which feels at times as if there was a hornet's nest in it, and I get so hot and then so cold. I believe it is malarious here. Anyhow, I do not feel like myself. I do not seem to have any courage or life left in me."

Tom looked at him and saw what he had not before noticed, that he did look very worn and tired.

"It's that confounded will," he thought, "and the sooner he gets it off his mind the better. I'll hurry back and have it out with him. There is not time now."

At this point Mr. McPherson was heard in the hall, asking if Rex were going to the station with Tom, in which case he would order the carriage; otherwise he would send Nixon with the buggy.

"I'm going, yes. The drive will do me good," Rex answered; and Irene saw

the McPherson carriage go by with Tom and Rex in it, both lifting their hats to Rena, who was upon the piazza, and Tom kissing his hand to her as he looked back.

Half an hour later the carriage stopped at the gate while Rex alighted, and, after saying a few words to Nixon, who nodded and drove on, he came up the walk and rang the bell, asking for Miss Burdick.

CHAPTER XIII REX AND IRENE

Rex was in a bad way mentally and physically. The hot weather was telling upon a constitution never very strong, and every day he felt a recurrence of the pain in his head which he likened to a hornet's nest, and the trouble was intensified by thoughts of the will and what he ought to do.

"I'll speak to her about it to-day," he said to himself, when returning from the station after bidding Tom good-by. "I ought to have done so at once and found out her opinion of it, and should, if it had not been for my wretched shyness and—and—Rena."

He said the name hesitatingly, with a feeling that always between him and Irene there had been a thought of Rena. Now, however, when he knew absolutely that the latter was engaged his thoughts turned to Irene, and he could remember the expression of the white frightened face in the water, and the voice which called to him, "Rex, save me!" as the blonde head was going down. The look and voice had appealed to him strangely, awakening a throb of something he had never felt before for her. She had claimed his protection and in so doing had in a way claimed him, and he would be a dastard to pay no attention to her.

"Yes, I'll call and see her and speak of the will. I guess I have made up my mind to accept it if she can," he said, as Mrs. Parks' house came

in view. "Perhaps with no Rena in the foreground and no Tom to depend upon I shall get on better."

He did get on a great deal better, and only felt his heart giving a few thumps as he sat waiting for Irene on the piazza, where he had seated himself. He had not asked for Rena. It was Miss Burdick he wished to see, and she came at once, looking a little languid but more attractive than he had ever seen her before. Her tea-gown was very becoming and the soft shawl around her shoulders was worn with a grace peculiar to herself. Her hair was a story or two lower and made her seem less formidable as he stood up to greet her. She gave him her hands, and a smile a little less than angelic was on her face as she said: "Oh, Mr. Travers, I am so glad to see you and thank you again for saving me from drowning. I didn't know I was so shaken at the time, and even now I dream about it every night, and wake myself calling to you, as I did call, didn't I?"

He still had her hands, and not knowing exactly what to do with them he continued to hold them, while he replied, "You called me, yes; or I might not have seen you until it was too late. I am glad I was there. Sit down. You do not seem very strong."

He had backed towards the chair from which he had risen, and into which

Irene sank as if exhausted. In this way he was rid of her hands, and felt better as he took another chair near her and began to examine her more critically than he had ever done before. She was perfect in form and feature, with a complexion smooth and fair as marble. Her voice was very sweet, and in her eyes there was a look which seemed asking him to break the silence and put an end to the strained relations between them.

"I believe I'll take the plunge, but how shall I begin? What must I say first? Speak of the will, or ask her to marry me without any reference to it? I wish I knew," he thought, and had drawn a long breath preparatory to the effort when Rena appeared in the doorway. "Thank

God,” he said under his breath as he rose with a good deal of alacrity to meet her.

She did not know that he was there, and as something in Irene’s face warned her that she was *_de trop_*, she stopped only a moment and then walked away. But the spell was broken. Rex could not recall what he was

going to say, and did not feel inclined to say it if he could. “Another time will do,” he thought, and then remembered the cool shade in the grove and the seat under the pines. That was the place where there was no danger of interruption, and he asked Irene if she had been there lately.

“No,” she replied; and, as if reading his thoughts, continued: “to-morrow, if it is fine, I am going to sit under the pines. I think it will do me good; it is so cool there and hot here.”

Providence certainly was leading him, and Rex hastened to say, “I will come round and go with you, if you like.”

“Oh, thank you, I shall be most happy, if it will not trouble you too much,” and Irene’s face was beaming with a smile which would have stirred any man, it was so glad and winsome and frank. “Come about eleven,” she said, “that is the best part of the day.”

“All right,” Rex answered, rising to go, while Irene did not try to detain him. Her hopes were high and her spirits, too, and there was no sign of languor or weakness about her as she moved around the house singing snatches of old love songs, rallying Rena for feeling lonesome with Tom gone, and saying amiable things to all of us.

The next morning at the hour named Rex appeared, looking bright and almost hilarious for him. He had made up his mind that when alone in the shadow of the pines near Nannie’s well it would be easy to lead up to the will by speaking of Nannie and Sandy McPherson, and he would do it.

There was no use in playing the coward any longer. He would be a man. Anybody would be proud of a wife like Irene. He was very loverlike in his attentions, offering her his arm on the way to the grove, and fanning her with his hat after they reached it.

“What a quiet, restful place this is,” Irene said, leaning against a tree which grew behind the bench on which she was seated. “Pity so much superstition should linger around the spot on account of poor Nannie, who must have been a little unsettled in her mind.”

She was taking the initiative and Rex kept silent and let her go on till she said, “I am not at all superstitious and have no faith in the well; and yet do you know I have heard so much about it that I really want to look in it myself. Do you think me very foolish? Rena tried it with Tom. Did you know it?”

She turned her eyes upon Rex, who answered in some surprise, “Tom and Rena tried it! No, I did not know it; and did that lead to their engagement?”

“Oh, no,” Irene replied. “That was bound to come without the help of the well. They did it for a joke, just as we shall, for you will try first, won’t you? The day is very propitious, and it is near the time when the spectre appears.”

“I!” Rex gasped, “I look in the well? What for?”

“Oh, to please me,” Irene said, and Rex continued, “But I have no faith in it.”

“Neither have I,” Irene replied. “It is all foolishness, but I feel like being foolish to-day and having a lark, just as I did when I ate the salt at school. Rena told you about it. Let’s try it. Tom looked in the well to please Rena. You will do as much for me. Won’t you?”

She knew she was lying with regard to Tom, but Rex did not, and her eyes were very bright and her smile very sweet as she talked to him.

“I’ll get the mirror,” she continued, going to the tree and taking it from the box. Wiping it carefully with her handkerchief she handed it to him saying, “It is perfectly clean, with all the faces which have ever looked in it rubbed off. If you don’t see anyone you may rest assured you are to live single all your life, and never give matrimony another thought.”

She spoke playfully, but Rex caught eagerly at her words and said, “Do you think so? Are you sure?”

“Yes, sure. Don’t be afraid; you will see nothing,” Irene answered.

“All right; but don’t tell Tom or anyone. I feel half ashamed,” Rex said, with a feeling that he did not quite know what he was saying or doing as he took the mirror and started for the well. One idea, however, was very distinct in his mind. He should see nothing, and if he did not Irene had said he need never trouble himself about matrimony. He would try it, and just as the village clock began to strike twelve he stepped rather airily upon the projecting stone, with a feeling that he was about to shake off that incubus of the will which had haunted him so long.

“Take your time. It will make no difference if I do not look till after twelve, so I’ll sit here and shut my eyes so as not to watch you,” Irene said to him, and her voice had a sound as if she were far away.

Every thing began to seem far away and strange and his real self the strangest and farthest away of all. He had scoffed mentally at the well and thought every one weak who looked in it. And now here he was holding the mirror which, for aught he knew, might have been wrong side out. And yet his eyes were intently fixed upon it and he half closed them as a

ray of strong sunlight fell upon it and dazzled him, bringing back the pain he had complained of to Tom and with it the buzzing of the hornets so loud now that he could not have heard a much more distinct footstep than the one which approached him cautiously across the soft bed of pines and moss. The figure standing close behind him scarcely breathed as it bent forward close to him. If he caught her she had only to call it a joke, such as Tom had played on Rena. But he would not catch her. He was too much absorbed and she stood looking over his shoulder until the half of a face was reflected in the mirror beside his own, and Rex saw it with a sensation he could not define except that the solid foundations seemed to be moving from under him and he was in danger of falling as he stood paralyzed and fascinated with wonder and something akin to fear. He had expected nothing and yet there surely was a face beside his which he knew so well, although only half of it was visible. He could not be mistaken in the blonde hair a la Pompadour, the rounded cheek and more than all the one blue eye confronting him so steadily with something like a laugh in it.

“Oh!” he said as the face vanished and only his own was left staring up at him, while everything around him began to grow dark and he leaned forward as if about to fall.

There was the sound of broken glass as the mirror dropped from his hands and went crashing against the stones to the bottom of the well.

“What is it? Are you dizzy? Are you faint?” Irene cried seizing him by the arm and turning him around till his white face looked into hers scarcely less white than his own. “You certainly saw nothing! There was nothing to see; there could be nothing,” she said, and he replied, “No, nothing to see; nothing. It was all imagination. My head has not been right for some days. I grew dizzy, there was a ringing in my ears, and I think I let the mirror fall. Where is it?”

“At the bottom of the well, and a good place for it,” Irene said, still holding his arm as they went back to the bench on which she had presumably sat quietly while he tried the charm.

“How did you happen to come to me?” he asked, suddenly, without, however, a suspicion of the truth.

Irene’s voice was very steady as she answered, “I was sitting here with my eyes shut, as I told you I would, waiting for some sign that you were through and it was my turn to consult the oracle. You were so long that I looked at last and saw you sway a little as if about to fall. Then I ran forward just as you dropped the glass. Didn’t you hear me coming?”

She asked the last question with her heart in her throat as she waited for his answer.

“I heard nothing but the humming of the hornets. There’s a whole swarm of them buzzing in my ears now,” he said.

“Is he crazy?” Irene thought, wondering what her next move should be. She had made her great stroke and succeeded, but felt that to keep alive any superstitious feeling in him would be uphill business. He had seen her face, she was sure, for she had met his eyes fully and seen in them an expression of intense surprise and half terror, as if the sight were not a pleasant one. She must now await developments. He was very white

and the perspiration was standing upon his forehead where Irene laid her hand as she said, “I am sorry I insisted upon that foolishness. I might have known it would make one dizzy to look steadily into the reflection of the sun this hot day.

“I am glad the mirror is broken. I would not look in it if it were not.”

“Never allow yourself to do such a thing. I am sorry I did,” Rex exclaimed.

“And it was all my doings,” Irene said. “I hope you will forgive me. Does your head ache very hard?”

She still kept her hand upon his forehead and he did not try to shake it off. It was very cold and his head was burning and throbbing with pain. He was in no mood for love making had he been inclined, and Irene knew it and that she must wait.

“I think it is time we were going home,” she said at last, as he did not speak, but sat staring in front of him as if still seeing the half face in the glass.

He was seeing it and felt bewildered and wanted to be alone to think it out.

“Yes, it is better to go home,” he said, rising to his feet and steadying himself with a great effort. “I am ashamed of my weakness,” he continued, “but you see my head is at fault and it is so hot.”

He would not admit that the episode of the well had anything to do with his collapse. It was a headache and the heat, and he talked of the sultry weather as they walked slowly to the gate where, unless he accompanied her home, he would leave her.

“You must not go with me,” she said, as she saw he made no sign of turning in the direction of the McPherson place. “I am quite equal to going alone. I believe upon my soul that this moment I feel stronger than you do, and ought to go with you. Shall I?”

“No, oh no,” he answered quickly. “I am not quite so bad as that.”

“Good-by, then,” she said, and gave him her hand and a smile which stirred him out of his apathy, it was so sympathetic.

For an instant he bent over her hand, while there passed through his mind the thought that if she was to be his wife he might as well kiss it, and he would perhaps have done so but for Mrs. Parks, who, as she had called Rena the day before when she stood with Tom among the pines, now sent her voice like a fog-horn down the lane to the gate where Irene and Rex were standing.

“Miss Burdick, Miss Burdick, where be you? It’s going on one o’clock and the steak is cold as a stone.”

Irene laughed and said, as Rex dropped her hand, “That’s a call I do not dare disobey, so good-by again.”

“Good-by. There is something I was going to say, but it has gone from me. I’ll see you to-morrow and be more like myself,” Rex said; and with another smile Irene walked rapidly up the lane while Rex took his way more slowly toward the McPherson Place.

CHAPTER XIV

REX AND COLIN

To say that he was a good deal upset would not fully describe Rex’s condition when he reached home and, declining lunch on the plea of a headache, went to his room. His head was aching with that wavy, trembling feeling, hard to combat, and every nerve was quivering with excitement.

“Let me rest a bit and get cool and I shall be able to think clearly, and know it was only a hallucination of my disordered brain,” he thought, as he dashed the cold water over his face and head till his hair was dripping wet. “It was exactly that way with poor Nannie,” he continued, as he tried to dry his hair and face. “She was thinking so much of Sandy and so afraid she should see him that she thought she did, while I—well, I wasn’t thinking of Irene, but of the ridiculous thing I

was doing to please a girl and what Tom would say if he knew it. I was not expecting to see her, but I did; or something very like half of her, even the little fancy comb stuck on one side of her hair was plain. I could not be mistaken.”

How did it happen and was it an hallucination, or was it a device of the devil? he asked himself, half wishing it were the latter, for then he would not feel obliged to follow his suggestion. Then he called himself a brute for thinking for a moment of the devil in connection with Irene, the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. “It rhymes, don’t it?” he said, with a laugh, repeating Irene and seen and wondering if he were not getting a little off in his head. How he wished Tom was there to help him. “I’d make a clean breast of the whole business from the will to the well. I wish I had done it before,” he said; but Tom was sweating in his office in Newton over a letter of eight pages to Rena, and Rex was alone to pull through as he could. Throwing himself at last upon the couch he fell asleep and when he awoke the pain in his head was better, but he did not feel greatly rested, his sleep had been so disturbed with visions of the well and the broken glass, and Nannie lying dead upon the pines and a regal-looking woman sitting near her, smiling, gracious and dignified as she always was. He looked at his watch and saw it was half-past five, and knowing dinner would be served in half an hour, and that Mr. McPherson was nearly as punctual as Mrs. Parks, he hurried his toilet and was in the dining-room before Colin, who, when he came, asked

where he was all the morning that he did not come in till after lunch and then did not care for any.

“With a girl, I suppose,” and he laughed meaningly, while Rex felt suddenly a desire to tell the whole story and see what his host thought of it.

“Yes, I was with a girl,” he said, and Colin continued, “Miss Burdick, Miss Irene?”

“Yes, with Miss Irene, in the pine-grove.”

“What were you doing in the pines?”

“I looked in the well and broke the mirror,” Rex answered, with a fearlessness which astonished himself.

“Looked in the well! You! Such an idiot! I am surprised that you should go into that tomfoolery,” Mr. McPherson exclaimed, and Rex replied:

“No more surprised than I was when I found myself fairly at it. Had I been told a week ago that I could have done it I should have said: ‘Is thy servant a dog?’ but I did it.”

“Of course you saw nothing but yourself. You couldn’t,” Colin said, and after hesitating a moment Rex answered, “Yes, I did, I saw half of Miss Burdick’s face and one of her eyes as plainly as I see you.”

“Great guns!” and Colin sprang up and began to walk the floor. “You certainly are mad as a March hare and ought to have a doctor. Saw Miss Burdick! The thing is impossible. Look here, nobody ever saw anything except in fancy. Nannie—rest her soul—was thinking of Sandy and afraid

she should see him. You were thinking of Miss Burdick and afraid you shouldn’t see her, and—”

“No, I wasn’t,” Rex interrupted. “I didn’t want to see her, did not expect to, but I did. I was doing it to please her. She was there and kept me from falling into the well. Of course I know it was an optical illusion, if there is such a thing, but I saw her, and that, with the heat, has rather upset me.”

To this Colin made no reply. He had resumed his seat and after a moment

said, “I believe the theory is that you are to marry the person whose face you see?”

“I believe so, yes.”

“Then you will marry Miss Burdick, of course.”

“Perhaps so.”

“Why perhaps? Haven’t you said anything to her about a marriage?”

“No.”

“Nor about the will?”

“No.”

“Not a word?”

“No.”

“Rex, you are crazy.”

“I think so at times.”

“Don’t you like Miss Burdick?”

“Yes, I like her.”

“Don’t you love her?”

“I don’t believe I do, as people call love,” Rex said, getting up from the table and going into the parlor, followed by Colin, who exclaimed, “By the great horn spoon, Rex, what do you mean philandering with that girl all this time? What the deuce is the matter? What fault have you to find with her?”

“Not the slightest. She is perfect every way, except a little too tall for a woman,” Rex said. “But I am not a marrying man. Never thought of

it till I saw that will, which I wish had never been made. I am very happy as I am and do not care to change. Tell me, you have never married, would you have been happier with a Mrs. McPherson and a

colony
of little McPhersons upsetting you generally?”

“Yes, by George! as many times happier as there were Mrs. McPhersons and little McPhersons. I wish I had a hundred of ’em,” and Colin struck his hand hard upon his knee, while Rex laughed at his excitement. “Have you a hankering notion after the other one, who is most like Nannie? I believe my soul you have,” was Colin’s next question, and Rex replied, “It would do me no good if I had; she belongs to Tom, but I think I fancy little women the most.”

“Confound your little woman,” Colin exclaimed, growing more and more excited. “Not that this Rena isn’t a pretty little filly, such as men like Giles like to cuddle in their arms. I wouldn’t mind kissing her myself, but I tell you, boy, she has not the backbone her cousin has. You wouldn’t amount to shucks with her. She’d just be a plaything and that’s all, while the other will make a man of you and keep you pulled together. She has a head on her. And such a head! and such hair! Never saw so much hair in my life on anybody.”

Rex could have told him something about that hair and the loss of a part of it, which had so greatly improved Irene’s appearance. He had noticed the improvement when he saw her that morning, but had said nothing, feeling that she would not like the subject referred to. Of course he could not speak of it to Colin, who went on. “Don’t you think something is due the girl? Here you’ve been playing up to her for weeks and given her reason to think you meant something, and you hang off because she is too tall! Great Scott! I’m ashamed of you! Too tall! Great Moses!”

Colin was growing quite heated and Rex took his castigation very meekly and only said, “What do you advise me to do? What shall I say to her?”

You know I have no fund of small talk, to say nothing of making love.”

“Say to her? Heaven and earth! I could find enough to say, old as I am. I never tried it, but common sense tells me what I should do in your case. Plunge in. Tell her you are a coward and a fool not to have spoken before. She probably has thought that forty times. Tell her you are ready to fulfil your part of the business if she is. Snug up to her, take her hand, and squeeze it a little. She will let you—ask her if her pulse beats in unison with yours! Go to-morrow, and have it out!”

Rex laughed till the tears ran, at Colin’s directions with regard to his lovemaking.

“I wish you had to do it,” he said, “but as it seems to devolve on me, I’ll go to-morrow and as a preliminary ask her what she thinks of the will, instead of how her pulse beats.”

“Hang your preliminary,” Colin growled, “Ask her to be your wife! That will look as if you wanted her, even if there were no will.”

Rex was not quite certain whether he wanted her or not, but Colin’s attitude helped to reassure him and he said again. “I’ll settle it to-morrow one way or the other.”

“There’s only one way to settle it. Ask her out and out and don’t hint that she’s too tall! My soul! As if there could be too much of a woman like that!” Colin rejoined, as he lighted his pipe and went out upon the piazza to smoke, leaving Rex alone.

The pain in his head which had left him for a time had come back again and he could not think of anything very clearly except that he must propose to Irene the next day. Even that did not seem to impress him very strongly. Nothing impressed him very much, and after he went to his

room he sat a long time by his window, scarcely knowing of what he was

thinking, except that he was hot and cold by turns, with a buzzing in

his head, and he was going to propose to Irene on the morrow.

“Squeeze her hand and ask how her pulse was beating,” Colin had suggested. But Rex didn’t believe he should do that, and he didn’t believe he should do anything, if it were not for that face in the mirror, which kept haunting him with its one eye, which followed him persistently and made him so uncomfortable and nervous.

Even after he was in bed and the light out he saw it looking at him, and the last thing he remembered he was covering his face with the sheet to shut it from his sight.

CHAPTER XV

“MAN PROPOSES, BUT GOD DISPOSES”

“Claremont, August ——

“To Miss Irene Burdick, Oakfield, Mass.

“Johnnie is very low with malignant diphtheria. Come at once.

James Burdick.”

This telegram was brought to Mrs. Parks’ house on the morning after Irene’s adventure at the well, and was received by her just as she had finished her breakfast and was taking her seat upon the piazza, where she believed she should soon welcome Mr. Travers, or hear from him. Her

success at the well had put her in high spirits, and although she felt annoyed that Mrs. Parks should have disturbed what seemed almost like lovemaking, by her call to dinner, she had been very gracious to that lady when she reached the house, and very profuse in her apologies for her tardiness; and she seemed so happy that Rena said to her when they were alone in their room:

“Has Mr. Travers proposed, and have you told him everything? What did he

say? Tell me.”

Irene tossed her head airily and answered:

“I’ve nothing much to tell except that he never seemed so loverlike as he did this morning, and I know he was about to speak when that horrid old woman’s scream came down to us saying the steak was cold as a stone.

That broke the spell, but he is to see me to-morrow, and his manner was so different from what it has ever been that I am sure he means business, and I shall depend on you to help me and take your share of the blame. I’ll confess I am rather nervous and do not like to meet it alone, especially as it is not my fault.”

If Irene was nervous Rena was more so, wishing Tom were there and wondering what she could say to Rex which would excuse the deception in

his estimation if Irene called upon her to explain. She hoped that he cared for Irene for her own sake and not for anything relating to the will, as this would make matters easier. There was comfort in this thought, and still she had a dread of what to-morrow might bring, if, as Irene believed, Rex had made up his mind to speak. Irene, too, was anxious, but very happy, and had arranged in her own mind, as she had many times before, exactly what she would say to him by way of explanation, and how much she would blame herself and how much Rena. On

the whole she could not see how she was in fault. She had nothing to do with the will, nor was it her place to speak of it. She had received Mr. Travers’ attentions, such as they were, as she would have received the attentions of any man. She had not encouraged him and she was not supposed to know that he believed her to be the girl intended for him by Sandy McPherson. He had never asked any questions. No one had;—they had

made a mistake with regard to her identity, and it was not her place to set them right, and if any one was to blame it was Rena. Satisfied with this reasoning, she slept soundly, and came to breakfast brighter and

handsomer than I had ever seen her. There was a softness in the expression of her face and a gentleness in her manner which made me think I had been mistaken in her character, and I looked after her admiringly as she left the table and went out upon the piazza to the chair she usually occupied, the most comfortable one there.

Coming through the gate was a messenger-boy with one of those yellow missives, the sight of which always makes one's heart beat expectantly with hope or fear. Rena saw him first and with a thought of Tom went forward to meet him.

"Is it for me?" she asked, holding out her hand.

"It's for Miss Irene Burdick," was the reply, as the boy gave her the envelope.

Her letters from her aunt had always been addressed to Miss Rena Burdick. Tom's letter would be directed that way and the telegram must be for Irene, to whom she gave it.

"Who could have sent it?" Irene asked, knowing that her family was not given to the extravagance of telegrams, and with no thought of what this contained.

If there was any living thing in the world beside herself which Irene loved it was her little three-year-old brother Johnnie, the darling of the household, on whom she lavished all the unselfishness and affection of which she was capable. It was Johnnie whom she cared to see when away from home, Johnnie, who, in her mother's letters to her, sent pencil scrawls as his contributions, with love and kisses for his "booful Reene," as he called her. And now he was ill—dying, perhaps, and she must go to him. Every other consideration was forgotten. She must go to him.

"What is it, Irene?" Rena asked, as she saw how white her cousin grew.

Irene gave her the telegram, while the tears rained down her face.

“Johnnie is dying,” she said, “and I must take the first train for home. There is one at eleven. I must catch it.”

She started upstairs, followed by Rena, who said:

“I am sorry for you, and hope we may find him better.”

“We,” Irene repeated. “You are not going with me.”

“Yes, I am,” Rena replied, beginning to fold one of her dresses.

“But you must not,” Irene continued. “The telegram said ‘malignant diphtheria.’ You had it once and came near dying. You must not run the risk again. You are not needed. Our house is small. Tom and your aunt would not like it, and you must not go.”

Very reluctantly Rena hung up her dress, with a feeling that Irene was right—that Tom and her aunt would not like her running into danger and that very likely she would be in the way, and might again contract the disease which had nearly ended her life a few years before.

“Mr. Travers is coming up the lane,” Mrs. Parks said, putting her head in at the door and adding that Sam Walker, who happened in, had offered to take Miss Burdick to the station with Black Beauty and had gone to harness and would be there in a minute.

In her excitement Irene had scarcely thought of Rex and the call she had felt so sure he would make and its probable result.

“O Rena!” she groaned, sitting down upon the hat-box in which she had put the few articles she might need. “This is very hard upon me—to miss the goal just as I thought I had reached it. Mr. Travers is coming, and I must tell him where I am going and why—and what will he think? I have

not time to explain. You must do it for me after I am gone. There is Sam now, stopping at the gate.”

There was not a great deal of time if she would catch the train, and Irene was glad of it, as it would prevent Rex from asking questions she would rather have Rena answer for her. Putting on her sacque and hat she started to go down just as Rex came into the hall. He had not slept well. The eye seen in the mirror had troubled him in his dreams and was looking at him the moment he awoke making him wonder if it would follow him after he had talked with Irene. A cold bath had toned him up somewhat and Colin’s cheerfulness toned him more.

“Go right over and have it done with,” Colin had said. “Maybe she won’t have you. I wouldn’t if I was in her place, shilly-shallying as you have been. If she won’t, all right. You have done your duty. On the whole you’d better begin with the will. Ask her what she thinks of it and if she is willing to carry it out. Tell her you are if she is and make some kind of a love demonstration. Giles would know how to do it. I wish he was here. Act as you must have seen him act with the other one. Keep a stiff upper lip and take her hand. I know that is right and proper—the way I should do. Just the touch of it will make you feel kind of all over, or ought to. Such a hand as she has!”

There was a good deal more advice of the same nature, some of which Rex heard and some he didn’t. One fact, however, was clear to him. He was going to have it out with Irene, and about a quarter past ten he started for Mrs. Parks’ house, walking slowly and not at all as an ardent lover walks when going to woo his mistress. He did not feel very ardent, although he tried to work himself up to a proper state of mind and to remember what Colin had told him to say and do. But nothing came to him except that he must take her hand, which would make him feel kind of

all

over. He had held her hand and he didn't feel all over, the way Colin meant. It was usually rather cold and he never cared to hold it long. It made him sweaty and nervous.

"And yet it is a handsome hand, well shaped and white and large—large as

mine, I do believe," he said, holding up both his rather small hands for a moment and remembering suddenly the little ones he had seen picking pine-needles from Tom's coat. "Happy Tom and fool me!" he said aloud,

quickenning his steps until he reached the gate just as Sam came dashing up with Black Beauty who, not having been driven for a day or two, pawed

the ground impatiently, anxious to be off.

"Good-morning, Mr. Travers," Sam said. "If you are going in won't you hurry Miss Burdick up. We haven't much time to catch the train."

"Hurry Miss Burdick," Rex repeated. "What do you mean? Where is she going?"

"To New York, I s'pose. She's had a telegraph," Sam answered, while Rex

went rapidly to the house where he met Irene and Rena coming down the stairs with Mrs. Parks bringing the hat-box.

Irene was crying—partly for Johnnie and partly for what she felt she was losing by being compelled to go home.

"What is it?" Rex asked. "What has happened? Sam tells me you are going to New York."

At the mention of New York Irene caught eagerly. Her mind always worked

rapidly, and if Rex thought she was going to New York it was not

necessary to undeceive him and tell him she was going to Claremont—a place he had probably never heard of—so she answered:

“My brother is very ill and I must go to him.”

“Your brother! I did not know you had one,” Rex said, in some surprise.

“Yes, I have, and he is dying,” Irene answered, with a sob, while Rex looked puzzled, as we all were with the brother business, but had no time to ask questions.

“And are you going with her?” Rex said to Rena, who replied:

“Only to the station.”

“But she must not go alone. I shall go with her if you do not,” Rex continued. “I can telegraph Mr. McPherson.”

They had reached the gate by this time, and Rex, who was carrying the hat-box he had taken from Mrs. Parks, offered his disengaged hand to Irene to help her into the buggy, while Sam held the impatient Beauty. Irene knew he must not go with her to that low-roofed house in the factory village among the hills. It would be madness to suffer it, and she exclaimed, “No, no! I shall not allow it. He has malignant diphtheria. It is dangerous. I can take the journey alone. I would not let Rena go, and certainly not you, but I thank you for your kind offer. Good-by.”

She smiled at him through her tears, which made her seem more womanly than she ever had before.

“But I really ought to go. I am not afraid,” Rex said, while she answered, again:

“No, you must not,” and sprang into the buggy, followed by Rena, the movements of both accelerated by Sam’s imperative “You must hurry,

or
lose the train.”

If there had been room for him in the buggy Rex would have gone to the station. But there was not, and while he was still protesting Black Beauty dashed from the gate and soon disappeared from view, while Rex stood looking after him, surprised and bewildered and relieved, he did not know why.

“Come in, Mr. Travers,” Mrs. Parks said to him. “Come and have a glass of root beer. I’ve got some fresh brewed yesterday. I see you are all upset, and so am I with the suddenness of it. You could knock me down with a straw. I didn’t s’pose she had a brother. Did you? And I have not had time to ask Miss Rena.”

She looked at him for some explanation, but he had none to give. He was as much mystified as she, and declining the beer he walked away, thinking to himself: “I supposed she was an orphan, living with her aunt,” then it occurred to him that she might be an orphan and still have a brother, and he at once conjured up the image of a very tall and fair-haired young man as Irene’s brother. He knew he must be fair-haired, Irene was so fair, and he must be tall, because she was so tall. And he saw her in fancy bending over him with tears in her eyes and on her long lashes, just as there had been when she said to him: “My brother is dying.” She had never seemed so attractive, and he found himself pitying her greatly and wishing he had insisted upon going with her, while there crept into his mind a thought that he would like to see her brother and her home before he committed himself. He was by nature and training an aristocrat, and the woman to whom he gave his name must not be below him in position. Nor did he believe that Irene was below him, but if the chance offered he would like to be sure, though it did not matter much what her brother or surroundings were. She was to be his wife. Sandy McPherson had settled that, and still he was conscious of

being glad that the plunge, as he called it, had not been made, and he had yet a little time of probation left.

CHAPTER XVI

THE LETTER

“Well, my boy, have you been and done it? and was she favorable? You look rather happy,” Colin said to Rex as he came upon the piazza where the old man was sitting.

“No, I haven’t,” Rex answered, adding that Irene had been summoned to New York to her brother, who was dying, and he had just time to say good-by.

“Her brother!” Colin repeated. “I didn’t know she had one, and I don’t believe Sandy did. She never mentioned him, did she? Who is he?”

“Her brother—that’s all I know,” Rex said, adding that he had never inquired about her family relations and she might have more than one brother for aught he knew.

“Quite right,” Colin responded. “There’s nothing to hinder her having a dozen if she likes. Queer, though, we never heard Tom speak of him. I’m

sorry you didn’t have a chance to square up to her before she went. Here you’ve let the time run to waste and now she’s gone, and that brother may die and she go into black, and the very old Harry be to pay before you see her again. Rex, my boy, you haven’t used her fair.”

Some such thought was in Rex’s mind, and he said, rather humbly, “I’m afraid I have been rather slow and half-hearted; but what can I do now?”

“I’m sure I don’t know, unless you write her a letter. George of Uxbridge! That’s just the checker!” Colin exclaimed, delighted with his bright idea. “Write and tell her what a laggard you have been. That will chirp her up a bit with her sick brother. Don’t put it off, but begin at once after lunch, which I think is ready now.”

Rex had not much appetite for lunch. The reprieve, which had been so welcome, bade fair not to last long. And then he didn't know what to say. He had never written to a woman in his life except once to his laundress asking where a part of his washing had gone to and why she tore his shirts so badly. That had been easy to do, because he was indignant that his shirts were torn, and out of five pairs of socks, only one pair had been returned, and that was not his, or mated either. He could write to Bridget O'Hara about his socks and shirts, but writing to Irene was a different matter. Hers must be a love-letter, or the semblance of one, and he felt himself wholly inadequate to the task. Once he thought to consult Colin, but remembering the old man's advice with regard to his lovemaking, he changed his mind and decided to try and see what he could do alone.

"If Tom were only here to start me," he thought, as he took up his pen and a sheet of dainty note paper with his monogram in the corner. It was very easy to write "Oakfield, Aug. ——" but what to say next was a puzzler. Finally he wrote: "My dear Irene," and then stopped and stared at it, with a feeling that it was quite too familiar. He had never called her Irene, and he didn't know as she was his "dear." He must think about it. He liked her and he supposed she would be his wife, and in time very dear to him. But now "My dear" was a little too strong with Irene attached to it. Taking another sheet he began: "Miss Irene Burdick," but that was quite too formal and this second sheet followed the first into the waste basket. He had only one left of that particular kind and could not afford to spoil that. So he practised on a less expensive sheet till he decided that "Dear Miss Burdick," which meant nothing, as dear was a common mode of expression, would do, and began to write, sweating like rain, weighing every word, and feeling that the hardest work he had ever done was writing that letter, which in a way was intended as a proposal.

"Dear Miss Burdick," he wrote, "I am very sorry for the illness of your brother, which necessitated your leaving so suddenly, just as I was about to speak of something I ought to have spoken of before, and

should, but for my natural nervousness or shyness, or whatever you may choose to call it, together with a doubt as to what were your feelings on the subject. Believe me, Miss Burdick, I would not on any account try to persuade you to think favorably of the plan if your heart is not in it. I am aware that you are placed in a very delicate position, which I regret as much as you possibly can.”

Here Rex stopped suddenly, with a feeling that it would never do to say that he regretted the relation in which he stood to Irene. He had made a horrid blunder and used up his last sheet of fine note paper.

“Oh, for Tom, or somebody,” he groaned, and the somebody came in the person of Colin, who knocked at the door. “Oh, come in, come. I am glad to see you,” Rex said, changing his mind with regard to consulting Colin. “I am writing to Miss Burdick and have spoiled three sheets of my best note paper, and have told her she can not regret the peculiar relations in which we stand to each other more than I do. What do you think of that?”

“I think you are an imbecile, or crazy,” Colin said. “I could do better, and I never wrote a love-letter in my life.”

“I know you could and I wish you’d write it for me, or make an outline for me to copy. Will you?” Rex said.

“Heavens and earth!” Colin replied. “Do you expect an old man like me to dictate your love-letters? Plunge in and say something like this: ‘My dear Irene, I ought to have spoken to you before, but I am such a coward and I did not know how you felt, or if your pulse beat in unison with mine.’”

This beating of the pulse seemed to be a favorite theme with Colin, who went on: “I refer, of course, to Sandy McPherson’s will, in which it is proposed that we marry each other. You know about it. Colin

McPherson

sent you a copy, and if you are willing to accede to its conditions, I am, and I herewith make you a formal offer of my heart and hand. Please answer by return mail. Yours lovingly,

Reginald Travers.

“P. S. I hope your brother is better!”

“There! How is that? It is not too hifalutin’ for a starter.”

Colin was perspiring nearly as much as Rex with his efforts at composition, which Reginald heard in a vague kind of way, with a sense of the ludicrousness of the affair.

“Thanks,” he said, when Colin had finished. “I think I can go on now and write something she will understand.”

He turned to his desk, while Colin left the room, thinking to himself, “Good fellow, but dum fool in some things; don’t know what to say to that girl.”

Meanwhile Rex had selected his fourth sheet of paper, which he must make answer his purpose. He didn’t say “My dear Irene,” but simply “Miss Burdick,” forgetting the dear until he was well under way, and would not begin again. Neither did he say anything about her pulse beating in unison with his, but he went straight at the subject of the will, saying he was ready to fulfil his part of it if she were and apologizing for not having spoken of it before.

“I am rather shy and slow, but it has always been in my mind,” he wrote, adding in conclusion, “We have not had a long acquaintance, but in the intimate relations of married life we shall soon learn to know and esteem each other. Yours truly,

“Reginald Travers.”

The ending sounded a little stiff. Indeed, his whole letter seemed a little stiff and as if his heart were not in it. “Not such as Tom would write to the little one,” he thought, “but I’m not Tom, and she’s not the little one,” and then there swept over him a longing for something, he hardly knew what, except that it was different from the prospect opening before him and from which he found himself shrinking more and more. “It’s the giving up of my freedom, I dread,” he said to himself. “I’ve had my way so long as a fussy old bachelor that I shan’t know what to do with a wife upsetting my things and having opinions different from my own and shocking me with habits I know nothing about. I’m glad that twist of hair went out to sea. I couldn’t have borne to see it lying round as I might some day. I hope she hasn’t any more. Ah, well, it says somewhere ‘the wind is tempered to the shorn lamb,’ and I put my trust in Providence to steer me through the shoals of matrimony. Carlyle, I believe, felt some as I do before he married Janie, and they got on pretty well, except for a few squabbles, which Irene and I will never have. She is not as catty as Janie, and I hope I am not as selfish as Carlyle.”

He read the letter over two or three times, and finally put it in an envelope and addressed it to “Miss Irene Burdick, New York.” Then it occurred to him that there should be some street and number to insure its delivery. This he did not know. Colin, when questioned, had lost the address of Mrs. Graham, which would presumably be that of Irene. There was nothing to do but go to Rena and get the direction.

“I’ll do that,” he said, with a good deal of alacrity.

It did not tire him, nor make him nervous, to think of calling upon Rena, and although his head was still aching, he resolved to go at once.

He should feel better when the letter had gone and he was committed past recall. The day was hotter than any which had preceded it and was one of those sultry, sticky days when exertion of any kind seems a burden, and Rex felt it intensely, and would far rather have remained on the couch in his cool room than have gone out in the heat of the afternoon for a walk to Mrs. Parks' through pastures and lane where there was no shade.

"I am in for it and must brace up," he said, and putting two plantain leaves in the top of his hat to keep his head cool, and taking the biggest umbrella he could find, he started along the short road through the pasture and meadow which led to Mrs. Parks' house.

CHAPTER XVII REX AND SAM

It was three o'clock, and the heat, instead of growing less, seemed to increase. There were a few thunder-heads in the western sky and some mutterings in the distance, but the sun poured down in a blaze like noonday and the heat seemed unbearable to Rex, as he walked slowly along, his feet dragging heavily, his umbrella seeming fifty pounds weight and the plantain leaves pressing upon his head.

"I feel badly and no mistake," he thought, as he came in sight of the grove which looked so cool and inviting that, although it took him out of his way, he turned aside and soon came near the well, at which he glanced with a shudder, while the one eye seen on half of the face began to dance before him and beckon him on—not to the well, he made quite a detour to avoid it—and came to the bench under a pine tree, starting as a figure reclining upon it began to stir and sit upright.

Sam Walker had been across the fields to a distant farmhouse and on returning had sought the shelter of the grove, where for a moment he had fallen asleep.

“Hello!” he said, rubbing his eyes. “It’s you, Mr. Travers. I’m just resting and trying to keep cool. Isn’t the heat a corker? Sit down, you seem tuckered out.”

He moved along and Rex sat down, admitting that he was tuckered out and
the day a corker, while Sam continued:

“If there was anything here to draw water with, I’d get some for you to bathe your face and hands. You look kinder queer.”

It does not make one feel better to be told that he looks queer, and Rex was not an exception. He felt queer. The hornets were in full play, and he put up his hand to brush away one which seemed buzzing in his face, while the eye was staring at him from the stone near the well where it had first appeared to him.

“I’m tired and warm, that’s all,” he said, while Sam remarked that he guessed a shower must be coming up, as he felt like thunder and had all day.

Rex laughed at the odd speech and replied that he believed he, too, felt like thunder, or something worse.

“I wish I could get some water,” Sam said. “There used to be a bucket here but it is gone, and the nonsense about played out. I was kinder glad when I heard the glass go into the well. Was you much scared when she looked over your shoulder? I thought you was goin’ to tumble in, and
you would if she hadn’t caught you.”

“Who looked over my shoulder? What do you mean?” Rex asked, and Sam
replied:

“Why, she, Miss Burdick, you know, when you looked into the well yesterday. Don’t you remember?”

“Yesterday,” Rex repeated, with a feeling that yesterday was a great way off. “Were you here?”

“Why, yes,” Sam answered. “You see, I’d been to Bemis’ about some hayseed, just as I have to-day, and on my way back I was so hot and dead tired that I lay down under that tree behind that clump of bushes and fell asleep. When I waked up you was lookin’ in the well for all you was worth, and she was goin’ up to you careful-like, just as I went up to Lottie when I caught her at it and looked over her shoulder before she knew I was there. My, how she screeched—Lottie, I mean—not you. I didn’t mean to peek, only I happened to be here and watched Miss Burdick and see you jump when she bent over you and the glass fell into the well as if you was scared.”

“But—but—Miss Burdick was sitting where we are,” Rex stammered, and Sam, who suspected nothing, continued:

“Maybe she was at first, but when I seen her she was tip-toe-in’ up to you, who couldn’t hear her, the ground is so soft and the pine-needles so thick, and I s’pose you was thinkin’ of something else.”

“And looked over my shoulder?” Rex asked next, every faculty now on the alert as he began to see the trick played upon him.

“Why, yes,” Sam said, thinking Mr. Travers rather forgetful. “You saw her, didn’t you? and that’s what made you drop the glass, while she jumped back and put on her hat, which she had took off, and, when you reeled as if you was goin’ to fall she sprang forward again and grabbed you, don’t you know?”

“Yes, yes,” Rex said. “I know, but I didn’t see you.”

“Of course not,” Sam replied. “I didn’t want you to think I was spyin’ on you, because I wasn’t, and I kep’ still and you and she sat on the bench awhile, and you seemed kinder upset and faint.”

“Yes, and I—I think I am now, the day is so hot and my head so bad,” Rex said. “Tell me again just what you saw.”

Sam looked at him in some surprise, wondering if he were a little off, but he repeated the story again, apologizing profusely because he was there a spectator of the scene, which he described very fully, interspersing his remarks with “Don’t you remember?” and “Don’t you know?” while Rex kept saying, “Yes, yes, go on,” till he had a very lucid idea of what had taken place in the grove the previous day. It was not a phantom he saw in the glass, the half face whose one eye had left the stone by the well and was dancing up and down before him with a persistency which made him dizzy. It was Irene herself playing a trick upon him and offering no explanation when she saw how it had affected him. What was her object? Not a mere joke, or she would have confessed

it, and if it were a joke it certainly was not worthy of her, he thought, and there began to creep over him a great revulsion of feeling toward her and he was glad he had not sent the letter. He must wait a while and think it over. He was very tired and very warm and very sick, he said to himself at last, as he sat half blinded with the pain in his head and the nausea at his stomach. He knew Sam was still talking to him, but he did not comprehend all he was saying. He had not, however, lost a word where Irene was concerned, and could see her stealing up behind him, while he was too absorbed to hear her. He could see, too, the half face in the mirror and the eye looking at him with something like a mocking smile in its blue depths, but aside from that he did not pay much attention to Sam’s talk till he spoke of taking Irene to the station and how badly she felt about her brother.

“I s’posed she lived in New York, but she got a ticket for Claremont,” he said.

For a moment Rex looked at him inquiringly.

“Claremont? Where is that?” he asked.

“Dunno,” Sam replied. “Maybe her brother lives there and not in New York with her.”

“Yes, that’s it, thank you,” Rex said, as if Sam had solved a question which was puzzling him a little.

The brother and Claremont were new to him, and in his hazy state of mind he could not quite comprehend them. But Sam had made it plain. The brother lived in Claremont and Irene had gone there.

“Yes, thank you,” he said again, while Sam looked curiously at him a moment, and then remembering the fever which had broken out in the village he spoke of it and how rapidly it was spreading.

“I shouldn’t wonder if you was comin’ down with it,” he said, as he noticed Rex’s flushed face and saw him shiver occasionally as if he were cold. “Be you real sick?” he asked, at last, and Rex replied:

“No—no; a little shaky, that’s all. I was startled at the well, that’s a fact, and the weather is so warm. I think, however, I’ll go home. That is the best place; yes, the best place, and I must lie down.”

He didn’t quite know what he was saying, as he rose slowly, swaying to one side, and putting out his hand to steady himself. Certainly there was something the matter, Sam thought, and he walked with him as far as the gate and offered to go the rest of the way if Rex would like to have him. But Rex declined his escort, and bidding him good afternoon went on toward home very slowly, with a feeling that something had happened to him or was going to happen, he did not know which. One fact, however,

stood out distinctly in his mind. He had not sent the letter and he was glad. Irene had deceived him, and he must wait till he saw her, and then—He did not know what then. He was only conscious of a sense of great relief as if he had escaped a danger, but by the time he reached home the pain in his head overmastered every other feeling, and Colin found him sitting in the hall where he had dropped into a chair, very white and uncertain as to where he was or what was the matter.

“My head is pretty bad and dizzy,” he said. “I think it is the heat. I shall be better when I get to my room but I guess you will have to go with me. I don’t quite remember the way and am weak as water. I wish Tom were here.”

Colin looked at him in some alarm. He knew of the fever in the village, which was causing dismay among the inhabitants. As yet it had been confined to the poorer class in the narrow streets where there was filth with poverty and squalor. None of the better class had it and it hardly seemed possible to Colin that a guest in his house, where there was extreme cleanliness and every possible luxury, could fall a victim to the malarious disease. But there was certainly something wrong with Rex,

whose speech became every moment more incoherent, and Colin went with

him to his room and summoned the housekeeper, Mrs. Frye, and sent for the doctor, whom Nixon fortunately met near the house on his way from visiting a patient further up the road.

“He hasn’t the fever, of course?” Colin said, anxiously, as he watched the doctor examining Rex and taking his temperature. “He couldn’t get it in this house, where everything is spick and span clean, cellar whitewashed twice this year, drains clean as a whistle, traps all right, water filtered, and all that. He can’t have the fever!”

The doctor made no reply for a few moments, while he was dealing out medicine, with directions how to give it.

“I am very sorry,” he said, at last, “very sorry to tell you that in spite of your cellar and drain and traps and filtered water, Mr. Travers has the fever, and I think it has been coming on for some days. It bids fair to be the crazy kind, as he is already out of his head. Keep him as quiet as you can; better have a trained nurse at once. Good afternoon. I’ll look in again to-night. I have a good many more patients to see. The fever is spreading.”

CHAPTER XVIII

THE TRAINED NURSE

“Lord Harry! what am I to do, with fever in the house, and Giles gone and Miss Frye no more good than a setting hen, and I, who was never sick a day in my life worse than Mrs. Frye,” Colin thought, as he stood looking at Rex, who seemed in a heavy sleep, although he kept muttering about the well, and the broken glass, and the letter, and the sick brother, and Claremont, and the will, which he said he was going to contest and break.

“Confound that will! It’s bothering him to death,” Colin thought, “and will until the thing is decided. I wonder if he posted the letter he was writing. If so that will settle it. Rex,” he said, screaming as if the fever-tossed man, whose eyes were now wide open and staring at him, were deaf as a stone. “Have you sent the letter to Irene, you know?”

For a moment Rex looked at him as if in doubt of his meaning; then, as the past came back to him, he answered briskly, “Oh, yes, the letter you helped me write, with something about her pulse beating in unison with mine. I didn’t put that in, but I wrote the letter. It’s all right;” then he dozed off again and Colin did not dream that the letter was still in Rex’s pocket where he had put it when he started to see Rena and ask Irene’s address. It was on its way to New York, or soon would be, Colin thought, and felt relieved on that score. If Rex should get

very sick it might, perhaps, be proper to send for Irene, and what was it the doctor said about a trained nurse? and where was he to get one? For a man strong as he was in some respects, he was weak and helpless in

others. The household matters he left mostly with his housekeeper, Mrs. Frye, and as he was never sick himself, he had but little idea what he ought to do for Rex, who, now that he was in bed, had let go of himself and given up to the disease making rapid inroads upon him. Suddenly it occurred to Colin that Mrs. Parks would know what to do and where he could find a nurse. She knew everything and kept hold of everybody's business. It would be some comfort to talk with her anyway, he thought, and just as we were sitting down to tea he appeared at the front door, on the brass knocker of which he made thunderous raps as if he were in a hurry.

"For land's sake!" Mrs. Parks exclaimed, almost dropping the teapot in her surprise. "Go, Charlotte Ann, and see who is there and what he wants."

"I want to see Mrs. Parks," he said. "I want to see all the women-folks," he continued, walking straight through the hall into the dining-room, the door of which was open. "There's the old Harry to pay up at our house. Giles is gone, and Mrs. Frye—well, she's great on soups

and welch rabbits and salads and sweet breads, but is no more good where

there is sickness than a hen with its head cut off, and we've got to have a trained nurse, the doctor says, and he's out of his head—crazy as a loon—talking about half of a face and one eye which he sees all the time—and the will and the lookin' glass. Demnation! I'm glad the thing is broke and sunk! Such infernal nonsense, and to think he, of all men, should try it! Great Scott! Who can I get to nurse him? I'm so wet with worry that there isn't a dry thread on me."

He sank into a chair looking the picture of distress while we sat staring at him.

“What’s the matter? Who is sick?” Mrs. Parks asked, and he replied:

“Lord Harry! haven’t I told you? Rex, to be sure. Who else should be, with Giles gone and me here. He has been taken sudden with fever, though

the doctor says it has been coming on for days, and our cellar and drains all right and no smells anywhere. Why should he have a fever?” After a little direct questioning we managed to learn that Mr. Travers was very ill, and that the doctor had recommended a nurse, for whom Mr.

McPherson was in search. “A trained one,” he said. “And where am I to find her, the right kind, I mean? I can’t have no second-class truck in the house.”

“Mr. Travers got the fever!” Mrs. Parks exclaimed. “That is sudden. Why,

he was here this morning to see Miss Burdick off. But come to think on’t, he did look rather pimpin’. Want a nuss! There’s Sally Ann Ross, lazy as the rot, and Mary Jane Moore, stupid and shiffless, and the Widder Jones, pretty fair—but none of ’em is trained. We hain’t that kind in Oakfield, and they cost awful—fifteen or twenty dollars a week.”

“What do I care how much she costs? If Rex needs a trained nurse, he is going to have her, if there’s one this side of Boston,” Colin replied, and by the merest chance his eyes rested on me, who had sat thinking while Mrs. Parks descanted on the merits and demerits of Sally Ann and Mary Jane and the Widow Jones.

Before taking up stenography, I had studied for a trained nurse in a New York hospital and had passed a creditable examination, and for nearly two years had practised almost constantly until my health failed and I was obliged to abandon my profession and seek another employment where

the responsibility and strain upon my nerves were not so great. I was very well now. Rest and Oakfield air had done me a great deal of good. I had still three weeks' vacation and the thought entered my mind, Why not

offer my services? I had had a great deal of experience with fever in its worst form and had never lost a case. In a few words I told him that I had once been a trained nurse, and offered to go to Mr. Travers until something better could be done.

"You a nuss! Well, I never! What will happen next?" Mrs. Parks exclaimed, and I think I sank a little in her estimation. "You a trained nuss! How did it happen, and why didn't you stick to it?"

As well as I could I explained, while Mr. McPherson listened and finally said:

"I b'lieve you'll do, and I'm glad, for I'm afraid he's goin' to be awful sick, it comes on so fast, and that quill or something the doctor put in his mouth registered over a hundred. Can you go to-night?"

It was rather sudden changing my quiet quarters to a sick-room, with the old care upon me; but the remuneration, I knew, would be sure and more than pay my expenses at Mrs. Parks', and I said I would go.

All this time Rena had not spoken, but she was very pale as she listened to the conversation. She was thinking what if he should die and never know the truth, and she said at last to Mr. McPherson:

"You think he will get well, don't you?"

"I hope so, but there's no telling. If I thought he wouldn't I s'pose I ought to send for Miss Irene. Maybe I ought to as it is, or let her know. They were the same as engaged, or would have been. What do you think?"

He looked at me, but it was Rena who answered quickly:

“No, oh, no, don’t send; don’t write at once. Wait and see. You know she has gone to her sick brother. She must not leave him or be troubled.”

We were a little surprised at Rena’s vehemence, which looked as if she did not wish to have Irene return even if there were no sick brother.

We had been a good deal puzzled about that brother, and Mrs. Parks had questioned Rena rather closely with regard to him, learning that he was not in New York, but in Claremont, a place of which she had never heard.

Thinking that when Tom came back she would tell the whole truth and that until he came she would say as little as possible of Irene. Rena was so noncommittal and evidently so unwilling to discuss the matter that even Mrs. Parks gave it up, saying confidently to me:

“He’s some dissipated critter, I presume, that they are ashamed of.”

Now a new diversion had come up, and Irene’s brother was for the time forgotten in the excitement of Mr. Travers’ illness and my going to care for him.

“Beats all! You a nuss, and I never knew it! I’m that weak that you could knock me down with a feather,” Mrs. Parks said, as she followed me to my room and stayed there while I made the necessary preparations for going with Mr. McPherson.

The carriage was waiting at the gate and he was upon the piazza listening to Sam, who had come to the house and was telling of his interview with Mr. Travers in the grove only a few hours before. With a delicacy for which I had not given him credit, Sam said nothing of what he saw at the well the previous day when the glass was broken. That was reserved for Lottie’s ear, and he only told of meeting Mr. Travers, who complained of the heat and a pain in his head and walked shaky like, when he got up to go home.

“Why didn’t you go with him?” Rena asked, all her womanly instincts of pity roused for Rex, who might die and never know.

“I did offer and he wouldn’t let me,” Sam replied, and Rena continued to Mr. McPherson:

“Is he out of his head all the time? Would he understand if one were to tell him something?”

The idea had seized her that if Tom did not return at the end of the week she would confess everything to Rex. She could not have him die and

leave that acted lie on her soul. It would be hard to tell him, but she must do it. She had been the instigator of the plot and ought to suffer for it. To her question as to whether Rex could understand if told something important Mr. McPherson’s answer was not reassuring.

“He is rambling mostly, and I don’t think he would sense much, but,” he added, as he saw the look of distress in Rena’s face, “he’ll pull through. Lean, lanky fellows like him generally do. It’s the strappers, full of blood like Giles, who die.”

Rena shuddered, and as I just then came out she walked with me to the carriage and said very low and earnestly:

“I am glad you are going to Mr. Travers. Don’t let him die, and if you want some one with you send for me. Aunt Mary says I am very nice with

sick people, whose heads ache. There’s magnetism in my hands, small as they are.” She held them up and looked at them; then let them drop in a helpless kind of way, while I wondered at her manner, but promised to send for her if I needed her.

“And you will let us know how he is every day—twice a day, if possible?” she added.

I was in the carriage by this time, and Mr. McPherson was waiting to get in when Rena said again: "Remember and send if you want me. I am a pretty good nurse."

"You?" Mr. McPherson said with a laugh. "You'd be no more good than a fly."

"Try me and see," Rena answered, looking up pleadingly at him as he took his seat beside me.

"All right," he said. "Good-bye. Write to Irene to-night and tell her to keep a stiff upper lip. We'll pull him through."

Then Nixon started up the horses and I was on my way to the McPhersons as nurse to Reginald Travers.

CHAPTER XIX REX AND RENA

He was very quiet when I entered the room, but his eyes bright with fever, were rolling restlessly around as if watching something. His face was red and his head hot when I put my hand upon it and asked how he felt. He manifested no surprise at seeing me, but made no direct reply to my question except to say:

"I wish it would go away; it troubles me! Can't you drive it out? It came in at the window."

"What is it?" I asked, and he replied:

"That eye keeps floating round and round, and once it settled on my pillow, and I brushed it off. Don't you see it on the curtain over there staring at me?"

I was accustomed to the vagaries of delirious patients and tried to soothe him with the assurance that the eye should be removed, but it was not in my power to do it. He saw it in the dark quite as well as in the light, and would cover his face with his hands to shut it from his sight.

“Whose eye is it?” I asked him, and he answered:

“Why, hers. It is big and blue with heavy brows and lashes, and mocks and laughs at me for the fool that I was; but I know better now. It was flesh and blood I saw and not a phantom. I don’t see why her eye is haunting me unless it is because I broke the glass. I am glad I did.”

I had no idea what he meant. Mr. McPherson had said something about an eye and a glass being broken, when he came to Mrs. Parks’, but in our excitement we had not asked him what he meant, and when I did so now he answered evasively, having thought it better not to betray Rex’s weakness in looking in the well. All that night I sat up with my patient, whose fever increased steadily, but whose mind seemed clearer toward morning. He knew me and why I was there and that he had the fever which he said must have been coming on for days, but he still complained of the hornets, and the eye constantly floating in the air before him. The weather had changed and it was cooler, which was a great help; and I had gotten him into a quiet state and was sitting in the hall outside his room, when there was the rustle of skirts on the stairs. Some one was coming up rapidly and to my surprise Rena appeared, her face flushed and a look of determination in her eyes which I could not understand.

“Miss Rena!” I exclaimed. “I did not know you were here. How did you come?”

“I walked,” she said. “I could not wait another minute. I should have gone crazy if I had. I never slept a wink all night thinking what if he should die before I told him, and I’ve come to do it. I thought once I’d wait for Tom to help me, but I can’t. Please let me see him. Nixon, who passed the house, told me he was rational this morning and so I came at once.”

I had no idea what she meant. One thing, however, was plain. Rex must not be excited and I told her so, but it made no difference. She was determined.

“I must see him. I will not excite him,” she said. “I have more power than you suppose. I’ll hold his hands in mine and he’ll be quiet. You’ll see. Is this his room?”

She was in it before I could stop her, and Rex, who heard her voice, welcomed her with a glad smile and put up his hand which she took in one of hers, while the other she laid upon his forehead.

“Oh,” he said, in a tone of relief. “That is good. It stops the hornets and frightens the eye. I don’t see it now, with you looking at me. Sit down. I like to have you here. Why didn’t you come before?”

He was not quite himself, and I trembled every moment for the effect Rena might have upon him. But he was very quiet as she stroked his hair and let her fingers move gently across his forehead.

“You will leave me with him a while,” she said to me. “It will not take long and I cannot get my courage up again. I’ll tell you and everybody when it is over why I came.”

The look in her eyes conquered me; and going out, I closed the door and left her alone with Rex. Rena had fully made up her mind to confess her fault and had gone over and over with what she meant to say, until it seemed very easy. But now that the time had come, and she was with him

face to face, her wits left her and she was dumb, but kept on rubbing Rex's head and hands and creating little electric thrills which he felt in every nerve. At last when she knew that she must speak she drew her hands away and sinking upon her knees covered her face and burst into a paroxysm of sobbing.

"Oh, what is it?" Rex asked, in alarm.

"Mr. Travers," she began at last, lifting up her face, down which the tears were pouring, "I have come to tell you something dreadful and ask your forgiveness. I am not what you think I am, I am the girl Sandy McPherson saw on the beach and the one mentioned in his will. My name is

Irene it is true, but I am always called Rena. It has been a wretched mistake, a deception, a lie from the beginning."

She stopped, startled by the expression of his face. He understood perfectly what she had said and the shock was very great, taking away the little strength she had given him. For a moment he neither spoke, nor stirred, but looked at her with an eager, questioning gaze, then said:

"Tell me while I can understand. Things are going from me again."

He seemed to feel that the films of delirium were weaving their webs across his brain, which would soon be shrouded in darkness, and wished her to hurry while his sense remained.

"It was this way," Rena began, checking her sobs so as to speak more distinctly. "I had never heard of Sandy McPherson, nor of you, until Colin sent me a copy of the will which astonished me and at first made me very angry with both Sandy and you, although I knew you were no more

to blame than I was. I did not like the idea of being disposed of in that way and made over to some one I had never seen just for money. I had, however, a curiosity to see you, and when I heard you were here and

saw Mrs. Parks' advertisement for boarders, I planned to come to Oakfield and bring Irene, and let you and the rest find out which was which. If you or anybody had asked I meant to tell, but you didn't. No one did, and I went on and on, acting a lie. Tom called it that and tried to stop me, but I would not be stopped, and I am so sorry. Oh, Mr. Travers, you don't know how sorry."

Here she broke down entirely and cried like a child. Then dashing away her tears she went on with her story very rapidly, if not very connectedly, taking all the blame herself and exonerating Irene and Tom, the latter of whom had tried to dissuade her from it.

As Rex listened there were great drops of sweat on his forehead and about his lips and on his hands, which lay helpless on the bed. For an instant a feeling of resentment had swept over him that he should have been made the subject of a joke like this and that Tom should have aided and abetted it, or at least kept quiet. But the rain of tears from Rena's eyes swept the hard feeling away, and he only asked:

"How could you do it?"

"I don't know, except I thought it might be fun to see you and others mistaking Irene for me," Rena said, and for a moment the hot blood flamed over Rex's face and then left it deadly pale, with the sweat gathering faster and faster on his forehead and lips and he no power to wipe it away.

"Did you find it fun?" he whispered, and Rena answered:

"No, oh, no, and every hour after I saw you I wanted to confess it, but couldn't, and then you seemed to admire Irene and I hoped you would like her so well that you would not care when you knew the truth."

Something like a spasm of pain contracted Rex's features, and he closed his eyes wearily, while the sweat was now like drops of water rolling down his face. Once he tried to lift his hand but could not, and he said

feebly:

“Wipe it away, I can’t.”

She knew what he meant and very deftly and gently wiped his face and hands with her handkerchief, while her tears kept dropping fast.

“Don’t cry,” he said. “It will not make it any better. I am glad you have told me. I wish I had known it at first, and I don’t quite see what pleasure there was in making fun of me, and Tom in it, too.”

“There was none!” Rena cried, “and it was not to make fun of you. It was wrong and wicked. But Tom was not to blame. He wanted to tell you and I would not let him. I made him promise not to. I am the guilty one. Can you forgive me?”

His eyes were closed and he did not answer her nor see the tear-stained face so close to his that he felt her hot breath on his cheek. He was thinking of possibilities and finally said abruptly:

“You did not like Sandy’s will, you say, nor wish to abide by it!”

“No, I couldn’t, because, you see, there was Tom, whom I have known ever since I can remember,” Rena answered.

“And if there had been no Tom?” was Rex’s next question, put he scarcely knew why, except that he felt a desire to know if this little girl could have cared for him under any circumstances.

There was no hesitating in Rena’s answer as she again wiped the sweat from his face. She meant to be truthful now, if the heavens fell, and she said:

“I told you I was angry about the will, and I did not wish to be disposed of that way. I did not know you and did not suppose you would care for me, except for the money, and if that influenced you I should hate you. I don’t think you are that kind, now, and I don’t know what might have happened if there had been no Tom. I guess I have always loved him, but I like you very much and want you for my friend.”

She was very frank and Rex smiled faintly and said: “It’s some comfort to know that you like me and might possibly have cared if there were no Tom.”

He seemed very tired and Rena knew she ought to leave him, but could not go without his forgiveness.

“Miss Bennett will be coming for me, I have stayed so long,” she said, “but I cannot go until you forgive me.”

“I must,” he answered. “There is nothing else to do. It has hurt me some; for no man likes to be the subject of a joke like that, but I am glad you have told me and wish you had done so before.”

“I wish I had. I have wanted to so many times,” she said, and again wiping the drops from his face and hands she left the room and came to me, her voice shaking and her eyes full of tears as she said: “I have told him and I am going to tell you. I am the girl in the will, and have been acting as bad a lie as Ananias and Sapphira ever acted, and ought to be killed.”

“What do you mean?” I asked, and she repeated the story to me as she had to Rex, giving no blame to any one but herself.

I was too much surprised to speak at first, nor had I time, for seeing Mr. McPherson entering the house she darted from me exclaiming:

“I must tell him, too. I mean to make thorough work.”

She was gone like the whirlwind and following Mr. McPherson into the library she began at once, talking so rapidly that he could scarcely follow her, and some things she repeated twice before he understood her. His first impulse was to swear when he fairly got it through his head that a big joke had been played upon them. He didn't like practical jokes, and this least of all, and said so rather emphatically, asking what excuse she had, while Rena sobbed piteously.

"I've no excuse," she said, "and it was all my fault. I persuaded Tom and Irene. She is not to blame."

"Irene," the old Scotchman growled, growing more and more indignant. "She is as deep in it as you. Yes, deeper," he continued, as his thoughts went over the past and he recalled Irene's manner whenever he met her. "Didn't she let Rex make love to her, knowing he thought she was somebody else, and didn't she make a fool of me, who paid her all sorts of attention because I thought she was to be Rex's wife? I tell you, I don't like it!"

Colin's was rather a fierce nature when roused, and remembering his warm championship of Irene on the supposition that she was the girl, he now experienced a revulsion of feeling with regard to her, knowing that she had done more to deceive him than Rena had. He had been very attentive to her as the prospective mistress of his house and she had not only received his attentions, knowing what he meant, "but egged me on," he said, "yes, by George! egged me on and carried herself as if she owned the ranch, making me ridiculous to you and Giles and making a fool of Rex, who never seemed to hanker after her much, but who fell into her trap at last, looked in the well and thought he saw her face and broke the glass all to smash. I'm glad of that, and I'll have the cussed well covered up. Yes, I will. Saw her! By the great horn spoon, saw me just as much! Lord Harry! to think she is just Irene from Claremont; and I made him write her a letter which he went to post in the heat and so got a sunstroke, or something worse. What does he think of it all, I wonder?"

He did not wait for Rena to answer, but strode toward the door of the sick-room, which he entered, and before I could stop him, burst out to Rex:

“A fine brace of fools we are and I made you send that letter and helped compose it; but I’ll go and get it back and tell her that was a joke, if you say so. Why, she lives in Claremont, a little out-of-the-way factory town, with rocks as thick as huckleberries. I’ve been there—went into one of the mills to see a feller who once worked for me. And, yes, by George! I remember the overseer was a little crusty about my calling off the man from his work. His name was Burdick. I thought I’d heard it somewhere before Sandy hunted up the girl, or I hunted her for him.

That

was her father, I know—tall and fair like her, and I’ll bet she has worked there, too, and I wanted you to marry her! Oh, Lord, what a fool I have been to make you send that letter, but I’ll stop it.”

Rex looked, at first, as if he did not comprehend, then he said, very feebly:

“I didn’t send the letter. I didn’t know the address.”

“Thank the Lord!” Colin exclaimed, while I motioned him from the room.

Returning to Rena, the old man continued:

“Yes, thank the Lord for one mercy, the letter didn’t go. If it had, she’d accepted double quick, fraud as it was. Yes, a fraud. But I’d have straightened it. Yes, I would. I’d have told her Rex did not care for her only as I egged him on. Yes, sir, thinks he saw her face in the glass. Saw mine just as much. By the great horn spoon, what a fool! I feel like fighting.”

Rena did not understand what he meant by the well and the face and the letter, but she felt that in a way he was unjust to her cousin, who was not there to defend herself, and remembering his admiration for Irene

was surprised that the most of his wrath should fall upon her.

“See here,” she said at last, “listen to me. Irene was no more to blame than I. From the very first you fell down and worshiped her, without asking a question as to who was who. She didn’t tell you she was the one in the will. You assumed it. We are cousins, both Burdicks, both Irene’s, only I am called Rena; and wouldn’t it have looked well in me to say to Mr. Travers, when I met him, or to you either, ‘I’m the girl!’ He never mentioned the will to Irene, as it was his place to do, if he thought she was the one—neither did you. If you had, we were prepared to tell the truth. There are two sides to the affair, mine the wicked, foolish one, and yours the credulous one for taking things for granted. And why do you assume that Mr. Travers could not fall in love with Irene from Claremont, as if it were not a respectable place. She is a beautiful woman and I don’t think it nice in you to be so hard upon her and she not here to speak for herself. I tell you I am the one to blame. Fight me, if you must fight somebody.”

Rena was splendid in her defense of Irene. The tears on her flushed cheeks were dried and only one or two stood in her eyes, making them very bright as they flashed defiance upon the old Scotchman, whose anger was not proof against this little girl standing up so bravely for her cousin.

“Great guns!” he said, beginning to cool down. “There’s a heap of sense in what you say, and I believe you’ve as level a head as Irene. I did admire her and supposed she was the one. We all did. And because Rex held back I tried to push him on, and when you told me she wasn’t the one, I was mad as a March hare. No man likes to be fooled as Rex and I have been, and I believe my soul I take it harder than he does. I don’t think he was hit bad. Now, if you had been you—”

“No, no, no,” Rena cried vehemently, guessing what he meant. “There was Tom—always Tom—before I saw Mr. Travers. It could never have

been.”

“Then Sandy made a confounded mistake and muddle. The will was a queer one any way, and now how is the money to go? I’d like to know,” Colin asked.

Rena neither knew nor cared. She had confessed everything, and her heart was lighter than it had been since she came to Oakfield. Colin did not seem very angry now, and went with her to the door, offering to send her home in his carriage. But she preferred to walk, as the day was fine and she wanted time in which to collect herself before encountering Mrs. Parks, to whom she went with her story the moment she reached home, telling it in a straightforward way and taking all the blame to herself. That lady was horrified at first, then incredulous, and finally declared that she suspected all the while that there was something she could not get hold of and that Irene was not the real stuff a lady should be. Like Rex and Colin, she was not proof against Rena’s penitence and tears and the little sinner was forgiven, while Irene went far down in the scale as the chief offender, inasmuch as she was the poor relation after all, and had received Mr. Travers’ attentions as a matter of course.

“Yes, and courted ’em, too, and put on as many airs as if she was the Queen of Sheba, askin’ for maids and bath-rooms and dinner at six, taking the best chamber and everything, and we lettin’ her. I am so mad at myself?” Mrs. Parks confided to Lottie, when talking the matter over with her.

And Lottie, being a girl, thought the whole a lark, in which she would liked to have had a hand; and looked upon Rena as the heroine of a romance acted before her eyes. Rena, however, felt like anything but a heroine, and the letters she wrote that afternoon to Irene and Tom, telling what she had done were full of contrition and blotted with tears. She did not then realize how very ill Rex was, and she merely said to both that he had the fever and Miss Bennett was nursing him;

while to Tom she added, "I wish you would hurry back. I want you so much, and feel so ashamed of myself."

Tom's answer came the next day, commending her for what he called her pluck, and saying he should be with her soon. Irene's was longer in coming, and when it did arrive it brought the news that Johnnie was dead and Irene heart-broken, and her mother so prostrated with grief and care that she could not be left alone.

"So, I'll have to stay," Irene wrote, "but my thoughts are constantly in Oakfield, where I suppose I am looked upon as an impostor. I hope you did your best for me with Mr. Travers and convinced him that I was not to blame. He has done almost everything a man like him can do, except propose in so many words, and I think he would have done that if I had not been called home. Give him my, not exactly love, but tell him how sorry I am for him and if I can be any comfort or help I'll try to come. Life here is almost unendurable, with Johnnie gone and mother good for nothing, and all the work on my hands. On second thought I believe I will enclose a note for Mr. Travers which you can give or withhold as you see fit. I trust you as I have always done, and you have never failed me. Lovingly,

Irene."

The note to Rex was as follows:

"My dear Mr. Travers:

"I am so sorry you are ill and wish I were there to do something for you. I hope you are not judging me too harshly for the deception of which Rena has told you and of which I was a very foolish tool. I am exceedingly sorry for my part in it, and I was always wanting to confess it, fearing lest any interest you seemed to have in me might arise from the fact that you believed me the heroine of Mr. McPherson's will. Can you forgive me? It will be very hard to lose your friendship now when my heart aches so for little Johnnie. How I

miss him; and how my thoughts go back to the pleasant days in Oakfield, the walks and talks, and all of which made life a holiday. Hoping you will soon be well and that you will not think less of Irene of Claremont than you did of the supposed Irene of New York, I am your very sad and sorry Irene.”

This note Irene read two or three times before deciding to send it. There certainly was no harm in it, she thought, and possibly good might come of it. She could not lose the hold she had on Rex without a struggle and this would keep her in his mind. If she could only go back and be on the spot and see him occasionally during his illness she might accomplish her purpose yet, but this was impossible. The duties of home were imperative, even to her selfish nature. Her overworked mother gave up when Johnnie died, and Irene was compelled to take the helm, which she did unwillingly, rebelling against her fate and sending her thoughts constantly to Oakfield where Rex Travers lay burning with fever and talking constantly of the will, of the broken mirror, the half face and the eye, which troubled him more than all the rest.

CHAPTER XX

IN THE SICK-ROOM

Rex seemed worse, perhaps, than he really was, because of the delirium which increased rapidly after his interview with Rena. The sweat which stood in so big drops upon his face and hands was gone, leaving his skin parched and dry. His head was very hot and rolled from side to side, following the eye, which he said was watching him and moving from point to point. Sometimes it dropped upon the pillow over his shoulder and sometimes on the bed close to him, when he would try to brush it off. How the idea of the eye originated I could not guess, but Colin knew, and after listening awhile to Rex's ravings he left the room muttering something about stopping the infernal nonsense. Calling Nixon he bade him take some heavy planks and cover up the well, putting a big stone on the centre plank, so it could not be removed easily. Then he came back,

and sitting down by Rex tried to quiet him, telling him the eye was in the well with the mirror, and he had covered it up.

“You needn’t tell me that,” Rex said. “It’s on your coat-sleeve, this minute, winking up at you. Don’t you see it.”

“Whew!” Colin exclaimed, jumping up and brushing his sleeve vigorously,
while Rex laughed.

“You don’t like it either—that big blue eye staring at you—but you don’t
budge it at all. It sticks with all your brushing. There it is on your shoulder now.”

“This is awful,” Colin said. “I think I’ll get out.”

He left the room hurriedly, taking the eye with him, so that for a time Rex was free from its tormenting presence. But it came back again, and all through the night and the next day he watched it and talked about it, while his fever increased and his temperature went up and the doctor began to look anxious, wondering how we could rid ourselves of that eye
which was making us both so nervous, especially when Rex called out that
it had alighted upon some part of our person. Even I began to brush myself and to fancy I saw it flitting through the room and alighting first on Rex and then on myself, and was afraid I was losing my nerve, and wondering what I should do.

It was not until the second day that Rena came again, bringing the good news that Tom was coming the next morning. He had apprised her by telegram, and her face was very bright and happy.

“Tom will know just what to do,” she said, and then asked if she could see Mr. Travers.

I did not think it best, he was so wild with delirium. The eye was in full chase now around the room, and he was following it with feverish, bloodshot eyes, which did not rest long upon anything. A new fancy had also taken possession of him, and when it was not the eye it was a braid of blonde hair floating out to sea, while he laughed as he watched it mounting wave after wave until it finally disappeared and the eye came to the front again. Rena could have thrown light upon the hair, but the eye puzzled her. Sam had told Lottie what he had seen at the well, and girl-like Lottie had told Rena, who thus knew that Rex had looked in the well, but not of the half face and the eye.

“Let me see him,” she pleaded. “Don’t you know I told you I could quiet people?”

Against my better judgment I let her into the room where Rex was trying to catch the eye as it moved back and forth in front of him.

“Oh, is that you?” he said. “Quite a game of shuttlecock I am having. Come and see if you can catch it.”

I had been trained in one of the best hospitals in New York, and thought I knew how to treat the fancies of crazy people, but I gave the palm to Rena, who went up to Rex and said, “Certainly, I can,” and taking both his hands in one of hers she gave a rapid sweep in the air with the other.

“I have it,” she cried, closing her hand tightly.

“Let me see,” he said, trying to lift his head from the pillow.

“Oh, no,” Rena answered. “It might escape, and I am going to send it after that braid of hair.”

She went to the window, made an outward motion as if throwing something from her, then returned to Rex, who was looking at her wonderingly.

“It’s gone,” she said, and taking her seat beside him she laid her hand upon his head, telling him he must be quiet.

For a while he lay perfectly still, sometimes, with his eyes closed, but oftener with them fixed upon Rena to whom he said at last, “It makes me think of that night in the grove ever so many years ago when you picked the pine-needles from Tom’s neck and I wished you were picking them from mine. Do you remember it?”

“Hush! You are not to talk,” Rena replied, and he was quiet again until the eye came in at the window, and with a start, he exclaimed, “There it is! I don’t believe it found that braid.”

With a tact I could not understand, Rena managed to send the eye away again and to keep Rex so quiet that I dreaded the time when she must leave. I knew she ought to go and suggested it to her, but she stayed until the clock struck five, and then left the room so noiselessly that Rex, who was sleeping, did not awaken. In the lower hall she met Colin. He had thought the matter over very seriously and concluded that although it was a foolish joke, it was like a girl, and he had perhaps been too hard on Rena. With Irene he was still angry. She had acted the biggest lie, he thought, and then she was not real. She was bogus, and had tried to win Rex under false colors, and had let him treat her as if she was to be Rex’s wife. He was ashamed of all the things he had said to her on that subject and vexed that she had accepted them so sweetly as if they belonged to her. She was a fraud and did not seem as grand and beautiful as she had at first. Rena, however, was real. She was related to Nannie. She was the girl Sandy had seen and admired, and though he mentally called her a little hussy for trying such a doubtful experiment, he forgave her entirely when he heard she was with Rex “keeping that confounded eye away.” When he met her in the hall she simply bowed to him and was hurrying on when he put his hand on her shoulder saying: “Not so fast. I want to speak to you. I was a brute the other day to talk as I did, but I was mad for a minute, and now I don’t think the joke a nice one; but, by George! you did stand up square for

Irene when I came down so heavily on her. I believe you've just as much head on you as she has, and it beats me how you manage Rex and that eye—her eye. He was fool enough to look in the well. Did you know it?"

Rena nodded and he went on: "He says he saw half her face and one eye, but Lord, he didn't see anything; he couldn't."

"Yes, he did; or he might," Rena answered, beginning to understand, and repeating Sam's story and adding: "Tom tried the same thing on me, and I saw half his face; so it can be done. Of course Mr. Travers knew it was a joke. Irene must have told him."

Colin shook his head doubtfully. Rex had said nothing about a joke, or an explanation from Irene, as he would have done had there been any, and something like a suspicion of the truth began to creep into his mind, making him still more indignant at Irene. But he said nothing except that "when men like Rex went into such rot and got crazy it was time the performance was stopped," and he had ordered the well closed up and was glad the glass was broken, although he presumed there would be a howling among the young people who might try to open the well. Then he added, as she turned to leave him, "You are not to walk home; you are too tired. I shall order the carriage."

Rena was very tired and she accepted Colin's offer gladly and was driven home by Nixon. With Rena gone Rex's paroxysms of delirium returned. The eye came back and sat upon the wall and the ceiling and the bureau and chairs, sometimes in one place, sometimes in another, while the braid of hair wound itself now around my head and then around that of Rex, who kept asking for Rena, and became so wild that the doctor said to me at

last: "I think we must send for that young lady. She does more good than both of us."

I was doubtful whether Rena would come again, but I wrote her a note telling her the state of things, and was delighted when about ten o'clock the next morning she walked into the house with Tom. He had taken the early train from Boston and stopped on his way from the station at Mrs. Parks', where he heard from Rena all the particulars of Rex's illness—of his looking in the well, of his hallucination with regard to the eye, and her confession to him.

"It was awful," she said, "and at first my heart beat in my throat so I could scarcely talk, and I felt as if I was about to be electrocuted. But I am glad it is over, and he did not seem angry either, only hurt, at the trick put upon him. I am going with you this morning to see him."

"But is it safe to go there so much? Aren't you afraid of fever?" Tom asked.

Mrs. Parks had suggested the same thing. She was afraid, and was fumigating with sulphur candles and chloride of lime to kill the microbes which might stray her way until the house smelled like a vault. But Rena had no fear, and was soon on her way to the McPherson place with Tom, who was very anxious about Rex and curious to know how he would receive him. I was at my wits' end when he came, and I allowed him

to go in at once, hoping he might have a quieting effect upon my patient, who was making frantic efforts to catch the eye, or rather the eyes, for the room was full of them now, and his motions were like one brushing mosquitoes from the head and face.

"Hallo, Tom!" he said. "Glad to see you, but excuse me if I keep at it, driving them away. There was only one at first. I saw it in the well, you know—I was fool enough to look in—and it has been with me ever since. There's a thousand here now. I have counted five hundred on the bed at once, winking and blinking and mocking me, and they are

everywhere; shoo, shoo,” and he began to brush his hair and arms and face.

It was pitiful to see him, and Tom’s chin quivered as he looked at him fighting the imaginary eyes floating before him.

“Rex,” he said, sitting down upon the bed, “listen. There are no eyes here, and the one you saw in the mirror was a reflection of Irene herself standing by you in flesh and blood.”

“I know, I know,” Rex replied. “Somebody told me. Who was it? Sam, I believe. He saw her. She came up close and looked at me. It was a trick, a joke, a lie! I have been made the subject of a lot of late, and it hurt me some, and you, Tom, were in it, too! _Et tu, Brute!_ we used to read at school, but I never thought I should one day be Cæsar!”

A glimmer of reason was asserting itself for a moment, and Tom’s eyes filled with tears as he said: “Yes, Rex, I was in it, and I am so sorry. We are all sorry. Rena most of all.”

At the mention of Rena, Rex’s manner changed at once.

“Yes, Rena,” he said, with a ring of pleasure in his voice, “Rena, with the little soft hands which take the eyes away. She can catch them! Where is she? I want her. She’s the girl, you know, the other was somebody else, very grand and tall and beautiful, and lives in Claremont instead of New York, and is not the one Sandy meant. That was Rena—your Rena, I want her.”

He was talking at random again, and Rena, who heard her name, went into the room.

“I am here,” she said, going up to him, while he took his hands from Tom and gave them to her.

There was no talk of eyes or hair or anything after Rena sat down beside him. He did not say much, but slept a long time, which was a gain, and we began to hope that the fever would reach the crisis at the end of a week instead of running longer, as we had at first feared. Rena stayed till night, and only left then because Tom insisted that she should go.

“I owe him something,” she said, “and I shall come every day till he is better,” and the next morning she was at her post, looking rather pale and hollow-eyed, but determined and brave.

She had brought Irene’s note received the evening before in the letter telling of Johnnie’s death.

“Don’t show it to him now. Wait till he can sense it,” Tom said.

He was taking the lead in the sick-room and was so strong and masterful that Rex continued to improve, and, greatly to our delight, a few days saw the breaking of the fever and the clearing of the mists which had clouded his brain.

CHAPTER XXI

REX’S EXPERIMENT

Rex was very weak but his mind was clear. The eye was gone, and if he remembered it he never spoke of it, but lay very quiet and seemed very happy when Rena was with him, as she was every day. He never mentioned

Irene, but Rena told him at last of Johnnie’s death, and gave him Irene’s note, which he read and then put under his pillow, saying: “I am sorry for her, and there’s nothing to forgive. Tell her so when you write.”

That was all, and Tom felt sure that the chapter of Rex’s life as connected with Irene was closed. “But she will try to reopen it,” he said to Rena. “She’ll be coming here. You’ll see.”

This seemed probable, inasmuch as her trunks were still at Mrs. Parks', and one day when Rex was able to sit up in bed for an hour or so, Rena received a letter from her saying that her mother was better and she was coming to Oakfield very soon. As Rex had not spoken of her since he received her note, it was with some hesitancy that Rena told him of her intended visit. He was very bright that morning, and was sitting up in bed with his dressing-gown on and with a look of expectation on his face as he waited for Rena, who was later than usual.

"Hallo!" he said, when she came in, "I began to think my head nurse had struck."

"No danger of that," she replied, "I went with Tom to the grove and the well. It is covered with boards now, so no one can look in it."

At the mention of the well Rex's face clouded and his voice was not quite natural as he said, "I was foolish enough to look in it, you know."

"Yes, I know," Rena answered, "and Irene played you a joke, just as Tom did me, and Sam did Lottie. There's a great temptation to do it, I think."

She was speaking for Irene, trying to excuse her, but Rex's face was still clouded, and he winked hard as for a moment the eye danced around the room and finally alighted on Rena's hair. With a quick movement he brushed it off, letting his hand linger a moment on the brown head with a loving pressure.

"It's gone, and Richard is himself again," he said, with a smile, while Rena, guessing what he meant, replied: "Yes, and very soon you will see the original—the beautiful eyes themselves—for Irene is coming."

Instantly Rex's face was white as the pillow behind him. Then the pallor passed as he asked, "Is she coming to stay?"

“Oh, no,” Rena replied. “She can’t do that. She is coming for her trunks and to see us and you. She is very anxious about you.”

“She is very kind,” Rex said faintly, then added, quickly, “Will her coming keep you from me?”

“No,” Rena answered. “We shall both be here a great deal. You will be glad to see her?”

For a moment Rex did not reply, then he said: “Ye-es, but the doctor says I must not see people yet.”

“I know, but Irene will not tire you,” Rena replied, at a loss to understand his evident shrinking from seeing Irene.

She did not stay long that morning, for she was to take a drive with Tom, and Rex did not try to detain her. He wanted to be alone, and after she was gone he lay so still with his eyes closed that I thought he was asleep. Rousing up at last he said, “Send Mr. McPherson to me, please.”

Colin came at once, and for a time I heard the two voices in low and earnest consultation. Then Colin came out, and, going to his own rooms, where his papers were kept, selected one, which he took to Rex. It was a copy of Sandy McPherson’s will, which Rex read carefully, while in his heart there was an indescribable regret and longing for what he knew could never be. He had said often to himself that he was not like other men; that no woman, however fair she might be, could create in him a desire to possess her. He could respect and admire, but love her, never! And he did not quite understand this new sensation confronting him with both pain and happiness—happiness as he recalled the face which had bent

over him so often when his fever was at its height, and pain when he said to himself: “It never could have been, for there is nothing in me to attract a bright spirit like hers even if there were no Tom. But she shall not be the loser pecuniarily, if I can help it,” and he laughed as he thought of his experiment which was to benefit Tom and Rena. He had

talked it over with Colin and asked for a copy of the will, which, after reading two or three times, he put under his pillow, while he thought it out.

“I’ll do it,” he said, “but I’ll tell Tom first.”

With his mind made up, he waited impatiently for Tom, who came fresh and breezy and seeming very happy. After some demur Rena had promised to marry him at Christmas time if her aunt were willing and some investments recently made turned out well, “for we shall want a lot of money,” she said.

“Bother the investments,” Tom had replied. “I don’t intend to touch a penny of your money. We will let that rest for the rainy day, or our old age. I want to do everything myself. We can’t, of course, set up housekeeping very steep at first, and not at all like what you are accustomed to with your Aunt Mary, but I know a pretty little flat of six or seven rooms on a pleasant street in Newton which will come within my means, and where I think we can be very happy till I can afford something bigger and better—a house of our own, with garden and grounds.”

Rena had always said she detested a flat, and should smother in one, but Tom’s arm was around her as they drove through the woods, and he talked of the cozy little rooms and the dear little wife waiting to meet him when his day’s work was done, and asked if she could bear it. She was very frank, and answered, “I hate flats as a rule. Your mother’s house—the first I remember—was big, and Aunt Mary’s is, also, but I can be happy anywhere with you, only we must sometime have the big house and the garden, not right in the city, but outside, where there is room to

spread and breathe, and keep hens if we want to. I dote on little chickens.”

Tom promised, but thought his clients must be more numerous than they were at present before that consummation of her wishes. And so the matter was settled, and Tom was radiant when he went in to Rex, who startled him by asking:

“How is your business?”

“Fair, but not as good as I wish it were,” Tom said, thinking of the inexpensive flat in which he and Rena were to live.

Rex nodded and said next:

“You still expect to marry Rena?”

“Certainly,” Tom answered. “We settled everything this morning. We shall be married at Christmas and live in a flat, where the dining-room is not much larger than that great round mahogany table in your Richmond home.”

“Oh,” Rex said, with a gesture of dissent, “Rena is too airy a bird to be caged up like that with Tom, Dick and Harry above and below her and only Tom with her.”

He laughed a little at his own joke, and then went on: “She has money?”

“Yes, some, and might have had more if she had not spent it so lavishly, but I shall not touch it. I prefer to take care of my wife myself,” Tom answered proudly.

“Good for you,” Rex replied, and was silent for a moment. Then he burst out abruptly.

“You and Rena have tried your experiment on me, and it came near being my death. Miss Bennett says I was very ill at one time, but all I can remember is that eye, or rather the _eyes_, which bothered me so, making me dizzy and nauseated and wild. You have no idea how they made me shiver and sweat and crawl. You know what I did and saw at the well, and I am so stupid I never dreamed it was a joke till Sam told me she was looking over my shoulder. The fever was coming on, of course, but the shock made it worse, and I’ve had a hard time, but I am better now, and am going to try an experiment on you, or rather on Rena. I am going to propose to her!”

“Great Heavens! Are you crazy?” Tom exclaimed, with a feeling as if Rex had struck him.

“Perhaps,” Rex answered. “At all events, I am a different man from what I was before this illness. Something has wrought a change in me. You know how afraid I used to be of women, and how I shrank from talking to—to—Miss Irene, and how you used to call me a fool, as I was, and may be yet, but somehow the fear of a woman’s dress is gone. Perhaps it was having Miss Bennett potter round me so much, and perhaps it was the touch of Rena’s hands which brought such cooling with them. Don’t look so savage. You owe me something for the trick you played on me,” he continued, as Tom’s brows knitted together in a frown. “I am going to be frank and tell you that if I had felt as I do now when I first met Rena and had known the truth, I believe I should have contended even against you, my best friend. But I didn’t know. I thought the other was the one, and you did not deceive me.”

“I know it and am ashamed of it,” Tom interrupted. “I was a villain, but I had sworn to tell you when I came back, and Irene knew it.”

“It does not matter now,” Rex said. “I was mistaken, and I tried religiously to manufacture a love for Irene, but I failed dismally. Still I believe I should have made the leap if something had not happened to open my eyes. Rena is the real one, and if I know how a fellow feels when he is in love, I am in love with her and am going to tell her so. Hold on, don’t get excited, but hear me out!” he continued, as Tom sprang up, exclaiming:

“This is too much, even from you. Why, she belongs to me.”

“That may be, but I shall propose to her just the same,” Rex said, adding, as Tom began to pace the room hurriedly:

“Do you know the conditions of Sandy McPherson’s will?”

“I should think so. I have heard them often enough,” Tom growled, and Rex went on:

“Then as a lawyer will you tell me what is to be done with that hundred thousand dollars if Rena marries you without my ever having said a word to her on the subject of matrimony?”

“It will go to thunder for what I care,” Tom replied, still excited and impatient.

“But I care,” Rex rejoined, “I have not a superabundance of money and would not object to a little of Sandy’s, especially as Colin is willing. So I shall propose to Rena, and if she refuses me I get the eighty thousand and Rena gets twenty thousand. That is plain without a lawyer, if I understand the will. If we are indifferent to each other we get ten thousand apiece and the rest goes to the South Sea Islanders, or somewhere. I’ve been reading the will over and am posted, and do not intend to let all that money slip through my fingers. Do you see?”

Tom had stopped walking and with his hands jammed into his pockets stood

looking at Rex, wondering if he really were in his right mind. It was certainly a very different Rex from the one he had known. He must have met with a change, and Tom doubted if the change had improved him.

“Would you like to read the will?” Rex asked, taking it from under his pillow.

Tom shook his head and said:

“Do you expect Rena to accept you?”

“Why, no, of course not,” Rex answered. “But I shall give her a chance to decline. I can’t earn eighty thousand dollars easier.”

He certainly was demented, with a different kind of craziness from that which had affected him when his fever was on and the eye was after him, and Tom felt disturbed and indignant that Rena was to be made a tool by which Rex was to achieve a fortune, and he said so in plain language, adding that he never thought Rex would do so ungentlemanly a thing, and he did not like it.

Rex laughed good-humoredly and suggested that he had been made a dupe, if not a tool, and turn about was fair play.

“That may be, but I wouldn’t insult Rena, and make her the cat’s paw by which you are to get a fortune. I’d like eighty thousand dollars myself, but I would not hurt Rena’s feelings to get it. No, I wouldn’t!” Tom said, leaving the room and banging the door, while Rex chuckled over what he called his experiment, and read the will again.

Tom’s first impulse was to tell Rena and bid her keep away from Rex till his crazy fancy left him; then the ridiculousness of the affair struck him and he concluded to let matters take their course, knowing she would

refuse and thinking it would amuse him to know what Rex said to her and what she said to him. He did not like to quarrel with Rex, who certainly was a little off, and then he had been outrageously fooled, and if it was any satisfaction for him to propose to Rena and be rejected, let him do it and get the money. He deserved something for the way he had been treated. This was Tom's decision, and he began to look forward with some interest to the result of Rex's experiment.

The next morning when Rena came and went into Rex's room, Tom, who was there, made some excuse for going out, and the two were left alone. Rex was propped up on cushions and pillows and Rena sat in a low chair beside him where he could look into her face, which never seemed fairer and sweeter than it did now, awakening in him so keen a regret that she was not for him, that for a few moments he felt that if there were a shadow of a chance to win her he would take that chance and prove a traitor to Tom. She had gathered some wild flowers on her way through the fields and as she gave them to him he held her hand in a firm grasp and said:

"Rena."

He had called her so in his illness, but never just as he did now, and Rena flushed a little and tried to take her hand from his. But he held it fast and went on:

"What would you do if I told you that I loved you?"

"I should say you were crazy, and go straight and tell Tom," was Rena's answer.

"Of course you'd tell Tom," Rex said. "I've told him."

"Told him that you loved me, and he let you!" Rena exclaimed, releasing herself from his grasp and springing to her feet and trembling like a

scared bird ready for flight.

“Sit down and hear me out,” Rex said, and Rena sat down, wondering at herself for obeying him, and at his manner which compelled obedience.

“Yes, I told Tom,” he continued. “I mean to do things fairly, and now I tell you that if I know what love means I love you.”

“I’ll not sit here to listen to such insanity. I’ll call Miss Bennett, or Tom, or both,” Rena said, starting again to rise, but Rex’s imperative “Sit still,” kept her quiet, while he went on:

“I am an awkward man as you know, and in nothing more so than in lovemaking, the last thing in the world I once thought I should have attempted. Uncle Colin tried to coach me when I was laboring under a mistake and thought I ought to make love to some one else. He said I must ask the girl if her pulse beat in unison with mine.”

“Mine don’t! I can tell you that,” Rena interrupted him, while he laughed and still held her with something in his eyes she could not resist.

“No,” he said, I suppose not. I did not think they did; “but pulse or no pulse, I offer you my heart and hand—not exactly in Tom’s language, perhaps——”

“I should think not! Tom’s language, indeed!” and Rena smiled scornfully, as she mentally contrasted this phase of lovemaking with Tom’s.

Rex certainly was crazy again, and beyond her control. Indeed, his was the controlling influence now, rather than hers; and she felt a little afraid of him, but sat still, while with an eloquence for which she had never given him credit, and which surprised himself, he told her that if he knew what love was he loved her, and had he known who she was when he first met her his heart would have gone out to her as it did now, and

that in spite of a hundred Toms he asked her to be his wife. She would probably refuse, but he had done his duty.

“Duty!” Rena repeated. “You are a fine man to talk of duty! What of Irene, and her pulse? Did you ever ask how that beat?”

“No,” Rex said, while a shadow passed over his face. “I’d rather not discuss Irene except to say I never asked her to be my wife as I have you; and you won’t?”

“No, I won’t, and I am going now to tell Tom,” Rena replied, her eyes filling with tears.

This time Rex did not try to detain her, as she left him without a word and went in quest of Tom, whom she could not find. So she started home, feeling very hot and indignant and finally ending in a cry when alone in her room.

Meanwhile Tom, who had been in the stables when Rena was looking for him, had returned to Rex, whom he found with a look on his face such as an accepted lover might have worn. He had the copy of the will in his hand when Tom entered and said rather brusquely:

“Well, did you propose?”

“I did!”

“What did she say?”

“She said no, and threatened to tell you, and was pretty mad, but I’ve done my duty, and according to the terms of the will, I am entitled to eighty thousand dollars. Isn’t that so?”

If he had not been Rex, Tom felt that he should have hated him for this sudden manifestation of greed, but he was Rex, and something in his

eyes

gave the lie to his words, as he went on rapidly:

“As soon as I am able I shall have the matter attended to by some competent lawyer—not you, who might demur—but some one who will make

things straight and see that I rightfully get my eighty thousand, which will be mine to do with as I please, won’t it?”

“Yes,” Tom said, a glimmering of the truth beginning to dawn upon him, making him ashamed that for a moment he had distrusted Rex, who continued:

“Then if I please to give the most of it to Rena, she can’t help herself, can she?”

“Rex,” Tom exclaimed. “You must not do this. Rena will not let you, neither will I.”

“I don’t see how you can help it,” Rex replied. “It will be her wedding-present, and keep her from that miserable little flat you talk of. You and Rena in a flat! No, sir! You are to have a handsome suburban

villa, with grounds and garden, where I can visit you occasionally. I hate flats, and climbing stairs, and so will Rena. I thought it out and talked with Uncle Colin before I spoke to Rena, and you are to come here

whenever you like and Rena is to be mistress, just as Sandy meant her to be. It is all fixed, and you needn’t kick. I’ve tried my experiment, and it worked beautifully. I was in earnest, too, I am sure I love the girl, if, as Uncle Colin says, love consists in a kind of all-over feeling when you touch her hand or look at her, and if it were not for you I’d win her, too. As it is, I give her up, but I’ll have my revenge in my own way. What have you to say about it?”

Tom had a good deal to say, but nothing moved Rex, who insisted that he

could and should do what he liked with his own, when it was his, and as he was getting very tired, Tom gave up the contest and went to see Rena, whom he found tear-stained and indignant, nearly as much with him as with Rex.

Mr. Travers had proposed, she said, and Tom knew he was going to and had let him, and if Irene were not coming she'd go home that day, and she didn't care, so there!

Tom listened and laughed and tried to soothe her and explain as far as possible without giving Rex away.

"He certainly is a little off," he said, "and if he wanted to try his luck with you why shouldn't I let him, feeling sure of you, as I am? And then I was curious to know what a matter-of-fact chap like him, who used to shiver at the sight of a girl, would say. What did he?"

"He talked about my pulse beating in unison with his, and a lot more ridiculous stuff, not at all like you," Rena replied, beginning to feel her anger melt away as Tom kissed her flushed face and told her not to mind the vagaries of a crazy man, but adding, "I guess I wouldn't go near him again till Irene comes."

CHAPTER XXII

IRENE

She came at last, but the McPherson carriage was not waiting for her; Colin would not have sent it if he had known she must walk and Rex did not know she was coming. Tom and Rena, however, were at the station to meet her. Rena was glad to see her, while Tom seemed to be, and made her feel so comfortable that by the time the house was reached she was quite herself, without the air of superiority she had assumed when she first came to Oakfield. Then she was the Miss Burdick, claiming precedence

everywhere.

Now she was in a back seat, Mrs. Parks said to me, when getting her room ready and wondering if she'd better change the rocker and toilet-set or not. When Rena was just Rena, a plain white bowl and pitcher were good enough for her, while Irene had the sprigged set. She had also a Boston rocker and white bed-spread, and Rena had a wooden rocker and pink-and-white spread, pieced and quilted herring-bone pattern by Mrs. Parks' mother and valuable for its antiquity, but not first cut like the Marseilles, Mrs. Parks said. Now, the sprigged set was in Rena's room with the Boston rocker and Marseilles spread and Irene had the herring-bone and wooden chair and white pitcher with a chip gone from its nose, and Beatrice Cenci was removed to her place over the mantel in the parlor. If Irene noticed the changes she gave no sign, and took her place gracefully as what Mrs. Parks called "second fiddle." She arrived at four in the afternoon and immediately after tea which on her account was served at five she announced her intention to call at the McPherson place, if Rena would go with her. This was an ordeal from which Rena, who had not seen Rex, since his lovemaking, shrank; but if Irene went she must go too, and as Tom, who had stopped for supper at Mrs. Parks', was to accompany them she felt that with them both it would be comparatively easy to meet him. As yet Irene had had but little chance to talk, but out in the field her tongue was loosened and she asked innumerable questions concerning Rex's illness, with the air of one who had a right to know. It was Tom who answered the most of her questions, telling her first that Colin had covered up the well after he heard of Rex's adventure and the broken mirror.

"How did he know that?" Irene asked. "Did Mr. Travers tell of it?"

"Why, no," Tom answered. "Murder will out, you know, and Sam Walker was asleep behind some bushes and awoke just in time to see you scare Rex

out of his wits and make him drop the glass into the well, and nearly fall in himself. You played the trick more successfully on him than I did on Rena.”

Irene’s voice was very unsteady as she said:

“Mr. Travers was frightened at something and fortunately I was there and caught him in time to keep him from falling. Did the fright bring on his fever? Surely he saw nothing.”

“She is at her old tricks, as I knew she would be. I don’t want to quarrel with her.” Tom thought, “but by George, I’ll tell her the whole when I have a chance!”

Irene did not ask any more questions. Something warned her that her influence over Reginald was probably gone. Still she would not abandon all hope. There might yet be a chance and nothing could have been more sympathetic than the expression of her face, or sweeter than her voice when she was admitted to his room. It was so late in the day that I had doubts about letting her see him, but when I told him she was there with Rena, he said very eagerly, “Let them come in.”

“You two girls go without me; three are too many at one time,” Tom said, motioning Rena toward the door, while she held back and made Irene go first.

Rex was sitting up in his invalid chair, as he did now a part of every day, and his face flushed when Irene appeared and came toward him. He was paler and thinner than she had expected to find him, and the pity she felt was genuine as were the tears which came to the eyes which recalled to Rex’s mind the one which had troubled him so much. It was looking at him now with so much sympathy that he was moved a little and he smiled up at her as he gave her his hand which she kept and smoothed as she said: “O, Mr. Travers! I was so sorry to hear of your illness and

wished I might do something for you, but I could not come.”

“You are very kind,” he replied, “and I was sorry for you when I heard of your little brother’s death. I hope you are well. You are looking so.”

Nothing could have been more formal than his words and manner, and Irene

felt it and saw the difference when he turned to Rena, asking why she had stayed away so long and saying to Irene: “You don’t know what a capital nurse your cousin is. I believe she did more to pull me through than Miss Bennett or the doctor.”

Rena’s face was crimson as she protested that she had done little, but Irene detected something in her and Rex both which she could not define and which made her uneasy. But she would not give up yet and she must speak to him of the deception in which she had taken part. She would rather have been alone with him, but Rena was there and she heard Tom’s voice in the hall and knew he might come in at any moment.

“Mr. Travers,” she began, “Rena has told you of our foolishness in which

I played a part.” She would like to have said unwilling part, but Rena’s presence prevented her, and she went on: “I told you how sorry I was, in my note which you received?”

“Yes, but I was too ill to answer it. There is nothing to forgive,” he said. “It is all past and gone and made square. Let us forget it.”

Just then Tom entered the room, saying Miss Bennett’s orders were that Rex must not talk any longer.

“I hope I have not tired you, have I?” Irene replied, turning upon Rex a look so full of entreaty for some sign that the old relations between them were not entirely ended that he could not misunderstand her. Neither could he answer her as she wished, and he only said:

“Miss Bennett knows how weak I am still and keeps close watch lest I get too tired. Perhaps you will come again. Do you stop long?”

Without directly answering him Irene said good-night and left the room with a growing feeling that any chance she might have had with Rex was lost. She was sure of it when after their return to Mrs. Parks', Rena, who had a headache, went to her room, leaving her with Tom. She made no move to follow Rena, for she wanted to see Tom alone and learn, if possible, how she stood with Rex, who, she said, seemed greatly changed.

“He is very weak, I know, but he did not seem a bit glad to see me, and he was rather fond of me once—you know he was. What has happened? Do you think it is because I am Irene of Claremont, instead of Irene of New York, which has changed him?”

Tom hesitated a moment, then he said:

“Rex is not that kind of man. If he had really loved you nothing would have changed him.”

This was not very encouraging to Irene, but there was worse to come as Tom continued:

“I may as well tell you the whole. I have told you that Sam Walker saw you steal up behind Rex when he was at the well and look over his shoulder. It seems Rex was foolish enough to think it was really an apparition, as you did not explain. He never suspects a joke, but Sam Walker told him the truth, which must have surprised him. His fever was coming on and the half face and eye seen in the mirror impressed him so much that they were with him in his delirium, making him so wild that nothing quieted him except Rena, who had the faculty of dissipating his fancies.”

Then Tom went in to describe the eye, which sometimes danced before Rex
and again alighted here and there and everywhere, until even he and Colin began to feel crawly when Rex said it was on them. Tom stopped a
moment as he saw how agitated Irene seemed; then he continued:

“Sometimes the room was full of eyes, winking and blinking at him, while
he used both hands to brush them away. It was awful to see him. That braid of hair he foolishly thought was growing on your head when he pulled it off troubled him, too,—winding itself round his neck and arms until Rena threw it from the window and made him think it had gone out to sea, but the eye stuck.”

“Oh, Tom! please stop. I can’t bear any more,” Irene exclaimed, and there was a sob in her voice as she began to understand that all hope was swept away if Rex knew the whole of that episode at the well and had
carried the memory of it in his delirium.

Tom was sorry for her, she looked so distressed, but he had not finished all he meant to say, and continued:

“Rex would not know how to deceive any one and cannot understand deception in another. As to matrimony, he never cared for girls, and Sandy’s will troubled him. Still he meant to do right, and if the girl mentioned in it liked him he would compel himself to like her. Excuse me, Irene, for speaking so plainly. You did seem to care for him, and he tried to care for you, and if he had never been undeceived he might have proposed to you as he has to Rena since he learned the truth.”

“Proposed to Rena!” Irene exclaimed springing up and going towards the
door, saying as she did so, “Come out with me, Tom, I cannot breathe in this close room.”

They went out upon the piazza where the wind was blowing cool and where

Irene could breathe more freely. Tom's news had stunned her for a moment, but she would not let him see how she was hurt.

"Tell me about it," she said. "Why should he propose to Rena when he knew she was engaged to you?"

Tom did not choose to enlighten her as to the real reason, and he answered: "That is rather queer, especially as he told me he was going to propose and that he loved her."

"Was he in his right mind?" Irene asked, and Tom replied:

"He seemed to be."

Then for a time there was silence while Irene sat with her hands clasped and her heart beating in her throat with throbs which told how hard her ambitious hopes were dying. She was a woman of quick perception, and after she could speak she said:

"Tom, Reginald Travers is a mercenary wretch. I know the conditions of the will, I saw the copy sent to Rena, and it is money he is after. He knew Rena would refuse him and that by her doing so he would get eighty

thousand dollars. With me, if I had been the girl, he would have gotten the whole on the principle that what is the wife's is the husband's. I am fortunate to be rid of him."

Tom laughed to himself, wondering how she could be rid of what she never

had, and still he pitied her, for he knew how she was writhing with humiliation and disappointment. She was very white and there was a drawn

look about her mouth, and Tom noticed that she shivered as a stronger gust of wind than usual swept across the piazza. She was cold, she said at last, rising, and giving her hand to Tom:

“I am glad you told me and I know now it was not I that he cared for, but what he might get with me. I shall go home to-morrow, wiser than when I came. Good-night.”

She was gone before Tom could detain her, and a moment after was in her room sobbing so loudly that Rena heard her, and stepping out of bed came to her side, asking what was the matter. Irene never forgot the main chance. If she had won Rex, Rena’s friendship would not be as necessary to her, but she had lost him and Rena, must be retained. Very rapidly she repeated what Tom had told her.

“It was horrible about that eye,—my eye,—and I can see it myself and always shall. He is not very bright, or he would have seen the joke,” she said; “but I did care for him and I thought he cared for me. I know better now, and there is nothing left me but you, Rena. You will not desert me. You will be the same after you are Tom’s wife that you always have been.”

It is needless to say that Rena’s soft heart melted at once and she assured her cousin that her friendship would never fail. There was comfort in this, opening up visions of frequent visits to Newton and the material good which always came from intercourse with Rena. And Irene’s spirits began to rise.

Once, as she lay awake that night, there came to her the thought that it might not be a bad scheme to try her hand with Colin, who had been far more gracious to her than Rex, but she soon gave that up. She had met him as she was leaving his house, and his manner, though civil, had not been very cordial.

“Bless my soul, Miss Burdick, you here?” he had said and with some commonplace remark had passed on.

Remembering this, she knew that he, too, had changed, and concluded to abandon her attack on him; nor would she see Rex again. He had deceived

her. He cared only for money, and she believed she hated him. She was nobody now, where she had been so much; even Miss Parks’ manner was

different, and she would leave the next day. This resolution she carried out in spite of Rena’s efforts to detain her. She only came for her trunks, she said, and was needed at home.

Tom and Rena went with her to the station, and when that evening Tom saw

Rex, he said to him, “Irene left a good-bye for you; she has gone.”

“Gone so soon? I thought I might see her again,” Rex replied; then after a moment, he added; “Better so, perhaps,” and that was all the mention he made of her.

CHAPTER XXIII

CONCLUSION

November had come and the Oakfield visitors were all gone,—I to my work

as stenographer,—Rena to New York, and Tom to Newton, where Rex finally

joined him. He was very well and seemed very happy as he took every car

line in and out of the city, and read every advertisement of “Villas for Sale.” He had been with Tom into the six room flat, third floor, and had sniffed at it scornfully.

“Rena here!” he said, “in these little rooms, with an elevator to reach them! I tell you, Tom, it will never do, and I’ll have my way in this matter. That eighty thousand is going to do some good.”

“All right,” Tom finally said. “Go ahead, and see what Rena says.”

She was coming in a few days with her aunt to see the flat and decide on its furnishing, and Rex was quite as anxious about it as Tom, who anticipated a scene when she learned the truth. Mrs. Graham had objected

to the flat, and had mentally objected to Tom, as a poor man. Reginald would have pleased her better. But she had no choice. Rena was to marry

Tom and live in a flat, and was very happy and anxious to see both. Tom met them at the station and took them to the hotel where he had engaged rooms for them. It was too late when they arrived to see the flat that day, but Tom came early the next morning to take them to it in a very smart turnout. Rena had heard so much from her aunt of the economy she

must practise as Tom’s wife, that the fine carriage and horses disturbed her as something Tom could not afford.

“I shall have to restrain him,” she thought, “for it is like him when he has one dollar to spend two.”

“Couldn’t we walk, or take a street-car?” she asked, and Tom replied: “Yes, but I am going to show you the city and some of the suburbs.”

It did not take long to reach the flat, and they were soon inspecting the rooms, at which Mrs. Graham looked askance, while Rena drew a quick

breath, they were so much smaller than she had expected. Tom was in high

spirits as he showed them through.

“This is the parlor,” he said, indicating the front room, “and this little nook out of it over the hall can be fitted up as a Japanese den. This room we will use for a library, where I can smoke and read. This is the dining-room, all furnished in oak. And the biggest room in the house with a fair outlook. Here is a sleeping-room, and bath-room, here the

kitchen, here the servant's room, small, to be sure, but less work to take care of; and here is what I consider best of all, a nice platform or open shed out of the kitchen where we can keep our truck. How do you like it?"

They had reached the open shed where they were to keep truck, of the nature of which Rena, who knew nothing of housekeeping, had no idea. She had followed Tom mechanically, with a feeling that her aunt's gown rustled more than usual as they went from room to room. She did not quite know what she did think except that it was different from what she had expected. Evidently Tom was pleased and wished her to be, and with a catch of breath she said:

"It is very nice, but rather small, big enough for us, though," while her aunt asked:

"Where am I to sleep if I should visit you—there is no spare room for guests?"

"By George! I hadn't thought of that," Tom said; then, brightening suddenly, he added, "We'll put a bed-lounge in the library and turn that into a sleeping-room. Shall we go now?"

"But we haven't decided what furniture we want," Rena said, and Tom replied:

"Time enough for that after I show you the city."

Rena was the first to go down the stairs, which she preferred to the elevator. Behind her came her aunt who turned to Tom and said in a low tone: "You must give up that Quixotic notion not to use Rena's money, and rent a larger place. According to that will she has a right to a part of Sandy's fortune, and she must not be buried here!"

“Think so?” Tom answered, good-humoredly, while Mrs. Graham shrugged her shoulders and thought of Reginald Travers and the will.

They were all rather silent, as they drove around the city, seeming to Rena to be going out of it until at last they were in a suburb and stopped before a handsome, modern house, with grounds in front and garden and stable in the rear.

“Who lives here?” Rena asked.

“No one at present. I want you to see it,” Tom said, putting up his arms to lift her out.

“I believe he has been playing a joke about that flat,” Mrs. Graham thought, as she followed up the walk to the front door, of which Tom had the key.

He seemed quite at home in the house, which was perfect in every respect, with plenty of room for guests, a modern hall and staircase, with broad window-seats and a fireplace, and Rena went off into little shrieks of ecstasy, while the six rooms of the flat, third floor, grew smaller and smaller in her mind.

“Tom,” she said, at last, timidly, as they sat in one of the window-seats, “how much is a home like this worth?”

Tom named a price which made her gasp.

“Did you think of buying it?” he asked.

“No, I couldn’t, and furnish it and keep it up as it ought to be kept, but it’s lovely,” Rena said. “Why did you bring us here? Whose is it?”

“Yours, if you prefer it to the flat.”

“Oh, Tom! You ought not to have done it! You couldn’t afford it, and you must let me help, but it was so good in you, you dear, delightful, darling old Tom,” Rena exclaimed, and forgetting that her aunt was present she threw her arms around Tom’s neck, nearly strangling him and knocking off his hat, which rolled on the floor.

“Hold on,” he said. “You are choking me to death and wide of the mark. I could not begin to buy the place, even with your help. Rex bought it and gives it to you. I have the deed in my pocket. Here it is.”

He drew out a legal-looking document and held it up, but Rena did not see it. She had bounded half across the room, where she stood with flashing eyes and white lips, exclaiming:

“I’ll never take it, never!”

“Come back here, and I will explain,” Tom said, and rather reluctantly Rena went back and resumed her seat beside him, while her aunt, scarcely less excited, asked:

“Is it a joke?”

“Not a bit of it. It’s true as the Gospel. Rex bought this house and has given it to Rena, with money enough to furnish it.”

“But why did he do it?” Rena asked, and very briefly Tom told her, while she listened with the tears streaming down her face and a strange feeling stirring in her heart.

Tom made her understand the will as she never had before, and that eighty thousand dollars were Rex’s in virtue of his having proposed to her and been rejected. Rena was a woman and something like resentment

flashed up for a moment as she said:

“So all that fine talk about love and my pulse beating in unison with his was put on for the sake of getting the money?”

“No, it wasn’t,” Tom said. “He cared for you very much—loved you, if that term suits you better. He told me so, and if you had not been engaged to me he would have tried to win you for himself, I know Rex, the best fellow that ever lived, and the most generous. I tried to dissuade him from doing what he has, but I might as well talk to the wind. He is determined, and so I turn the matter over to you, who can accept or reject, as you please.”

“I reject!” Rena said decidedly. “Do you think I can accept so great a gift from Mr. Travers?”

“But, Rena, consider the peculiar circumstances,” Mrs. Graham began.

She had no idea of letting Rena lose this lovely home, and her arguments were so strong and persuasive that Rena finally yielded so far as to say she would think about it, and to ask where Mr. Travers was.

“In the city, at the same hotel as you, waiting to see you,” Tom told her.

“Oh, I can’t do that, as I must tell him I cannot take the house,” Rena said, but when on their return to the city they passed the flat and Tom asked:

“Would you like to look at it again, or furniture for it?” she answered quietly:

“No, drive on, I am tired.”

After lunch Tom said to her: “Will you see Rex? He has a private parlor, and is in there.”

“Oh, no!” Rena cried, turning very white and beginning to tremble.

“But you must. Don’t be foolish,” her aunt persisted.

“Then Tom must go with me,” Rena said.

“No,” he answered. “It is better for you to see him alone. I’ll go as far as the door. Come on, and have it over. He will not hurt you.”

Very unwilling Rena went, shaking like a leaf when the door closed and she found herself with Rex. The particulars of that interview Tom never knew, nor asked, but Rena’s face was stained with tears when it was over, and she was greatly agitated as she said to him:

“I’ve consented, and I feel so mean; but I couldn’t help it, he was so nice—so like a brother, which he says he wants to be to us, and he almost made me believe that a part of that eighty thousand dollars was mine by right—that Sandy McPherson wished it so, and Colin, too; and we

are to stay at the McPherson place when we please and he will be there some of the time and here with us in his house. I can’t help feeling it is his, and in spite of it all I am so happy, for truly I did not want the flat, it is so small and stuffy. He reminded me that twenty thousand dollars are lawfully mine according to the will, but I won’t touch it. He shall keep it and give it to Irene, if he wants to. I know she did some things which surprised me, but I was to blame for getting her into the plot. She liked Mr. Travers and she had reason to think he liked her. I am sorry for her—and I——”

She did not finish for Tom stopped her mouth with kisses, saying:

“Never mind Irene. She shall not suffer. I am glad the thing is settled.”

He seemed relieved, and Rena at last became quite composed and consented

to dine that night in Rex’s private parlor. He proved an admirable host

and not at all like the timid man whom Tom had once almost dragged through the fields to call upon the Misses Burdick. It was decided that Rena and her aunt were to select the furniture for the house, or a part of it, before going home, and in the excitement of shopping Rena forgot the humiliation she thought she should always feel when she remembered

how her handsome home came to her. They stayed a week in Newton and

Boston and then returned to New York, where preparations for the wedding

went on rapidly. Mrs. Graham would have liked a church affair with a grand reception, but Rena shrank from it.

“We’ll be married at home in the morning with only a few friends here—Irene, Mr. Travers, Mr. McPherson, Miss Bennett, Mrs. Parks, Lottie and Sam.”

“Oh, horror!” Mrs. Graham exclaimed, but she gave in and the wedding took place the day before Christmas with all the invited guests present except Irene, who declined on the pretense that she was just recovering from the grippe, and no one seemed to miss her.

I was there, with Colin and Rex and Mrs. Parks and Lottie and Sam, to the last of whom Rex was very gracious, feeling that he owed him something for exposing the farce at the well and thus saving from which he would have found it hard to extricate himself.

After the bride and groom were gone and Sam was about to leave Rex drew him aside and asked:

“Are you much of a farmer?”

“Have been at it all my life,” Sam replied, with the air of a man of forty.

“Well, then,” Rex continued, “How would you like to see what you can do with my farm a few miles from Richmond? It was said to be a good one, I believe, before the war, but is somewhat run down. Would you like it?”

“You bet!” Sam answered, his eyes shining as he saw a chance to marry Lottie sooner than he had hoped.

He left that afternoon with Mrs. Parks and Lottie, but Mr. McPherson spent the night as he wished to question Mrs. Graham with regard to Rena, until he settled it to a certainty that she was a blood relation to Nannie, and that there had been no mistake in the distribution of Sandy’s money. Then he returned home, while Rex went to Boston, where a few days later he was joined by Mrs. Graham and with her finished the selection of furniture for the house. It was some time in January that the newly married pair took possession of their new home, where Mrs. Graham and Rex were waiting to welcome them.

Years have passed since then, bringing some changes. Tom has grown stouter and jollier, if possible, while Rena, who will always be girlish, tries to assume a matronly air on account of the two little children who call her mother. One is a boy, christened Travers McPherson, the other a girl named Nannie, for her far-removed relative, whose picture Colin insists she resembles. Irene has made up her mind to bear the inevitable gracefully and is a frequent visitor in Newton, where her still lovely face attracted the attention of a middle-aged bachelor from Boston, with a handsome house on Commonwealth Avenue, and more money than either Rex or Tom. The last I heard she was engaged to him, and Rena is to give her the wedding. Whenever I can leave my work I visit Rena and frequently meet with Mr. McPherson and Rex, the latter

of
whom is uncle and the other grandfather to the children. Sam Walker,
lives on Mr. Travers' farm, which, under his skilful management, is in
better condition than before the war when it was called one of the best
in the country. Tom's practise has increased until Mrs. Graham no
longer
looks upon him as a poor man, but speaks of him with pride as "a
promising lawyer, my niece's husband." Nearly every summer the
family go
to the McPherson place, where Rex joins them, and the children, with
their carts and shovels, play sometimes on the beach and sometimes in
the grounds, but their favorite place is in the pine-grove near the
covered well, where poor Nannie met her tragic death, without which
this
story could never have been written.

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