

FICTION

Albert Bigelow Paine

The Lucky Piece

A PUBLIC DOMAIN BOOK

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FICTION

THE LUCKY PIECE

A TALE OF THE NORTH WOODS

BY ALBERT BIGELOW PAINE

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ETC.

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He climbed down carefully and secured his treasure.

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THE LUCKY PIECE

PROLOGUE

There is a sharp turn just above the hill. The North Elba stage sometimes hesitates there before taking the plunge into the valley below.

But this was late September. The morning was brisk, the mountains glorified, the tourists were going home. The four clattering, snorting horses swung into the turn and made straight for the brow--the stout, ruddy-faced driver holding hard on the lines, but making no further effort to check them. Then the boy in the front seat gave his usual "Hey! look there!" and, the other passengers obeying, as they always did, saw something not especially related to Algonquin, or Tahawus, or Whiteface--the great mountains whose slopes were ablaze with autumn, their peaks already tipped with snow--that was not, indeed, altogether Adirondack scenery. Where the bend came, at the brink, a little weather-beaten cottage cornered--a place with apple trees and some faded summer flowers. In the road in front was a broad flat stone, and upon it a single figure--a little girl of not more than eight--her arm extended toward the approaching stage, in her hand a saucer of berries.

The tourists had passed a number of children already, but this one was different. The others had been mostly in flocks--soiled, stringy-haired little mountaineers, who had gathered to see the stage go by. The smooth, oval face of this child, rich under the tan, was clean, the dark hair closely brushed--her dress a simple garment, though of a fashion unfavored by the people of the hills. All this could be comprehended in the brief glance allowed the passengers; also the deep wistful look which followed them as the stage whirled by without stopping.

A lady in the back seat (she had been in Italy) murmured something about a "child Madonna." Another said, "Poor little thing!"

But the boy in the front seat had caught the driver's arm and was demanding that he stop the stage.

"I want to get out!" he repeated, with determination. "I want to buy those berries! Stop!"

The driver could not stop just there, even had he wished to do so, which he did not. They were already a third of the way down, and the hill was a serious matter. So the boy leaned out, looking back, to make sure the moment's vision had not faded, and when the stage struck level ground, was out and running, long before the horses had been brought to a stand-still.

"You wait for me!" he commanded. "I'll be back in a second!" Then he pushed rapidly up the long hill, feeling in his pockets as he ran.

The child had not moved from her place, and stood curiously regarding the approaching boy. He was considerably older than she was, as much as six years. Her wistful look gave way to one of timidity as he came near. She drew the saucer of berries close to her and looked down. Then, puffing and panting, he stood there, still rummaging in his pockets, and regaining breath for words.

"Say," he began, "I want your berries, you know, only, you see, I--I thought I had some money, but I haven't--not a cent--only my lucky piece. My mother's in the stage and I could get it from her, but I don't want to go back." He made a final, wild, hopeless search through a number of pockets, looking down, meanwhile, at the little bowed figure standing mutely before him. "Look here," he went on, "I'm going to give you my lucky piece. Maybe it'll bring luck to you, too. It did to me--I caught an awful lot of fish up here this summer. But you mustn't spend it or give it away, 'cause some day when I come back up here I'll want it again. You keep it for me--that's what you do. Keep it safe. When I come back, I'll give you anything you like for it. Whatever you want--only you must keep it. Will you?"

He held out the worn Spanish silver piece which a school chum had given him "for luck" when they had parted in June. But the little brown hand clung to the berries and made no effort to take it.

"Oh, you must take it," he said. "I should lose it anyway. I always lose things. You can take care of it for me. Likely I'll be up again next year. Anyway, I'll come some time, and when I do I'll give you whatever you like in exchange for it."

She did not resist when he took the berries and poured them into his cap. Then the coin was pushed into one of her brown hands and he was pressing her fingers tightly upon it. When she dared to look up, he had called, "Good-bye!" and was halfway down the hill, the others looking out of the stage, waving him to hurry.

She watched him, saw him climb in with the driver and fling his hand toward her as the stage rounded into the wood and disappeared. Still she did not move, but watched the place where it had vanished, as if she thought it might reappear, as if presently that sturdy boy might come hurrying up the hill. Then slowly--very slowly, as if she held some living object that might escape--she unclosed her hand and looked at the treasure within, turning it over, wondering at

the curious markings. The old look came into her face again, but with it an expression which had not been there before. It was some hint of responsibility, of awakening. Vaguely she felt that suddenly and by some marvelous happening she had been linked with a new and wonderful world. All at once she turned and fled through the gate, to the cottage.

"Mother!" she cried at the door, "Oh, Mother! Something has happened!" and, flinging herself into the arms of the faded woman who sat there, she burst into a passion of tears.



CHAPTER I

BUT PALADINS RIDE FAR BETWEEN

Frank rose and, plunging his hands into his pockets, lounged over to the wide window and gazed out on the wild March storm which was drenching and dismaying Fifth Avenue. A weaving throng of carriages, auto-cars and delivery wagons beat up and down against it, were driven by it from behind, or buffeted from many directions at the corners. Coachmen, footmen and drivers huddled down into their waterproofs; pedestrians tried to breast the rain with their umbrellas and frequently lost them. From where he stood the young man could count five torn and twisted derelicts soaking in gutters. They seemed so very wet--everything did. When a stage--that relic of another day--lumbered by, the driver on top, only half sheltered by his battered oil-skins, seemed wetter and more dismal than any other object. It all had an art value, certainly, but there were pleasanter things within. The young man turned to the luxurious room, with its wide blazing fire and the young girl who sat looking into the glowing depths.

"Do you know, Constance," he said, "I think you are a bit hard on me." Then he drifted into a very large and soft chair near her, and, stretching out his legs, stared comfortably into the fire as if the fact were no such serious matter, after all.

The girl smiled quietly. She had a rich oval face, with a deep look in her eyes, at once wistful and eager, and just a bit restless, as if there were problems there among the coals--questions she could not wholly solve.

"I did not think of it in that way," she said, "and you should not call me Constance, not now, and you are Mr. Weatherby. I do not know how we ever began--the other way. I was only a girl, of course, and did not know America so well, or realize--a good many things."

The young man stirred a little without looking up.

"I know," he assented; "I realize that six months seems a long period to a--to a young person, and makes a lot of difference, sometimes. I believe you have had a birthday lately."

"Yes, my eighteenth--my majority. That ought to make a difference."

"Mine didn't to me. I'm just about the same now as I was then, and----"

"As you always will be. That is just the trouble."

"I was going to say, as I always had been."

"Which would not be true. You were different, as a boy."

"And who gave you that impression, pray?"

The girl flushed a little.

"I mean, you must have been," she added, a trifle inconsequently. "Boys always are. You had ambitions, then."

"Well, yes, and I gratified them. I wanted to be captain of my college team, and I was. We held the championship as long as I held the place. I wanted to make a record in pole-vaulting, and I did. It hasn't been beaten since. Then I wanted the Half-mile Cup, and I won that, too. I think those were my chief aspirations when I entered college, and when I came out there were no more worlds to conquer. Incidentally I carried off the honors for putting into American some of Mr. Horace's justly popular odes, edited the college paper for a year, and was valedictorian of the class. But those were trivial things. It was my prowess that gave me standing and will remain one of the old school's traditions long after this flesh has become dust."

The girl's eyes had grown brighter as he recounted his achievements. She could not help stealing a glance of admiration at the handsome fellow stretched out before her, whose athletic deeds had made him honored among his kind. Then she smiled.

"Perhaps you were a pillar of modesty, too," she commented, "once."

He laughed--a gentle, lazy laugh in which she joined--and presently she added:

"Of course, I know you did those things. That is just it. You could do anything, and be anything, if you only would. Oh, but you don't seem to care! You seem satisfied, comfortable and good-naturedly indifferent; if you were poor, I should say idle--I suppose the trouble is there. You have never been poor and lonely and learned to want things. So, of course, you never learned to care for--for anything."

Her companion leaned toward her--his handsome face full of a light that was not all of the fire.

"I have, for you," he whispered.

The girl's face lighted, too. Her eyes seemed to look into some golden land which she was not quite willing to enter.

"No," she demurred gently. "I am not sure of that. Let us forget about that. As you say, a half-year has been a long time--to a child. I had just come from abroad then with my parents, and I had been most of the time in a school where girls are just children, no matter what their ages. When we came home, I suppose I did not know just what to do with my freedom. And then, you see, Father and Mother liked you, and let you come to the house, and when I first saw you and knew you--when I got to know you, I mean--I was glad to have you come, too. Then we rode and drove and golfed all those days about Lenox--all those days--your memory is poor, very poor, but you may recall those October days, last year, when I had just come home--those days, you know----"

Again the girl's eyes were looking far into a fair land which queens have willingly died to enter, while the young man had pulled his chair close, as one eager to lead her across the border.

"No," she went on--speaking more to herself than to him, "I am older, now--ages older, and trying to grow wise, and to see things as they are. Riding, driving and golfing are not all of life. Life is serious--a sort of battle, in which one must either lead or follow or merely look on. You were not made to follow, and I could not bear to have you look on. I always thought of you as a leader. During those days at Lenox you seemed to me a sort of king, or something like that, at play. You see I was just a schoolgirl with ideals, keeping the shield of Launcelot bright. I had idealized him so long--the one I should meet some day. It was all very foolish, but I had pictured him as a paladin in armor, who would have diversions, too, but who would lay them aside to go forth and redress wrong. You see what a silly child I was, and how necessary it was for me to change when I found that I had been dreaming, that the one I had met never expected to conquer or do battle for a cause--that the diversions were the end and sum of his desire, with maybe a little love-making as a part of it all."

"A little--" Her companion started to enter protest, but did not continue. The girl was staring into the fire as she spoke and seemed only to half remember his existence. For the most part he had known her as one full of the very joy of living, given to seeing life from its cheerful, often from its humorous, side. Yet he knew her to be volatile, a creature of moods. This one, which he had learned to know but lately, would pass. He watched her, a little troubled yet fascinated by it all, his whole being stirred by the charm of her presence.

"One so strong--so qualified--should lead," she continued slowly, "not merely look on. Oh, if I were a man I should lead--I should ride to victory! I should be a--a--I do not know what," she concluded helplessly, "but I should ride to victory."

He restrained any impulse he may have had to smile, and presently said, rather quietly:

"I suppose there are avenues of conquest to-day, as there were when the world was young. But I am afraid they are so crowded with the rank and file that paladins ride few and far between. You know," he added, more lightly, "knight-errantry has gone out of fashion, and armor would be a clumsy thing to wear--crossing Broadway, for instance."

She laughed happily--her sense of humor was never very deeply buried.

"I know," she nodded, "we do not meet many Galahads these days, and most of the armor is make-believe, yet I am sure there are knights whom we do not recognize, with armor which we do not see."

The young man sat up a bit straighter in his chair and assumed a more matter-of-fact tone.

"Suppose we put aside allegory," he said, "and discuss just how you think a man--myself, for instance--could set the world afire--make it wiser and better, I mean."

The embers were dying down, and she looked into them a little longer before replying. Then, presently:

"Oh, if I were only a man!" she repeated. "There is so much--so many things--for a man to do. Discovery, science, feats of engineering, the professions, the arts, philanthropy--oh, everything! And for us, so little!"

A look of amusement grew about the young man's mouth. He had seen much more of the world than she; was much older in a manner not reckoned by years.

"We do not monopolize it all, you know. Quite a few women are engaged in the professions and philanthropy; many in the arts."

"The arts, yes, but I am without talent. I play because I have been taught, and because I have practiced--oh, so hard!

But God never intended that the world should hear me. I love painting and literature, and all those things. But I cannot create them. I can only look on. I have thought of the professions--I have thought a great deal about medicine and the law. But I am afraid those would not do, either. I cannot understand law papers, even the very simple ones Father has tried to explain to me. And I am not careful enough with medicines--I almost poisoned poor Mamma last week with something that looked like her headache drops and turned out to be a kind of preparation for bruises. Besides, somehow I never can quite see myself as a lawyer in court, or going about as a doctor. Lawyers always have to go to court, don't they? I am afraid I should be so confused, and maybe be arrested. They arrest lawyers don't they, sometimes?"

"They should," admitted the young man, "more often than they do. I don't believe you ought to take the risk, at any rate. I somehow can't think of you either as a lawyer or a doctor. Those things don't seem to fit you."

"That's just it. Nothing fits me. Oh, I am not even as much as I seem to be, yet can be nothing else!" she burst out rather incoherently, then somewhat hastily added: "There is philanthropy, of course. I could do good, I suppose, and Father would furnish the money. But I could never undertake things. I should just have to follow, and contribute. Some one would always have to lead. Some one who could go among people and comprehend their needs, and know how to go to work to supply them. I should do the wrong thing and make trouble----"

"And maybe get arrested----"

They laughed together. They were little more than children, after all.

"I know there *are* women who lead in such things," she went on. "They come here quite often, and Father gives them a good deal. But they always seem so self-possessed and capable. I stand in awe of them, and I always wonder how they came to be made so wise and brave, and why most of us are so different. I always wonder."

The young man regarded her very tenderly.

"I am glad you are different," he said earnestly. "My mother is a little like that, and of course I think the world of her. Still, I am glad you are different."

He leaned over and lifted an end of log with the tongs. A bright blaze sprang up, and for a while they watched it without speaking. It seemed to Frank Weatherby that nothing in the world was so worth while as to be there near her--to watch her there in the firelight that lingered a little to bring out the rich coloring of her rare young face, then flickered by to glint among the deep frames along the wall, to lose itself at last amid the heavy hangings. He was careful not to renew their discussion, and hoped she had forgotten it. There had been no talk of these matters during their earlier acquaintance, when she had but just returned with her parents from a long sojourn abroad. That had been at Lenox, where they had filled the autumn season with happy recreation, and a love-making which he had begun half in jest and then, all at once, found that for him it meant more than anything else in the world. Not that anything had hitherto meant a great deal. He had been an only boy, with a fond mother, and there was a great deal of money between them. It had somehow never been a part of his education that those who did not need to strive should do so. His mother was a woman of ideas, but this had not been one of them. Perhaps as a boy he had dreamed his dreams, but somehow there had never seemed a reason for making them reality. The idea of mental and spiritual progress, of being a benefactor of mankind was well enough, but it was somehow an abstract thing--something apart from him--at least, from the day of youth and love.

CHAPTER II

OUT IN THE BLOWY WET WEATHER

The room lightened a little and Constance rose and walked to the window.

"It isn't raining so hard, any more," she said. "I think I shall go for a walk in the Park."

The young man by the fire looked a little dismayed. The soft chair and the luxurious room were so much more comfortable than the Park on such a day as this.

"Don't you think we'd better put it off?" he asked, walking over beside her. "It's still raining a good deal, and it's quite windy."

"I said that *I* was going for a walk in the Park," the girl reiterated. "I shall run, too. When I was a child I always loved to run through a storm. It seemed like flying. You can stay here by the fire and keep nice and cozy. Mamma will be glad to come in and talk to you. She will not urge you to do and be things. She thinks you well enough as you are. She says you have repose, and that you rest her--she means, of course, after a session with me."

"I have the greatest regard for your mother--I might even say sympathy. Indeed, when I consider the serene yet sterling qualities of both your parents, I find myself speculating on the origin of your own--eh--rather unusual and, I hasten to add, wholly charming personality."

She smiled, but he thought a little sadly.

"I know," she said, "I am a trial, and, oh, I want to be such a comfort to them!" Then she added, somewhat irrelevantly, "But Father made his fight, too. It was in trade, of course, but it was a splendid battle, and he won. He was a poor boy, you know, and the struggle was bitter. You should stay and ask him to tell you about it. He will be home presently."

He adopted her serious tone.

"I think myself I should stay and have an important talk with your father," he said. "I have been getting up courage to speak for some time."

She affected not to hear, and presently they were out in the wild weather, protected by waterproofs and one huge umbrella, beating their way toward the Fifty-ninth Street entrance to Central Park. Not many people were there, and, once within, they made their way by side paths, running and battling with the wind, laughing and shouting like children, until at last they dropped down on a wet bench to recover breath.

"Oh," she panted, "that was fine! How I should like to be in the mountains such weather as this. I dream of being there almost every night. I can hardly wait till we go."

Her companion assented rather doubtfully.

"I have been in the mountains in March," he said. "It was pretty nasty. I suppose you have spent summers there. I believe you went to the Pyrenees."

"But I know the mountains in March, too--in every season, and I love them in all weathers. I love the storms, when the snow and sleet and wind come driving down, and the trees crack, and the roads are blocked, and the windows are covered with ice; when there's a big drift at the door that you must climb over, and that stays there almost till the flowers bloom. And when the winter is breaking, and the great rains come, and the wind,--oh, it's no such little wind as this, but wind that tears up big trees and throws them about for fun, and the limbs fly, and it's dangerous to go out unless you look everywhere, and in the night something strikes the roof, and you wake up and lie there and wonder if the house itself won't be carried away soon, perhaps to the ocean, and turn into a ship that will sail until it reaches a country where the sun shines and there are palm trees, and men who wear turbans, and where there are marble houses with gold on them. And in that country where the little house might land, a lot of people come down to the shore and they kneel down and say, 'The sea has brought a princess to rule over us.' Then they put a crown on her head and lead her to one of the marble and gold houses, so she could rule the country and live happy ever after."

As the girl ran on, her companion sat motionless, listening--meanwhile steadying their big umbrella to keep their retreat cozy. When she paused, he said:

"I did not know that you knew the hills in winter. You have seen and felt much more than I. And," he added reflectively, "I should not think, with such fancy as yours, that you need want for a vocation; you should write."

She shook her head rather gravely. "It is not fancy," she said, "at least not imagination. It is only reading. Every child with a fairy-book for companionship, and nature, rides on the wind or follows subterranean passages to a regal inheritance. Such things mean nothing afterward. I shall never write."

They made their way to the Art Museum to wander for a little through the galleries. In the Egyptian room they lingered by those glass cases where men and women who died four thousand years ago lie embalmed in countless wrappings and cryptographic cartonnage--exhibits, now, for the curious eye, waiting whatever further change the upheavals of nations or the progress of an alien race may bring to pass.

They spoke in subdued voice as they regarded one slender covering which enclosed "A Lady of the House of Artun"--trying to rebuild in fancy her life and surroundings of that long ago time. Then they passed to the array of fabrics--bits of old draperies and clothing, even dolls' garments--that had found the light after forty centuries, and they paused a little at the cases of curious lamps and ornaments and symbols of a vanished people.

"Oh, I should like to explore," she murmured, as she looked at them. "I should like to lead an expedition to uncover ancient cities, somewhere in Egypt, or India, or Yucatan. I should like to find things right where they were left by the people who last saw them--not here, all arranged and classified, with numbers pasted on them. If I were a man, I should be an explorer, or maybe a discoverer of new lands--places where no one had ever been before." She turned to him eagerly, "Why don't you become an explorer, and find old cities or--or the North Pole, or something?"

Mr. Weatherby, who was studying a fine scarab, nodded.

"I have thought of it, I believe. I think the idea appealed to me once. But, don't you see, it takes a kind of genius for those things. Discoverers are born, I imagine, as well as poets. Besides"--he lowered his voice to a pitch that was meant for tenderness--"at the North Pole I should be so far from you--unless," he added, reflectively, "we went there on our wedding journey."

"Which we are as likely to do as to go anywhere," she said, rather crossly. They passed through the corridor of statuary and up the stairway to wander among the paintings of masters old and young. By a wall where the works of Van Dyck, Rembrandt and Velasquez hung, she turned on him reproachfully.

"These men have left something behind them," she commented--"something which the world will preserve and honor. What will you leave behind you?"

"I fear it won't be a picture," he said humbly. "I can't imagine one of my paintings being hung here or any place else. They might hang the painter, of course, though not just here, I fancy."

In another room they lingered before a painting of a boy and a girl driving home the cows--Israel's "Bashful Suitor." The girl contemplated it through half-closed lids.

"You did not look like that," she said. "You were a self-possessed big boy, with smart clothes, and an air of ownership that comes of having a lot of money. You were a good-hearted boy, rather impulsive, I should think, but careless and spoiled. Had Israel chosen you it would have been the girl who was timid, not you."

He laughed easily.

"Now, how can you possibly know what I looked like as a boy?" he demanded. "Perhaps I was just such a slim, diffident little chap as that one. Time works miracles, you know."

"But even time has its limitations. I know perfectly well how you looked at that boy's age. Sometimes I see boys pass along in front of the house, and I say: 'There, he was just like that!'"

Frank felt his heart grow warm. It seemed to him that her confession showed a depth of interest not acknowledged before.

"I'll try to make amends, Constance," he said, "by being a little nearer what you would like to have me now," and could not help adding, "only you'll have to decide just what particular thing you want me to be, and please don't have the North Pole in it."

Out in the blowy wet weather again, by avenues and by-ways, they raced through the Park, climbing up to look over at the wind-driven water of the old reservoir, clambering down a great wet boulder on the other side--the girl as agile and sure of foot as a boy. Then they pushed toward Eighth Avenue, missed the entrance and wandered about in a labyrinth of bridle-paths and footways, suddenly found themselves back at the big boulder again, scrambled up it warm and flushed with the exertion, and dropped down for a moment to breathe and to get their bearings.

"I always did get lost in this place," he said. "I have never been able to cross the Park and be sure just where I was coming out." Then they laughed together happily, glad to be lost--glad it was raining and blowing--glad, as children are always glad, to be alive and together.

They were more successful, this time, and presently took an Eighth Avenue car, going down--not because they especially wanted to go down, but because at that time in the afternoon the down cars were emptier. They had no plans as to where they were going, it being their habit on such excursions to go without plans and to come when the spirit moved.

They transferred at the Columbus statue, and she stood looking up at it as they waited for a car.

"That is my kind of a discoverer," she said; "one who sails out to find a new world."

"Yes," he agreed, "and the very next time there is a new world to be discovered I am going to do it."

The lights were already coming out along Broadway, this gloomy wet evening, and the homing throng on the pavements were sheltered by a gleaming, tossing tide of umbrellas. Frank and Constance got out at Madison Square, at the Worth monument, and looked down toward the "Flat-iron"--a pillar of light, looming into the mist.

"Everywhere are achievements," said the girl. "That may not be a thing of beauty, but it is a great piece of engineering. They have nothing like those buildings abroad--at least I have not seen them. Oh, this is a wonderful country, and it is those splendid engineers who have helped to make it so. I know of one young man who is going to be an engineer. He was just a poor boy--so poor--and has worked his way. He would never take help from anybody. I shall see him this summer, when we go to the mountains. He is to be not far away. Oh, you don't know how proud I shall be of him, and how I want to see him and tell him so. Wouldn't you be proud of a boy like that, a--a son or--a brother, for instance?"

She looked up at him expectantly--a dash of rain glistening on her cheek and in the little tangle of hair about her temples. She seemed a bit disappointed that he was not more responsive.

"Wouldn't you honor him?" she demanded, "and love him, too--a boy who had made his way alone?"

"Oh, why, y-yes, of course--only, you know, I hope he won't spend his life building these things"--indicating with his head the great building which they were now passing, the gusts of wind tossing them and making it impossible to keep the umbrella open.

"Oh, but he's to build railroads and great bridges--not houses at all."

"Um--well, that's better. By the way, I believe you go to the Adirondacks this summer."

"Yes, Father has a cottage--he calls it a camp--there. That is, he had. He says he supposes it's a wreck by this time. He hasn't seen it, you know, for years."

"I suppose there is no law against my going to the Adirondacks, too, is there?" he asked, rather meekly. "You know, I should like to see that young man of yours. Maybe I might get some idea of what I ought to be like to make you proud of me. I haven't been there since I was a boy, but I remember I liked it then. No doubt I'd like it this year if--if that young man is there. I suppose I could find a place to stay not more than twenty miles or so from your camp, so you could send word, you know, any time you were getting proud of me."

She laughed--he thought a little nervously.

"Why, yes," she admitted, "there's a sort of hotel or lodge or something, not far away. I know that from Father. He said we might have to stay there awhile until our camp is ready. Oh, but this talk of the mountains makes me want to be there. I wish I were starting to-night!"

It seemed a curious place to discuss a summer's vacation--under a big wind-tossed umbrella, along Broadway on a March evening. Perhaps the incongruity of it became more manifest with the girl's last remark, for her companion chuckled.

"Pretty disagreeable up there to-night," he objected; "besides, I thought you liked all this a few minutes ago."

"Yes, oh, yes; I do, of course! It's all so big and bright and wonderful, though after all there is nothing like the woods, and the wind and rain in the hills."

What a strange creature she was, he thought. The world was so big and new to her, she was confused and disturbed by the wonder of it and its possibilities. She longed to have a part in it all. She would settle down presently and see things as they were--not as she thought they were. He was not altogether happy over the thought of the young man

who had made his way and was to be a civil engineer. He had not heard of this friend before. Doubtless it was some one she had known in childhood. He was willing that Constance should be proud of him; that was right and proper, but he hoped she would not be too proud or too personal in her interest. Especially if the young man was handsome. She was so likely to be impulsive, even extreme, where her sympathies were concerned. It was so difficult to know what she would do next.

Constance, meanwhile, had been doing some thinking and observing on her own account. Now she suddenly burst out: "Did you notice the headlines on the news-stand we just passed? The bill that the President has just vetoed? I don't know just what the bill is, but Father is so against it. He'll think the President is fine for vetoing it!" A moment later she burst out eagerly, "Oh, why don't you go in for politics and do something great like that? A politician has so many opportunities. I forgot all about politics."

He laughed outright.

"Try to forget it again," he urged. "Politicians have opportunities, as you say; but some of the men who have improved what seemed the best ones have gone to jail."

"But others had to send them there. You could be one of the noble ones!"

"Yes, of course, but you see I've just made up my mind to work my way through a school of technology and become a civil engineer, so you'll be proud of me--that is, after I've uncovered a few buried cities and found the North Pole. I couldn't do those things so well if I went into political reform." Then they laughed again, inconsequently, and so light-hearted she seemed that Frank wondered if her more serious moods were not for the most part make-believe, to tease him.

At Union Square they crossed by Seventeenth Street back to Fifth Avenue. When they had tacked their way northward for a dozen or more blocks, the cheer of an elaborate dining-room streamed out on the wet pavement.

"It's a good while till dinner," Frank observed. "If your stern parents would not mind, I should suggest that we go in there and have, let me see--something hot and not too filling--I think an omelette soufflé would be rather near it, don't you?"

"Wonderful!" she agreed, "and, do you know, Father said the other day--of course, he's a gentle soul and too confiding--but I heard him say that you were one person he was perfectly willing I should be with, anywhere. I don't see why, unless it is that you know the city so well."

"Mr. Deane's judgment is not to be lightly questioned," avowed the young man, as they turned in the direction of the lights.

"Besides," she supplemented, "I'm so famished. I should never be able to wait for dinner. I can smell that omelette now. And may I have pie--pumpkin pie--just one piece? You know we never had pie abroad, and my whole childhood was measured by pumpkin pies. May I have just a small piece?"

Half an hour later, when they came out and again made their way toward the Deane mansion, the wind had died and the rain had become a mild drizzle. As they neared the entrance of her home they noticed a crouching figure on the lower step. The light from across the street showed that it was a woman, dressed in shabby black, wearing a drabbed hat, decorated with a few miserable flowers. She hardly noticed them, and her face was heavy and expressionless. The girl shrank away and was reluctant to enter.

"It's all right," he whispered to her. "That is the Island type. She wants nothing but money. It's a chance for philanthropy of a very simple kind." He thrust a bill into the poor creature's hand. The girl's eye caught a glimpse of its denomination.

"Oh," she protested, "you should not give like that. I've heard it does much more harm than good."

"I know," he assented. "My mother says so. But I've never heard that she or anybody else has discovered a way really to help these people."

They stood watching the woman, who had muttered something doubtless intended for thanks and was tottering slowly down the street. The girl held fast to her companion's arm, and it seemed to him that she drew a shade closer as they mounted the steps.

"I suppose it's so, about doing them harm," she said, "and I don't think you will ever lead as a philanthropist. Still, I'm glad you gave her the money. I think I shall let you stay to dinner for that."

CHAPTER III

THE DEEP WOODS OF ENCHANTMENT

That green which is known only to June lay upon the hills. Algonquin, Tahawus and Whiteface--but a little before grim with the burden of endless years--rousing from their long, white sleep, had put on, for the millionth time, perhaps, the fleeting mantle of youth. Spring lay on the mountain tops--summer filled the valleys, with all the gradations between.

To the young man who drove the hack which runs daily between Lake Placid and Spruce Lodge the scenery was not especially interesting. He had driven over the road regularly since earlier in the month, and had seen the hills acquire glory so gradually that this day to him was only as other days--a bit more pleasant than some, but hardly more exciting. With his companion--his one passenger--it was a different matter. Mr. Frank Weatherby had occupied a New York sleeper the night before, awaking only at daybreak to find the train puffing heavily up a long Adirondack grade--to look out on a wet tangle of spruce, and fir, and hardwood, and vine, mingled with great bowlders and fallen logs, and everywhere the emerald moss, set a gleam where the sunrise filtered through. With his curtain raised a little, he had watched it from the window of his berth, and the realization had grown upon him that nowhere else in the world was there such a wood, though he wondered if the marvel and enchantment of it might not lie in the fact that somewhere in its green depths he would find Constance Deane.

He had dressed hurriedly and through the remainder of the distance had occupied the rear platform, drinking in the glory of it all--the brisk, life-giving air--the mystery and splendor of the forest. He had been here once, ten years ago, as a boy, but then he had been chiefly concerned with the new rod he had brought and the days of sport ahead. He had seen many forests since then, and the wonder of this one spoke to him now in a language not comprehended in those far-off days.

During the drive across the open farm country which lies between Lake Placid and Spruce Lodge he had confided certain of his impressions to his companion--a pale-haired theological student, who as driver of the Lodge hack was combining a measure of profit with a summer's vacation. The enthusiasm of his passenger made the quiet youth responsive, even communicative, when his first brief diffidence had worn away. He had been awarded this employment because of a previous knowledge acquired on his father's farm in Pennsylvania. A number of his fellow students were serving as waiters in the Lake Placid hotels. When pressed, he owned that his inclination for the pulpit had not been in the nature of a definite call. He had considered newspaper work and the law. A maiden aunt had entered into his problem. She had been willing to supply certain funds which had influenced the clerical decision. Perhaps it was just as well. Having thus established his identity, he proceeded to indicate landmarks of special interest, pointing out Whiteface, Colden and Elephant's Back--also Tahawus and Algonquin--calling the last two Marcy and McIntyre, as is the custom to-day. The snow had been on the peaks, he said, almost until he came. It must have looked curious, he thought, when the valleys were already green. Then they drove along in silence for a distance--the passive youth lightly flicking the horses to discourage a number of black flies that had charged from a clump of alder. Frank, supremely content in the glory of his surroundings and the prospect of being with Constance in this fair retreat, did not find need for many words. The student likewise seemed inclined to reflect. His passenger was first to rouse himself.

"Many people at the Lodge yet?" he asked.

"N-no--mostly transients. They climb Marcy and McIntyre from here. It's the best place to start from."

"I see. I climbed Whiteface myself ten years ago. We had a guide--an old chap named Lawless. My mother and I were staying at Saranac and she let me go with a party from there. I thought it great sport then, and made up my mind to be a guide when I grew up. I don't think I'd like it so well now."

"They have the best guides at the Lodge," commented the driver. "The head guide there is the best in the mountains. This is his first year at the Lodge. He was with the Adirondack Club before."

"I suppose it couldn't be my old hero, Lawless?"

"No; this is a young man. I don't just remember his last name, but most people call him Robin."

"Um, not Robin Hood, I hope."

The theological student shook his head. The story of the Sherwood bandit had not been a part of his education.

"It doesn't sound like that," he said. "It's something like Forney, or Farham. He's a student, too--a civil engineer--but he was raised in these hills and has been guiding since he was a boy. He's done it every summer to pay his way through

college. Next year he graduates, and they say he's the best in the school. Of course, guides get big pay--as much as three dollars a day, some of them--besides their board."

The last detail did not interest Mr. Weatherby. He was suddenly recalling a wet, blowy March evening on Broadway--himself under a big umbrella with Constance Deane. She was speaking, and he could recall her words quite plainly: "I know one young man who is going to be an engineer. He was a poor boy--so poor--and has worked his way. I shall see him this summer. You don't know how proud I shall be of him."

To Frank the glory of the hills faded a little, and the progress of the team seemed unduly slow.

"Suppose we move up a bit," he suggested to the gentle youth with the reins, and the horses were presently splashing through a shallow pool left by recent showers.

"He's a very strong fellow," the informant continued, "and handsome. He's going to marry the daughter of the man who owns the Lodge when he gets started as an engineer. She's a pretty girl, and smart. Her mother's dead, and she's her father's housekeeper. She teaches school sometimes, too. They'll make a fine match."

The glory of the hills renewed itself, and though the horses had dropped once more into a lazy jog, Frank did not suggest urging them.

"I believe there is a young lady guest at the Lodge," he ventured a little later--a wholly unnecessary remark--he having received a letter from Constance on her arrival there, with her parents, less than a week before.

The youth nodded.

"Two," he said. "One I brought over yesterday--from Utica, I think she was--and another last week, from New York, with her folks. Their names are Deane, and they own a camp up here. They're staying at the Lodge till it's ready."

"I see; and did the last young lady--the family, I mean--seem to know any one at the Lodge?"

But the youth could not say. He had taken them over with their bags and trunks and had not noticed farther, only that once or twice since, when he had arrived with the mail, the young lady had come in from the woods with a book and a basket of mushrooms, most of which he thought to be toadstools, and poisonous. Once--maybe both times--Robin had been with her--probably engaged as a guide. Robin would be apt to know about mushrooms.

Frank assented a little dubiously.

"I shouldn't wonder if we'd better be moving along," he suggested. "We might be late with that mail."

There followed another period of silence and increased speed. As they neared the North Elba post-office--a farmhouse with a flower-garden in front of it--the youth pointed backward to a hill with a flag-staff on it.

"That is John Brown's grave," he said.

His companion looked and nodded.

"I remember. My mother and I made a pilgrimage to it. Poor old John. This is still a stage road, isn't it?"

"Yes, but we leave it at North Elba. It turns off there for Keene."

At the fork of the road Frank followed the stage road with his eye, recalling his mountain summer of ten years before.

"I know, now," he reflected aloud. "This road goes to Keene, and on to Elizabeth and Westport. I went over it in the fall. I remember the mountains being all colors, with tips of snow on them." Suddenly he brought his hand down on his knee. "It's just come to me," he said. "Somewhere between here and Keene there was a little girl who had berries to sell, and I ran back up a long hill and gave her my lucky piece for them. I told her to keep it for me till I came back. That was ten years ago. I never went back. I wonder if she has it still?"

The student of theology shook his head. It did not seem likely. Then he suggested that, of course, she would be a good deal older now--an idea which did not seem to have occurred to Mr. Weatherby.

"Sure enough," he agreed, "and maybe not there. I suppose you don't know anybody over that way."

The driver did not. During the few weeks since his arrival he had acquired only such knowledge as had to do with his direct line of travel.

They left North Elba behind, and crossing another open stretch of country, headed straight for the mountains. They passed a red farmhouse, and brooks in which Frank thought there must be trout. Then by an avenue of spring leafage,

shot with sunlight and sweet with the smell of spruce and deep leaf mold, they entered the great forest where, a mile or so beyond, lay the Lodge.

Frank's heart began to quicken, though not wholly as the result of eagerness. He had not written Constance that he was coming so soon. Indeed, in her letter she had suggested in a manner which might have been construed as a command that *if* he intended to *come to the Adirondacks at all* this summer he should wait until they were settled in their camp. But Frank had discovered that New York in June was not the attractive place he had considered it in former years. Also that the thought of the Adirondacks, even the very word itself, had acquired a certain charm. To desire and to do were not likely to be very widely separated with a young man of his means and training, and he had left for Lake Placid that night.

Yet now that he had brought surprise to the very threshold, as it were, he began to hesitate. Perhaps, after all, Constance might not be overjoyed or even mildly pleased at his coming. She had seemed a bit distant before her departure, and he knew how hard it was to count on her at times.

"You can see the Lodge from that bend," said his companion, presently, pointing with his whip.

Then almost immediately they had reached the turn, and the Lodge--a great, double-story cabin of spruce logs, with wide verandas--showed through the trees. But between the hack and the Lodge were two figures--a tall young man in outing dress, carrying a basket, and a tall young woman in a walking skirt, carrying a book. They were quite close together, moving toward the Lodge. They seemed to be talking earnestly, and did not at first notice the sound of wheels.

"That's them now," whispered the young man, forgetting for the moment his scholastic training. "That's Robin and Miss Deane, with the book and the basket of toadstools."

The couple ahead stopped just then and turned. Frank prepared himself for the worst.

But Mr. Weatherby would seem to have been unduly alarmed. As he stepped from the vehicle Constance came forward with extended hand.

"You are good to surprise us," she was saying, and then, a moment later, "Mr. Weatherby, this is Mr. Robin Farnham--a friend of my childhood. I think I have mentioned him to you."

Whatever momentary hostility Frank Weatherby may have cherished for Robin Farnham vanished as the two clasped hands. Frank found himself looking into a countenance at once manly, intellectual and handsome--the sort of a face that men, and women, too, trust on sight. And then for some reason there flashed again across his mind a vivid picture of Constance as she had looked up at him that wet night under the umbrella, the raindrops glistening on her cheek and in the blowy tangle about her temples. He held Robin's firm hand for a moment in his rather soft palm. There was a sort of magnetic stimulus in that muscular grip and hardened flesh. It was so evidently the hand of achievement, Frank was loath to let it go.

"You are in some way familiar to me," he said then. "I may have seen you when I was up this way ten years ago. I suppose you do not recall anything of the kind?"

A touch of color showed through the brown of Robin's cheek.

"No," he said; "I was a boy of eleven, then, probably in the field. I don't think you saw me. Those were the days when I knew Miss Deane. I used to carry baskets of green corn over to Mr. Deane's camp. If you had been up this way during the past five or six years I might have been your guide. Winters I have attended school."

They were walking slowly as they talked, following the hack toward the Lodge. Constance took up the tale at this point, her cheeks also flushing a little as she spoke.

"He had to work very hard," she said. "He had to raise the corn and then carry it every day--miles and miles. Then he used to make toy boats and sail them for me in the brook, and a playhouse, and whatever I wanted. Of course, I did not consider that I was taking his time, or how hard it all was for him."

"Miss Deane has given up little boats and playhouses for the science of mycology," Robin put in, rather nervously, as one anxious to change the subject.

Frank glanced at the volume he had appropriated--a treatise on certain toadstools, edible and otherwise.

"I have heard already of your new employment, or, at least, diversion," he said. "The young man who brought me over told me that a young lady had been bringing baskets of suspicious fungi to the Lodge. From what he said I judged that

he considered it a dangerous occupation."

"That was Mr. Meelie," laughed Constance. "I have been wondering why Mr. Meelie avoided me. I can see now that he was afraid I would poison him. You must meet Miss Carroway, too," she ran on. "I mean you *will* meet her. She is a very estimable lady from Connecticut who has a nephew in the electric works at Haverford; also the asthma, which she is up here to get rid of. She is at the Lodge for the summer, and is already the general minister of affairs at large and in particular. Among other things, she warns me daily that if I persist in eating some of the specimens I bring home, I shall presently die with great violence and suddenness. She is convinced that there is just one kind of mushroom, and that it doesn't grow in the woods. She has no faith in books. Her chief talent lies in promoting harmless evening entertainments. You will have to take part in them."

Frank had opened the book and had been studying some of the colored plates while Constance talked.

"I don't know that I blame your friends," he said, half seriously. "Some of these look pretty dangerous to the casual observer."

"But I've been studying that book for weeks," protested Constance, "long before we came here. By and by I'm going to join the Mycological Society and try to be one of its useful members."

"I suppose you have to eat most of these before you are eligible?" commented Frank, still fascinated by the bright pictures.

"Not at all. Some of them are quite deadly, but one ought to be able to distinguish most of the commoner species, and be willing to trust his knowledge."

"To back one's judgment with one's life, as it were. Well, that's one sort of bravery, no doubt. Tell me, please, how many of these gayly spotted ones you have eaten and still live to tell the tale?"



CHAPTER IV

A BRIEF LECTURE AND SOME INTRODUCTIONS

The outside of Spruce Lodge suggested to Frank the Anglo-Saxon castle of five or six hundred years ago, though it was probably better constructed than most of the castles of that early day. It was really an immense affair, and there were certain turrets and a tower which carried out the feudal idea. Its builder, John Morrison, had been a faithful reader of Scott, and the architecture of the Lodge had in some manner been an expression of his romantic inclination. Frank thought, however, that the feudal Saxon might not have had the long veranda facing the little jewel of a lake, where were mirrored the mountains that hemmed it in. With Constance he sat on the comfortable steps, looking through the tall spruces at the water or at mountain peaks that seemed so near the blue that one might step from them into the cloudland of an undiscovered country.

No one was about for the moment, the guests having collected in the office for the distribution of the daily mail. Robin had gone, too, striding away toward a smaller cabin where the guides kept their paraphernalia. Frank said:

"You don't know how glad I am to be here with you in this wonderful place, Conny. I have never seen anything so splendid as this forest, and I was simply desperate in town as soon as you were gone."

She had decided not to let him call her that again, but concluded to overlook this offense. She began arranging the contents of her basket on the step beside her--a gay assortment of toadstools gathered during her morning walk.

"You see what *I* have been doing," she said. "I don't suppose it will interest you in the least, but to me it is a fascinating study. Perhaps if I pursue it I may contribute something to the world's knowledge and to its food supply."

Frank regarded the variegated array with some solemnity.

"I hope, Conny, you don't mean to eat any of those," he said.

"Probably not; but see how beautiful they are."

They were indeed beautiful, for no spot is more rich in fungi of varied hues than the Adirondack woods. There were specimens ranging from pale to white, from cream to lemon yellow--pink that blended into shades of red and scarlet--gray that deepened to blue and even purple--numerous shades of buff and brown, and some of the mottled coloring. Some were large, almost gigantic; some tiny ones were like bits of ivory or coral. Frank evinced artistic enthusiasm, but a certain gastronomic reserve.

"Wonderful!" he said. "I did not suppose there were such mushrooms in the world--so beautiful. I know now what the line means which says, 'How beautiful is death.'"

There was a little commotion just then at the doorway of the Lodge, and a group of guests--some with letters, others with looks of resignation or disappointment--appeared on the veranda. From among them, Mrs. Deane, a rather frail, nervous woman, hurried toward Mr. Weatherby with evident pleasure. She had been expecting him, she declared, though Constance had insisted that he would think twice before he started once for that forest isolation. They would be in their own quarters in a few days, and it would be just a pleasant walk over there. There were no hard hills to climb. Mr. Deane walked over twice a day. He was there now, overseeing repairs. The workmen were very difficult.

"But there are *some* hills, Mamma," interposed Constance--"little ones. Perhaps Mr. Weatherby won't care to climb at all. He has already declared against my mushrooms. He said something just now about their fatal beauty--I believe that was it. He's like all the rest of you--opposed to the cause of science."

Mrs. Deane regarded the young man appealingly.

"Try to reason with her," she said nervously. "Perhaps she'll listen to you. She never will to me. I tell her every day that she will poison herself. She's always tasting of new kinds. She's persuaded me to eat some of those she had cooked, and I've sent to New York for every known antidote for mushroom poisoning. It's all right, perhaps, to study them and collect them, but when it comes to eating them to prove that the book is right about their being harmless, it seems like flying in the face of Providence. Besides, Constance is careless."

"I remember her telling me, as reason for not wanting to be a doctor, something about giving you the wrong medicine last winter."

"She did--some old liniment--I can taste the stuff yet. Constance, I do really think it's sinful for you to meddle with such uncertain subjects. Just think of eating any of those gaudy things. Constance! How can you?"

Constance patted the nervous little lady on the cheek.

"Be comforted," she said. "I am not going to eat these. I brought them for study. Most of them are harmless enough, I believe, but they are of a kind that even experts are not always sure of. They are called *Boletus*--almost the first we have found. I have laid them out here for display, just as the lecturer did last week at Lake Placid."

Miss Deane selected one of the brightly colored specimens.

"This," she began, with mock gravity and a professional air, "is a *Boletus*--known as *Boletus speciosus*--that is, I think it is." She opened the book and ran hastily over the leaves. "Yes, *speciosus*--either that or the *bicolor*--I can't be certain just which."

"There, Constance," interrupted Mrs. Deane, "you confess, yourself, you can't tell the difference. Now, how are we going to know when we are being poisoned? We ate some last night. Perhaps they were deadly poison--how can we know?"

"Be comforted, Mamma; we are still here."

"But perhaps the poison hasn't begun to work yet."

"It should have done so, according to the best authorities, some hours ago. I have been keeping watch of the time."

Mrs. Deane groaned.

"The best authorities? Oh, dear--oh, dear! Are there really any authorities in this awful business? And she has been watching the time for the poison to work--think of it!"

A little group of guests collected to hear the impromptu discussion. Frank, half reclining on the veranda steps, ran his eye over the assembly. For the most part they seemed genuine seekers after recreation and rest in this deep forest isolation. There were brain-workers among them--painters and writer folk. Some of the faces Frank thought he recognized. In the foreground was a rather large woman of the New England village type. She stood firmly on her feet, and had a wide, square face, about which the scanty gray locks were tightly curled. She moved closer now, and leaning forward, spoke with judicial deliberation.

"Them's tudstools!" she said--a decision evidently intended to be final. She adjusted her glasses a bit more carefully and bent closer to the gay collection. "The' ain't a single one of 'em a mushroom," she proceeded. "We used to have 'em grow in our paster, an' my little nephew, Charlie, that I brought up by hand and is now in the electric works down to Haverford, he used to gather 'em, an' they wa'n't like them at all."

A ripple of appreciation ran through the group, and others drew near to inspect the fungi. Constance felt it necessary to present Frank to those nearest, whom she knew. He arose to make acknowledgments. With the old lady, whose name, it appeared, was Miss Carroway, he shook hands. She regarded him searchingly.

"You're some taller than my Charlie," she said, and added, "I hope you don't intend to eat them tudstools, do you? Charlie wouldn't a et one o' them kind fer a thousand dollars. He knew the reel kind that grows in the medders an' pasters."

Constance took one of Miss Carroway's hands and gave it a friendly squeeze.

"You are spoiling my lecture," she laughed, "and aiding Mamma in discrediting me before the world. I will tell you the truth about mushrooms. Not the whole truth, but an important one. All toadstools are mushrooms and all mushrooms are toadstools. A few kinds are poisonous--not many. Most of them are good to eat. The only difficulty lies in telling the poison ones."

Miss Carroway appeared interested, but incredulous. Constance continued.

"The sort your Charlie used to gather was the *Agaricus Campestris*, or meadow mushroom--one of the commonest and best. It has gills underneath--not pores, like this one. The gills are like little leaves and hold the spores, or seed as we might call it. The pores of this *Boletus* do the same thing. You see they are bright yellow, while the top is purple-red. The stem is yellow, too. Now, watch!"

She broke the top of the *Boletus* in two parts--the audience pressing closer to see. The flesh within was lemon color, but almost instantly, with exposure to the air, began to change, and was presently a dark blue. Murmurs of wonder ran through the group. They had not seen this marvel before.

"Bravo!" murmured Frank. "You are beginning to score."

"Many of the *Boleti* do that," Constance resumed. "Some of them are very bad tasting, even when harmless. Some are poisonous. One of them, the *Satanus*, is regarded as deadly. I don't think this is one of them, but I shall not insist on Miss Carroway and the rest of you eating it."

Miss Carroway sent a startled glance at the lecturer and sweepingly included the assembled group.

"Eat it!" she exclaimed. "Eat that? Well, I sh'd think not! I wouldn't eat that, ner let any o' my folks eat it, fer no money!"

There was mirth among the audience. A young mountain climber in a moment of recklessness avowed his faith by declaring that upon Miss Deane's recommendation he would eat the whole assortment for two dollars.

"You'd better make it enough for funeral expenses," commented Miss Carroway; whereupon the discussion became general and hilarious, and the extempore lecture ceased.

"You see," Constance said to Frank, "I cannot claim serious attention, even upon so vital a subject as the food supply."

"But you certainly entertained them, and I, for one, have a growing respect for your knowledge." Then, rising, he added, "Speaking of food reminds me that you probably have some sort of midday refreshment here, and that I would better arrange for accommodations and make myself presentable. By the way, Constance," lowering his voice, "I saw a striking-looking girl on the veranda as we were approaching the house a while ago. I don't think you noticed her, but she had black eyes and a face like an Indian princess. She came out for a moment again, while you were talking. I thought she rather looked as if she belonged here, but she couldn't have been a servant."

They had taken a little turn down the long veranda, and Constance waited until they were well out of earshot before she said:

"You are perfectly right--she could not. She is the daughter of Mr. Morrison, who owns the Lodge--Edith Morrison--her father's housekeeper. I shall present you at the first opportunity so that you may lose no time falling in love with her. It will do you no good, though, for she is going to marry Robin Farnham. The wedding will not take place, of course, until Robin is making his way, but it is all settled, and they are both very happy."

"And quite properly," commented Frank with enthusiasm. "I heard something about it coming over. Mr. Meelie told me. He said they were a handsome pair. I fully agree with him." The young man smiled down at his companion and added: "Do you know, Conny, if that young man Farnham were unencumbered, I might expect you to do some falling in love, yourself."

The girl laughed, rather more than seemed necessary, Frank thought, and an added touch of color came into her cheeks.

"I did that years ago," she owned. "I think as much of Robin already as I ever could." Then, less lightly, "Besides, I should not like to be a rival of Edith Morrison's. She is a mountain girl, with rather primitive ideas. I do not mean that she is in any sense a savage or even uncultured. Far from it. Her father is a well-read man for his opportunities. They have a good many books here, and Edith has learned the most of them by heart. Last winter she taught school. But she has the mountains in her blood, and in that black hair and those eyes of hers. Only, of course, you do not quite know what that means. The mountains are fierce, untamed, elemental--like the sea. Such things get into one's blood and never entirely go away. Of course, you don't quite understand."

Regarding her curiously, Frank said:

"I remember your own hunger for the mountains, even in March. One might almost think you native to them, yourself."

"My love for them makes me understand," she said, after a pause; then in lighter tone added, "and I should not wish to get in Edith Morrison's way, especially where it related to Robin Farnham."

"By which same token I shall avoid getting in Robin Farnham's way," Frank said, as they entered the Lodge hall--a wide room, which in some measure carried out the Anglo-Saxon feudal idea. The floor was strewn with skins, the dark walls of unfinished wood were hung with antlers and other trophies of the chase. At the farther end was a deep stone fireplace, and above it the mounted head of a wild boar.

"You see," murmured Constance, "being brought up among these things and in the life that goes with them, one is apt to imbibe a good deal of nature and a number of elementary ideas, in spite of books."

A door by the wide fireplace opened just then, and a girl with jetty hair and glowing black eyes--slender and straight as a young birch--came toward them with step as lithe and as light as an Indian's. There was something of the type, too, in her features. Perhaps in a former generation a strain of the native American blood had mingled and blended with the

fairer flow of the new possessors. Constance Deane went forward to meet her.

"Miss Morrison," she said cordially, "this is Mr. Weatherby, of New York--a friend of ours."

The girl took Frank's extended hand heartily. Indeed, it seemed to the young man that there was rather more warmth in her welcome than the occasion warranted. Her face, too, conveyed a certain gratification in his arrival--almost as if here were an expected friend. He could not help wondering if this was her usual manner of greeting--perhaps due to the primitive life she had led--the untrammled freedom of the hills. But Constance, when she had passed them, said:

"I think you are marked for especial favor. Perhaps, after all, Robin is to have a rival."

Yet not all is to be read upon the surface, even when one is so unskilled at dissembling as Edith Morrison. We may see signs, but we may not always translate their meaning. Her love affair had been one of long standing, begun when Robin had guided his first party over Marcy to the Lodge, then just built--herself a girl of less than a dozen years, trying to take a dead mother's place. How many times since then he had passed to and fro, with tourists in summer and hunting parties in winter. Often during fierce storms he had stayed at the Lodge for a week or more--gathered with her father and herself before the great log fire in the hall while the winds howled and the drifts banked up against the windows, gleaning from the Lodge library a knowledge of such things as books can teach--history, science and the outside world. Then had come the time when he had decided on a profession, when, with his hoarded earnings and such employment as he could find in the college town, he had begun his course in a school of engineering. The mountain winters without Robin had been lonely ones, but with her father she had devoted them to study, that she might not be left behind, and had taken the little school at last on the North Elba road in order to feel something of the independence which Robin knew. In this, the last summer of his mountain life, he had come to her father as chief guide, mainly that they might have more opportunity to perfect their plans for the years ahead. All the trails carried their story, and though young men still fell in love with Edith Morrison and maids with Robin Farnham, no moment of distrust had ever entered in.

But there would appear to be some fate which does not fail to justify the old adage concerning true love. With the arrival of Constance Deane at the Lodge, it became clear to Edith that there had been some curious change in Robin. It was not that he became in the least degree indifferent--if anything he had been more devoted than before. He made it a point to be especially considerate and attentive when Miss Deane was present--and in this itself there lay a difference. No other guest had ever affected his bearing toward her, one way or the other. Edith remembered, of course, that he had known the Deanes, long before, when the Lodge was not yet built. Like Constance, she had only been a little girl then, her home somewhere beyond the mountains where she had never heard of Robin. Yet her intuition told her that the fact of a long ago acquaintance between a child of wealthy parents and the farm boy who had sold them produce and built toy boats for the little girl could not have caused this difference now. It was nothing that Constance had engaged Robin to guide her about the woods and carry her book or her basket of specimens. Edith had been accustomed to all that, but this time there was a different attitude between guide and guest--something so subtle that it could hardly be put into words, yet wholly evident to the eyes of love. Half unconsciously, at first, Edith revolved the problem in her mind, trying to locate the cause of her impression. When next she saw them alone together, she strove to convince herself that it was nothing, after all. The very effort had made her the more conscious of a reality.

Now had come the third time--to-day--the moment before Frank Weatherby's arrival. They were approaching the house and did not see her, while she had lost not a detail of the scene. Robin's very carriage--and hers--the turn of a face, the manner of a word she could not hear, all spoke of a certain tenderness, an understanding, a sort of ownership, it seemed--none the less evident because, perhaps, they themselves were all unconscious of it. The mountain girl remarked the beauty of that other one and mentally compared it with her own. This girl was taller than she, and fairer. Her face was richer in its coloring--she carried herself like one of the noble ladies in the books. Oh, they were a handsome pair--and not unlike, she thought. Not that they resembled, yet something there was common to both. It must be that noble carriage of which she had been always so proud in Robin. There swept across her mental vision a splendid and heart-sickening picture of Robin going out into the world with this rich, cultured girl, and not herself, his wife. The Deanes were not pretentious people, and there was wealth enough already. They might well be proud of Robin. Edith cherished no personal bitterness toward either Constance or Robin--not yet. Neither did she realize to what lengths her impetuous, untrained nature might carry her, if really aroused. Her only conscious conclusion thus far was that Robin and Constance, without knowing it themselves, were drifting into a dangerous current, and that this new arrival might become a guide back to safety. Between Frank Weatherby and herself there was the bond of a common cause.



CHAPTER V

A FLOWER ON A MOUNTAIN TOP

Prosperous days came to the Lodge. Hospitable John Morrison had found a calling suited to his gifts when he came across the mountain and built the big log tavern at the foot of McIntyre. With July, guests multiplied, and for those whose duty it was to provide entertainment the problem became definite and practical. Edith Morrison found her duties each day heavier and Robin Farnham was seldom unemployed. Usually he was away with his party by daybreak and did not return until after nightfall. Wherever might lie his inclination there would seem to be little time for love making in such a season.

By the middle of the month the Deanes had taken possession of their camp on the west branch of the Au Sable, having made it habitable with a consignment of summer furnishings from New York, and through the united efforts of some half dozen mountain carpenters, urged in their deliberate labors by the owner, Israel Deane, an energetic New Englander who had begun life a penniless orphan and had become chief stockholder in no less than three commercial enterprises on lower Broadway.

With the removal of the Deanes Mr. Weatherby also became less in evidence at the Lodge. The walk between the Lodge and the camp was to him a way of enchantment. He had been always a poet at heart, and this wonderful forest reawakened old dreams and hopes and fancies which he had put away for the immediate and gayer things of life, hardly more substantial and far less real. To him this was a veritable magic wood--the habitation of necromancy--where robber bands of old might lurk; where knights in silver armor might do battle; where huntsmen in gold and green might ride, the vanished court of some forgotten king.

And at the end of the way there was always the princess--a princess that lived and moved, and yet, he thought, was not wholly awake--at least not to the reality of his devotion to her, or, being so, did not care, save to test it at unseemly times and in unusual ways. Frank was quite sure that he loved Constance. He was certain that he had never cared so much for anything in the world before, and that if there was a real need he would make any sacrifice at her command. Only he did not quite comprehend why she was not willing to put by all stress and effort to become simply a part of this luminous summer time, when to him it was so good to rest by the brook and listen to her voice following some old tale, or to drift in a boat about the lake shore, finding a quaint interest in odd nooks and romantic corners or in dreaming idle dreams.

Indeed, the Lodge saw him little. Most days he did not appear between breakfast and dinner time. Often he did not return even for that function. Yet sometimes it happened that with Constance he brought up there about mail time, and on these occasions they were likely to remain for luncheon. Constance had by no means given up her nature study, and these visits usually resulted from the discovery of some especial delicacy of the woods which, out of consideration for her mother's nervous views on the subject, was brought to the Lodge for preparation. Edith Morrison generally superintended in person this particular cookery, Constance often assisting--or "hindering," as she called it--and in this way the two had become much better acquainted. Of late Edith had well-nigh banished--indeed, she had almost forgotten--her heart uneasiness of those earlier days. She had quite convinced herself that she had been mistaken, after all. Frank and Constance were together almost continually, while Robin, during the brief stay between each coming and going, had been just as in the old time--natural, kind and full of plans for the future. Only once had he referred more than casually to Constance Deane.

"I wish you two could see more of each other," he had said. "Some day we may be in New York, you and I, and I am sure she would be friendly to us."

And Edith, forgetting all her uneasiness, had replied:

"I wish we might"; and added, "of course, I do see her a good deal--one way and another. She comes quite often with Mr. Weatherby, but then I have the household and she has Mr. Weatherby. Do you think, Robin, she is going to marry him?"

Robin paused a little before replying.

"I don't know. I think he tries her a good deal. He is rich and rather spoiled, you know. Perhaps he has become indifferent to a good many of the things she thinks necessary."

Edith did not reflect at the moment that this knowledge on Robin's part implied confidential relations with one of the two principals. Robin's knowledge was so wide and varied it was never her habit to question its source.

"She would rather have him poor and ambitious, I suppose," she speculated thoughtfully. Then her hand crept over into his broad palm, and, looking up, she added: "Do you know, Robin, that for a few days--the first few days after she came--when you were with her a good deal--I almost imagined--of course, I was very foolish--but she is so beautiful and--superior, like you--and somehow you seemed different toward her, too--I imagined, just a little, that you might care for her, and I don't know--perhaps I was just the least bit jealous. I never was jealous before--maybe I wasn't then--but I felt a heavy, hopeless feeling coming around my heart. Is that jealousy?"

His strong arm was about her and her face hidden on his shoulder. Then she thought that he was laughing--she did not quite see why--but he held her close. She thought it must all be very absurd or he would not laugh. Presently he said:

"I do care for her a great deal, and always have--ever since she was a little girl. But I shall never care for her any more than I did then. Some day you will understand just why."

If this had not been altogether explicit it at least had a genuine ring, and had laid to sleep any lingering trace of disquiet. As for the Lodge, it accepted Frank and Constance as lovers and discussed them accordingly, all save a certain small woman in black whose mission in life was to differ with her surroundings, and who, with a sort of rocking-chair circle of industry, crocheted at one end of the long veranda, where from time to time she gave out vague hints that things in general were not what they seemed, thereby fostering a discomfort of the future. For the most part, however, her pessimistic views found little acceptance, especially as they concerned the affairs of Mr. Weatherby and Miss Deane. Miss Carroway, who for some reason--perhaps because of the nephew whose youthful steps she had guided from the cradle to a comfortable berth in the electric works at Haverford--had appointed herself a sort of guardian of the young man's welfare, openly pooh-poohed the small woman in black, and announced that she shouldn't wonder if there was going to be a wedding "right off." It may be added that Miss Carroway was usually the center of the rocking-chair circle, and an open rival of the small woman in black as its directing manager.

The latter, however, had the virtue of persistence. She habitually elevated her nose and crochet work at Miss Carroway's opinions, avowing that there was many a slip and that appearances were often deceitful. For her part, she didn't think Miss Deane acted much like a girl in love unless--she lowered her voice so that the others had to lean forward that no syllable might escape--unless it was with *some other man*. For her part, she thought Miss Deane had seemed happier the first few days, before Mr. Weatherby came, going about with Robin Farnham. Anyhow, she shouldn't be surprised if something strange happened before the summer was over, at which prediction Miss Carroway never failed to sniff indignantly, and was likely to drop a stitch in the wristlets she was knitting for Charlie's Christmas.

It was about the mail hour, at the close of one such discussion, that the circle became aware of the objects of their debate approaching from the boat landing. They made a handsome picture as they came up the path, and even the small woman in black was obliged to confess that they were well suited enough "so far as looks were concerned." As usual they carried the book and basket, and waved them in greeting as they drew near. Constance lifted the moss and ferns as she passed Miss Carroway to display, as she said, the inviting contents, which the old lady regarded with evident disapproval, though without comment. Miss Deane carried the basket into the Lodge, and when she returned brought Edith Morrison with her. The girl was rosy with the bustle going on indoors, and her bright color, with her black hair and her spotless white apron, made her a striking figure. Constance admired her openly.

"I brought her out to show you how pretty she looks," she said gayly. "Oh, haven't any of you a camera?"

This was unexpected to Edith, who became still rosier and started to retreat. Constance held her fast.

"Miss Morrison and I are going to do the russulas--that's what they were, you know--ourselves," she said. "Of course, Miss Carroway, you need not feel that you are obliged to have any of them, but you will miss something very nice if you don't."

"Well, mebbe so," agreed the old lady. "I suppose I've missed a good deal in my life by not samplin' everything that came along, but mebbe I've lived just as long by not doin' it. Isn't that Robin Farnham yonder? I haven't seen him for days."

He had come in the night before, Miss Morrison told them. He had brought a party through Indian Pass and would not go out again until morning.

Constance nodded.

"I know. They got their supper at the fall near our camp. Robin came over to call on us. He often runs over for a little while when he comes our way."

She spoke quite unconcernedly, and Robin's name came easily from her lips. The little woman in black shot a triumphant look at Miss Carroway, who did not notice the attention or declined to acknowledge it. Of the others only

Edith Morrison gave any sign. The sudden knowledge that Robin had called at the Deane camp the night before--that it was his habit to do so when he passed that way--a fact which Robin himself had not thought it necessary to mention--and then the familiar use of his name--almost caressing, it had sounded to her--brought back with a rush that heavy and hopeless feeling about her heart. She wanted to be wise and sensible and generous, but she could not help catching the veranda rail a bit tighter, while the rich color faded from her cheek. Yet no one noticed, and she meant that no one, not even Robin, should know. No doubt she was a fool, unable to understand, but she could not look toward Robin, nor could she move from where she stood, holding fast to the railing, trying to be wise and as self-possessed as she felt that other girl would be in her place.

Robin, meantime, had bent his steps in their direction. In his genial manner and with his mellow voice he acknowledged the greetings of this little group of guests. He had just recalled, he said to Constance, having seen something, during a recent trip over McIntyre, which he had at first taken for a very beautiful and peculiar flower. Later he had decided it might be of special interest to her. It had a flower shape, he said, and was pink in color, but was like wax, resembling somewhat the Indian pipe, but with more open flowers and much more beautiful. He did not recall having seen anything of the sort before, and would have brought home one of the waxen blooms, only that he had been going the other way and they seemed too tender to carry. He thought it a fungus growth.

Constance was deeply interested in his information, and the description of what seemed to her a possible discovery of importance. She made him repeat the details as nearly as he could recollect, and with the book attempted to classify the species. Her failure to do so only stimulated her enthusiasm.

"I suppose you could find the place, again," she said.

"Easily. It is only a few steps from the tripod at the peak," and he drew with his pencil a plan of the spot.

"I've heard the McIntyre trail is not difficult to keep," Constance reflected.

"No--provided, of course, one does not get into a fog. It's harder then. I lost the trail myself up there once in a thick mist."

The girl turned to Frank, who was lounging comfortably on the steps, idly smoking.

"Suppose we try it this afternoon," she said.

Mr. Weatherby lifted his eyes to where Algonquin lay--its peaks among the clouds.

"It looks pretty foggy up there--besides, it will be rather late starting for a climb like that."

Miss Deane seemed a bit annoyed.

"Yes," she said, rather crossly, "it will always be too foggy, or too late, or too early for you. Do you know," she added, to the company at large, "this young man hasn't offered to climb a mountain, or to go trouting, once since he's been here. I don't believe he means to, all summer. He said the other day that mountains and streams were made for scenery--not to climb and fish in."

The company discussed this point. Miss Carroway told of a hill near Haverford which she used to climb, as a girl. Frank merely smiled good-naturedly.

"I did my climbing and fishing up here when I was a boy," he said. "I think the fish are smaller now----"

"And the mountains taller--poor, decrepit old man!"

"Well, I confess the trails do look steeper," assented Frank, mildly; "besides, with the varied bill of fare we have been enjoying these days, I don't like to get too far from Mrs. Deane's medicine chest. I should not like to be seized with the last agonies on top of a high mountain."

Miss Deane assumed a lofty and offended air.

"Never you mind," she declared; "when I want to scale a high mountain I shall engage Mr. Robin Farnham to accompany me. Can you take me this afternoon?" she added, addressing Robin.

The young man started to reply, reddened a little and hesitated. Edith, still lingering, holding fast to the veranda rail, suddenly spoke.

"He can go quite well," she said, and there was a queer inflection in her voice. "There is no reason----"

But Constance had suddenly arisen and turned to her.

"Oh, I beg your pardon!" she pleaded hastily. "He has an engagement with you, of course. I did not think--I can climb McIntyre any time. Besides, Mr. Weatherby is right. It is cloudy up there, and we would be late starting."

She went over close to Edith. The latter was pale and constrained, though she made an effort to appear cordial, repeating her assurance that Robin was quite free to go--that she really wished him to do so. Robin himself did not find it easy to speak, and Edith a moment later excused herself, on the plea that she was needed within. Constance followed her, presently, while Frank, lingering on the steps, asked Robin a few questions concerning his trip through the Pass. Of the rocking-chair circle, perhaps only the small woman in black found comfort in what had just taken place. A silence had fallen upon the little company, and it was a relief to all when the mail came and there was a reason for a general breaking-up. As usual, Frank and Constance had a table to themselves at luncheon and ate rather quietly, though the russulas, by a new recipe, were especially fine. When it was over at last they set out to explore the woods back of the Lodge.



CHAPTER VI

IN THE "DEVIL'S GARDEN"

Constance Deane had developed a definite ambition. At all events she believed it to be such, which, after all, is much the same thing in the end. It was her dream to pursue this new study of hers until she had made a definite place for herself, either as a recognized authority or by some startling discovery, in mycological annals--in fact, to become in some measure a benefactor of mankind. The spirit of unrest which had possessed her that afternoon in March, when she had lamented that the world held no place for her, had found at least a temporary outlet in this direction. We all have had such dreams as hers. They are a part of youth. Often they seem paltry enough to others--perhaps to us, as well, when the morning hours have passed by. But those men and women who have made such dreams real have given us a wiser and better world. Constance had confided something of her intention to Frank, who had at least assumed to take it seriously, following her in her wanderings--pushing through tangle and thicket and clambering over slippery logs into uncertain places for possible treasures of discovery. His reluctance to scale McIntyre, though due to the reasons given rather than to any thought of personal discomfort, had annoyed her, the more so because of the unpleasant incident which followed. There had been a truce at luncheon, but once in the woods Miss Deane did not hesitate to unburden her mind.

"Do you know," she began judiciously, as if she had settled the matter in her own mind, "I have about concluded that you are hopeless, after all."

The culprit, who had just dragged himself from under a rather low-lying wet log, assumed an injured air.

"What can I have done, now?" he asked.

"It's not what you have done, but what you haven't done. You're so satisfied to be just comfortable, and----"

Frank regarded his earthy hands and soiled garments rather ruefully.

"Of course," he admitted, "I may have looked comfortable just now, rooting and pawing about in the leaves for that specimen, but I didn't really feel so."

"You know well enough what I mean," Constance persisted, though a little more pacifically. "You go with me willingly enough on such jaunts as this, where it doesn't mean any very special exertion, though sometimes I think you don't enjoy them very much. I know you would much rather drift about in a boat on the lake, or sit under a tree, and have me read to you. Do you know, I've never seen any one who cared so much for old tales of knights and their deeds of valor and strove so little to emulate them in real life."

Frank waited a little before replying. Then he said gently:

"I confess that I would rather listen to the tale of King Arthur in these woods, and as you read it, Conny, than to attempt deeds of valor on my own account. When I am listening to you and looking off through these wonderful woods I can realize and believe in it all, just as I did long ago, when I was a boy and read it for the first time. These are the very woods of romance, and I am expecting any day we shall come upon King Arthur's castle. When we do I shall join the Round Table and ride for you in the lists. Meantime I can dream it all to the sound of your voice, and when I see the people here climbing these mountains and boasting of such achievements I decide that my dream is better than their reality."

But Miss Deane's memory of the recent circumstances still rankled. She was not to be easily mollified.

"And while you dream, I am to find my reality as best I may," she said coldly.

"But, Constance," he protested, "haven't I climbed trees, and gone down into pits, and waded through swamps, and burrowed through vines and briars at your command; and haven't I more than once tasted of the things that you were not perfectly sure of, because the book didn't exactly cover the specimen? Now, here I'm told that I'm hopeless, which means that I'm a failure, when even at this moment I bear the marks of my devotion." He pointed at the knees of his trousers, damp from his recent experience. "I've done battle with nature," he went on, "and entered the lists with your detractors. You said once there are knights we do not recognize and armor we do not see. Now, don't you think you may be overlooking one of those knights, with a suit of armor a little damp at the knees, perhaps, but still stout and serviceable?"

The girl did not, as usual, respond to his gayety and banter.

"You may joke about it, if you like," she said, "but true knights, even in the garb of peasants, have been known to scale dizzy heights for a single flower. I have never known of one who refused to accompany a lady on such an errand, especially when it was up an easy mountain trail which even children have climbed."

"Then this is a notable day, for you have met two."

She nodded.

"But one was without blame, and but for the first there could not have occurred the humiliation of the second, and that, too"--she smiled in spite of herself--"in the presence of my detractors. It will be hard for you to rectify that, Sir Knight!"

There was an altered tone in the girl's voice. The humorous phase was coming nearer the surface. Frank brightened.

"Really, though," he persisted, "I was right about it's being foggy up there. Farnham would have said so, himself."

"No doubt," she agreed, "but we could have reached that conclusion later. An expressed willingness to go would have spared me and all of us what followed. As it is, Edith Morrison thinks I wanted to deprive her of Robin on his one day at home, while he was obliged to make himself appear foolish before every one."

"I wish you had as much consideration for me as you always show for Robin," said Frank, becoming suddenly aggrieved.

"And why not for Robin?" The girl's voice became sharply crisp and defiant. "Who is entitled to it more than he--a poor boy who struggled when no more than a child to earn bread for his invalid mother and little sister; who has never had a penny that he did not earn; who never would take one, but in spite of all has fought his way to recognition and respect and knowledge? Oh, you don't know how he has struggled--you who have had everything from birth--who have never known what it is not to gratify every wish, nor what it feels like to go hungry and cold that some one else might be warm and fed." Miss Deane's cheeks were aglow, and her eyes were filled with fire. "It is by such men as Robin Farnham," she went on, "that this country has been built, with all its splendid achievements and glorious institutions, and the possibilities for such fortunes as yours. Why should I not respect him, and honor him, and love him, if I want to?" she concluded, carried away by her enthusiasm.

Frank listened gravely to the end. Then he said, very gently:

"There is no reason why you should not honor and respect such a man, nor, perhaps, why you should not love him--if you want to. I am sure Robin Farnham is a very worthy fellow. But I suppose even you do not altogether realize the advantage of having been born poor----"

The girl was about to break in, but checked herself.

"Of having been born poor," he repeated, "and compelled to struggle from the beginning. It gets to be a habit, you see, a sort of groundwork for character. Perhaps--I do not say it, mind, I only say perhaps--if Robin Farnham had been born with my advantages and I with his, it might have made a difference, don't you think, in your very frank and just estimate of us to-day? I have often thought that it is a misfortune to have been born with money, but I suppose I didn't think of it soon enough, and it seems pretty late now to go back and start all over. Besides, I have no one in need to struggle for. My mother is comfortably off, and I have no little suffering sister----"

She checked him a gesture.

"Don't--oh, don't!" she pleaded. "Perhaps you are right about being poor, but that last seems mockery and sacrilege--I cannot bear it! You don't know what you are saying. You don't know, as I do, how he has gone out in the bitter cold to work, without his breakfast, because there was not enough for all, and how--because he had cooked the breakfast himself--he did not let them know. No, you do not realize--you could not!"

Mr. Weatherby regarded his companion rather wonderingly. There was something in her eyes which made them very bright. It seemed to him that her emotion was hardly justified.

"I suppose he has told you all about it," he said, rather coldly.

She turned upon him.

"He? Never! He would never tell any one! I found it out--oh, long ago--but I did not understand it all--not then."

"And the mother and sister--what became of them?"

The girl's voice steadied itself with difficulty.

"The mother died. The little girl was taken by some kind people. He was left to fight his battle alone."

Neither spoke after this, and they walked through woods that were like the mazy forests of some old tale. If there had been a momentary rancor between them it was presently dissipated in the quiet of the gold-lit greenery about them, and as they wandered on there grew about them a peace which needed no outward establishment. They held their course by a little compass, and did not fear losing their way, though it was easy enough to become confused amid those barriers of heaped bowlders and tangled logs. By and by Constance held up her hand.

"Listen," she said, "there are voices."

They halted, and a moment later Robin Farnham and Edith Morrison emerged from a natural avenue just ahead. They had followed a different way and were returning to the Lodge. Frank and Constance pushed forward to meet them.

"We have just passed a place that would interest you," said Robin to Miss Deane. "A curious shut-in place where mushrooms grow almost as if they had been planted there. We will take you to it."

Robin spoke in his usual manner. Edith, though rather quiet, appeared to have forgotten the incident of the veranda. Frank and Constance followed a little way, and then all at once they were in a spot where the air seemed heavy and chill, as though a miasma rose from the yielding soil. Thick boughs interlaced overhead, and the sunlight of summer never penetrated there. Such light as came through seemed dim and sorrowful, and there was about the spot a sinister aspect that may have been due to the black pool in the center and the fungi which grew about it. Pale, livid growths were there, shading to sickly yellow, and in every form and size. So thick were they they fairly overhung and crowded in that gruesome bed. Here a myriad of tiny stems, there great distorted shapes pushed through decaying leaves--or toppled over, split and rotting--the food of buzzing flies, thousands of which lay dead upon the ground. A sickly odor hung about the ghastly place. No one spoke at first. Then Constance said:

"I believe they are all deadly--every one." And Frank added:

"I have heard of the Devil's Garden. I think we have found it."

Edith Morrison shuddered. Perhaps the life among the hills had made her a trifle superstitious.

"Let us be going," Constance said. "Even the air of such a place may be dangerous." Then, curiosity and the collecting instinct getting the better of her, she stooped and plucked one of the yellow fungi which grew near her foot. "They seem to be all Amanitas," she added, "the most deadly of toadstools. Those paler ones are *Amanita Phalloides*. There is no cure for their poison. These are called the Fly Amanita because they attract flies and slay them, as you see. This yellow one is an Amanita, too--see its poison cup. I do not know its name, and we won't stop here to find it, but I think we might call it the Yellow Danger."

She dropped it into the basket and all turned their steps homeward, the two girls ahead, the men following. The unusual spot had seemed to depress them all. They spoke but little, and in hushed voices. When they emerged from the woods the sun had slipped behind the hills and a semi-twilight had fallen. Day had become a red stain in the west. Constance turned suddenly to Robin Farnham.

"I think I will ask you to row me across the lake," she said. "I am sure Mr. Weatherby will be glad to surrender the privilege. I want to ask you something more about those specimens you saw on McIntyre."

There was no hint of embarrassment in Miss Deane's manner of this request. Indeed, there was a pleasant, matter-of-fact tone in her voice that to the casual hearer would have disarmed any thought of suspicion. Yet to Edith and Frank the matter seemed ominously important. They spoke their adieus pleasantly enough, but a curious spark glittered a little in the girl's eyes and the young man's face was grave as they two watched the handsome pair down the slope, and saw them enter the Adirondack canoe and glide out on the iridescent water. Suddenly Edith turned to her companion. She was very pale and the spark had become almost a blaze.

"Mr. Weatherby," she said fiercely, "you and I are a pair of fools. You may not know it--perhaps even they do not know it, yet. But it is becoming very clear to me!"

Frank was startled by her unnatural look and tone. As he stood regarding her, he saw her eyes suddenly flood with tears. The words did not come easily either to deny or acknowledge her conclusions. Then, very gently, as one might speak to a child, he said:

"Let us not be too hasty in our judgments. Very sad mistakes have been made by being too hasty." He looked out at the little boat, now rapidly blending into the shadows of the other shore, and added--to himself, as it seemed--"I have made so little effort to be what she wished. He is so much nearer to her ideal."

He turned to say something more to the girl beside him, but she had slipped away and was already halfway to the Lodge. He followed, and then for a time sat out on the veranda, smoking, and reviewing what seemed to him now the wasted years. He recalled his old ambitions. Once they had been for the sea--the Navy. Then, when he had become associated with the college paper he had foreseen in himself the editor of some great journal, with power to upset conspiracies and to unmake kings. Presently he had begun to write--he had always dabbled in that--and his fellow-students had hailed him not only as their leader in athletic but literary pursuits. As editor-in-chief of the college paper and valedictorian of his class, he had left them at last, followed by prophecies of a career in the world of letters. Well, that was more than two years ago, and he had never picked up his pen since that day. There had been so many other things--so many places to go--so many pleasant people--so much to do that was easier than to sit down at a remote desk with pen and blank paper, when all the world was young and filled with gayer things. Then, presently, he had reasoned that there was no need of making the fight--there were too many at it, now. So the flower of ambition had faded as quickly as it had bloomed, and the blossoms of pleasure had been gathered with a careless hand. His meeting with Constance had been a part of the play-life of which he had grown so fond. Now that she had grown into his life he seemed about to lose her, because of the flower he had let die.

The young man ate his dinner silently--supplying his physical needs in the perfunctory manner of routine. He had been late coming in, and the dining-room was nearly empty. Inadvertently he approached the group gathered about the wide hall fireplace as he passed out. Miss Carroway occupied the center of this little party and, as usual, was talking. She appeared to be arranging some harmless evening amusement.

"It's always pleasant after supper," she was saying--Miss Carroway never referred to the evening meal as dinner--"to ask a few conundrums. My Charlie that I raised and is now in the electric works at Haverford used to say it helped digestion. Now, suppose we begin. I'll ask the first one, and each one will guess in turn. The first one who guesses can ask the next."

Becoming suddenly conscious of the drift of matters, Frank started to back out, silently, but Miss Carroway had observed his entrance and, turning, checked him with her eye.

"You're just in time," she said. "We haven't commenced yet. Oh, yes, you must stay. It's good for young people to have a little diversion in the evening and not go poking off alone. I am just about to ask the first conundrum. Mebbe you'll get the next. This is one that Charlie always liked. What's the difference between a fountain and the Prince of Wales? Now, you begin, Mr. Weatherby, and see if you can guess it."

The feeling was borne in upon Frank that this punishment was rather more than he could bear, and he made himself strong for the ordeal. Dutifully he considered the problem and passed it on to the little woman in black, who sat next. Miss Carroway's rival was consumed with an anxiety to cheapen the problem with a prompt answer.

"That's easy enough," she said. "One's the son of the queen, and the other's a queen of the sun. Of course," she added, "a fountain isn't really a queen of the sun, but it shines and sparkles and *might* be called that."

Miss Carroway regarded her with something of disdain.

"Yes," she said, with decision, "it might be, but it ain't. You guessed wrong. Next!"

"One's always wet, and the other's always dry," volunteered an irreverent young person outside the circle, which remark won a round of ill-deserved applause.

"You ought to come into the game," commented Miss Carroway, "but that ain't it, either."

"I'm sure it has something with 'shine' and 'line,'" ventured the young lady from Utica, who was a school-mistress, "or 'earth' and 'birth.' I know I've heard it, but I can't remember."

"Humph!" sniffed Miss Carroway, and passed it on. Nobody else ventured a definition and the problem came back to its proposer. She sat up a bit straighter, and swept the circle with her firelit glasses.

"One's thrown to the air, and the other's heir to the throne," she declared, as if pronouncing judgment. "I don't think this is much of a conundrum crowd. My Charlie would have guessed that the first time. But I'll give you one more--something easier, and mebbe older."

When at last he was permitted to go Frank made his way gloomily to his room and to bed. The day's events had been depressing. He had lost ground with Constance, whom, of late, he had been trying so hard to please. He had been willing enough, he reflected, to go up the mountain, but it really had been cloudy up there and too late to start. Then Constance had blamed him for the unpleasant incident which had followed--it seemed to him rather unjustly. Now, Edith Morrison had declared openly what he himself had been almost ready, though rather vaguely, to suspect. He had let

Constance slip through his fingers after all. He groaned aloud at the thought of Constance as the wife of another. Was it, after all, too late? If he should begin now to do and dare and conquer, could he regain the lost ground? And how should he begin? Half confused with approaching sleep, his thoughts intermingled with strange fancies, that one moment led him to the mountain top where in the mist he groped for mushrooms, while the next, as in a picture, he was achieving some splendid triumph and laying the laurels at her feet. Then he was wide awake again, listening to the whisper of the trees that came through his open window and the murmur of voices from below. Presently he found himself muttering, "What is the difference between a fountain and the Prince of Wales?"--a question which immediately became a part of his perplexing sleep-waking fancies, and the answer was something which, like a boat in the mist, drifted away, just out of reach. What *was* the difference between a fountain and the Prince of Wales? It seemed important that he should know, and then the query became visualized in a sunlit plume of leaping water with a diadem at the top, and this suddenly changed into a great mushroom, of the color of gold, and of which some one was saying, "Don't touch it--it's the Yellow Danger." Perhaps that was Edith Morrison, for he saw her dark, handsome face just then, her eyes bright with tears and fierce with the blaze of jealousy. Then he slept.

CHAPTER VII

THE PATH THAT LEADS BACK TO BOYHOOD

The sun was not yet above the hills when Frank Weatherby left the Lodge next morning. He halted for a moment to procure some convenient receptacle and was supplied with a trout basket which, slung across his shoulder, gave him quite the old feeling of preparation for a day's sport, instead of merely an early trip up McIntyre. Robin Farnham was already up and away with his party, but another guide loitered about the cabin and showed a disposition to be friendly.

"Better wait till after breakfast," he said. "It don't take long to run up McIntyre and back. You'll have plenty of time."

"But it looks clear up there, now. It may be foggy, later on. Besides, I've just bribed the cook to give me a bite, so I'm not afraid of getting hungry."

The guide brought out a crumpled, rusty-looking fly-hook and a little roll of line.

"Take these," he urged. "You'll cross a brook or two where there's some trout. Mebbe you can get a few while you're resting. I'd lend you a rod if we had one here, but you can cut a switch that will do. The fish are mostly pretty small."

The sight of the gayly colored flies, the line and the feeling of the basket at his side was a combination not to be resisted. The years seemed to roll backward, and Frank felt the old eager longing to be following the tumbling, swirling water--to feel the sudden tug at the end of a drifting line.

It was a rare morning. The abundant forest was rich with every shade of green and bright with dew. Below, where the path lay, it was still dim and silent, but the earliest touch of sunrise had set the tree-tops aglow and started a bird concert in the high branches.

The McIntyre trail was not a hard one to follow. Neither was it steep for a considerable distance, and Frank strode along rapidly and without fatigue. In spite of his uneasiness of spirit the night before, he had slept the sleep of youth and health, and the smell of the morning woods, the feel of the basket at his side, the following of this fascinating trail brought him nearer to boyhood with every forward step. He would go directly to the top of the mountain, he thought, find the curious flower or fungus which Robin had seen, and on his return trip would stop at the brooks and perhaps bring home a basket of trout; after which he would find Constance and lay the whole at her feet as a proof that he was not altogether indifferent to her wishes. Also, it might be, as a token that he had renewed his old ambition to be something more than a mere lover of ease and pleasure and a dreamer of dreams.

The suspicions stirred by Edith Morrison the night before had grown dim--indeed had almost vanished in the clear glow of morning. Constance might wish to punish him--that was quite likely--though it was highly improbable that she should have selected this method. In fact, it was quite certain that any possibility of causing heartache, especially where Edith Morrison was concerned, would have been most repugnant to a girl of the character and ideals of Constance Deane. She admired Robin and found pleasure in his company. That she made no concealment of these things was the best evidence that there was nothing to be concealed. That unconsciously she and Robin were learning to care for each other, he thought most unlikely. He remembered Constance as she had seemed during the days of their meeting at Lenox, when she had learned to know, and he believed to care for him. It had never been like that. It would not be like that, now, with another. There would be no other. He would be more as she would have him--more like Robin Farnham. Why, he was beginning this very moment. Those years of idleness had dropped away. He had regarded himself as beyond the time of beginning! What nonsense! At twenty-four--full of health and the joy of living--swinging up a mountain trail to win a flower for the girl he loved, with a cavalcade of old hopes and dreams and ambitions once more riding through his heart. To-day was life. Yesterday was already with the vanished ages. Then for a moment he recalled the sorrow of Edith Morrison and resolved within him to see her immediately upon his return, to prove to her how groundless and unjust had been her conclusions. She was hardly to blame. She was only a mountain girl and did not understand. It was absurd that he, who knew so much of the world and of human nature, should have allowed himself even for a moment to be influenced by the primitive notions of this girl of the hills.

The trail grew steeper now. The young man found himself breathing a trifle quicker as he pushed upward. Sometimes he seized a limb to aid him in swinging up a rocky steep--again he parted dewy bushes that locked their branches across the way. Presently there was a sound of water falling over stones, and a moment later he had reached a brook that hurried down the mountain side, leaping and laughing as it ran. There was a narrow place and a log where the trail crossed, with a little fall and a deep pool just below it. Frank did not mean to stop for trout now, but it occurred to him to try this brook, that he might judge which was the better to fish on his return. He looked about until he found a long, slim shoot of some tough wood, and this he cut for a rod. Then he put on a bit of the line--a longer piece would not do

in this little stream--and at the end he strung a short leader and two flies. It was queer, but he found his fingers trembling just a little with eagerness as he adjusted those flies; and when he held the rig at arm's length and gave it a little twitch in the old way it was not so bad, after all, he thought. As he stealthily gained the exact position where he could drop the lure on the eddy below the fall and poised the slender rod for the cast, the only earthly thing that seemed important was the placing of those two tiny bits of gimp and feathers just on that spot where the water swirled under the edge of the black overhanging rock. Gently, now--so. A quick flash, a swish, a sharp thrilling tug, an instinctive movement of the wrist, and something was leaping and glancing on the pebbles below--something dark and golden and gayly red-spotted--something which no man who has ever trailed a brook can see without a quickening heart--a speckled trout! Certainly it was but a boy who leaped down and disentangled the captured fish and held it joyously for a moment, admiring its markings and its size before dropping it into the basket at his side.

"Pretty good for such a little brook," he said aloud. "I wonder if there are many like that."

He made another cast, but without result.

"I've frightened them," he thought. "I came lumbering down like a duffer. Besides, they can see me, here."

He turned and followed the stream with his eye. It seemed a succession of falls and fascinating pools, and the pools grew even larger and more enticing. He could not resist trying just once more, and when another goodly trout was in his creel and then another, all else in life became hazy in the joy of following that stream from fall to fall and from pool to pool--of dropping those gay little flies just in the particular spot which would bring that flash and swish, that delightful tug, and the gayly speckled capture that came glancing to his feet. Why not do his fishing now, in these morning hours when the time was right? Later, the sport might be poor, or none at all. At this rate he could soon fill his creel and then make his way up the mountain. He halted a moment to line the basket with damp moss and water grasses to keep his catch fresh. Then he put aside every other purpose for the business of the moment, creeping around bushes, or leaping from stone to stone--sometimes slipping to his knees in the icy water, caring not for discomfort or bruises--heedless of everything except the zeal of pursuit and the zest of capture--the glory of the bright singing water, spilling from pool to pool--the filtering sunlight--the quiring birds--the resinous smell of the forest--all the things which lure the feet of young men over the paths trod by their fathers in the long-forgotten days.

The stream widened. The pools grew deeper and the trout larger as he descended. Soon he decided to keep only the larger fish. All others he tossed back as soon as taken. Then there came a break ahead and presently the brook pitched over a higher fall than any he had passed, into a larger stream--almost a river. A great regret came upon the young man as he viewed this fine water that rushed and swirled among a thousand bowlders, ideal stepping stones with ideal pools below. Oh, now, for a rod and reel, with a length of line to cast far ahead into those splendid pools!

The configuration of the land caused this larger stream to pursue a course around, rather than down the mountain side, and Frank decided that he could follow it for a distance, and then, with the aid of his compass, strike straight for the mountain top without making his way back up stream.

But first he must alter his tackle. He looked about and presently cut a much longer and stronger rod and lengthened his line accordingly. Then he made his way among the bowlders and began to whip the larger pools. Cast after cast resulted in no return. He began to wonder, after all, if it would not be a mistake to fish this larger and less fruitful stream. But suddenly there came a great gleam of light where his flies fell, and though the fish failed to strike, Frank's heart gave a leap, for he knew now that in this water--though they would be fewer in number--there were trout which were well worth while. He cast again over the dark, foamy pool, and this time the flash was followed by such a tug as at first made him fear that his primitive tackle might not hold. Oh, then he longed for a reel and a net. This was a fish that could not be lightly lifted out, but must be worked to a landing place and dragged ashore. Holding the line taut, he looked for such a spot, and selecting the shallow edge of a flat stone, drew his prize nearer and nearer--drawing in the rod itself, hand over hand, and finally the line until the struggling, leaping capture was in his hands. This was something like! This was sport, indeed! There was no thought now of turning back. To carry home even a few fish, taken with such a tackle, would redeem him for many shortcomings in Constance's eyes. He was sorry now that he had kept any of the smaller fry.

He followed down the stream, stepping from bowlder to bowlder, casting as he went. Here and there trout rose, but they were old and wary and hesitated to strike. He got another at length, somewhat smaller than the first, and lost still another which he thought was larger than either. Then for a considerable distance he whipped the most attractive water without reward, changing his flies at length, but to no purpose.

"It must be getting late," he reflected aloud, and for the first time thought of looking at his watch. He was horrified to find that it was nearly eleven o'clock, by which time he had expected to have reached the top of McIntyre and to have been well on his way back to the Lodge. He must start at once, for the climb would be long and rough here, out of the

regular trail.

Yet he paused to make one more cast, over a black pool where there was a fallen log, and bubbles floating on the surface. His arm had grown tired swinging the heavy green rod and his aim was poor. The flies struck a little twig and hung there, dangling in the air. A twitch and they were free and had dropped to the surface of the water. Yet barely to reach it. For in that instant a wave rolled up and divided--a great black-and-gold shape made a porpoise leap into the air. The lower fly disappeared, and an instant later Frank was gripping the tough green rod with both hands, while the water and trees and sky blended and swam before him in the intensity of the struggle to hold and to keep holding that black-and-gold monster at the other end of the tackle--to keep him from getting back under that log--from twisting the line around a limb--in a word, to prevent him from regaining freedom. It would be lunacy to drag this fish ashore by force. The line or the fly would certainly give way, even if the rod would stand. Indeed, when he tried to work his capture a little nearer, it held so like a rock that he believed for a moment the line was already fast. But then came a sudden rush to the right and another stand, and to the left--with a plunge for depth--and with each of these rushes Frank's heart stood still, for he felt that against the power of this monster his tackle could not hold. Every nerve and fiber in his body seemed to concentrate on the slow-moving point of dark line where the tense strand touched the water. A little this way or that it swung--perhaps yielded a trifle or drew down a bit as the great fish in its battle for life gave an inch only to begin a still fiercer struggle in this final tug of war. To all else the young man was oblivious. A bird dropped down on a branch and shouted at him--he did not hear it. A cloud swept over the sun--he did not see it. Life, death, eternity mattered nothing. Only that moving point of line mattered--only the thought that the powerful, unconquered shape below might presently go free.

And then--inch by inch it seemed--the steady wrist and the crude tackle began to gain advantage, the monster of black and gold was forced to yield. Scarcely breathing, Frank watched the point of the line, inch by inch, draw nearer to a little pebbly shore that ran down, where, if anywhere, he could land his prey. Once, indeed, the great fellow came to the surface, then, seeing his captor, made a fierce dive and plunged into a wild struggle, during which hope almost died. Another dragging toward the shore, another struggle and yet another, each becoming weaker and less enduring, until lo, there on the pebbles, gasping and striking with his splendid tail, lay the conquered king of fish. It required but an instant for the captor to pounce upon him and to secure him with a piece of line through his gills, and this he replaced with a double willow branch which he could tie together and to the basket, for this fish was altogether too large to go inside. Exhausted and weak from the struggle, Frank sat down to contemplate his capture and to regain strength before starting up the mountain. Five pounds, certainly, this fish weighed, he thought, and he tenderly regarded the fly that had lured it to the death, and carefully wound up the cheap bit of line that had held true. No such fish had been brought to the Lodge, and then, boy that he was, he thought how proud he should be of his triumph, and with what awe Constance would regard his skill in its capture. And in that moment it was somehow borne in upon him that with this battle and this victory there had come in truth the awakening--that the indolent, luxury-loving man had become as a sleep-walker of yesterday who would never cross the threshold of to-day.

A drop of water on his hand aroused him. The sun had disappeared--the sky was overcast--there was rain in the air. He must hurry, he thought, and get up the mountain and away, before the storm. He could not see the peak, for here the trees were tall and thick, but he knew his direction by the compass and by the slope of the land. From the end of his late rod he cut a walking stick and set out as rapidly as he could make his way through brush and vines, up the mountain-side.

But it was toilsome work. The mountain became steeper, the growth thicker, his load of fish weighed him down. He was almost tempted to retrace his way up the river and brook to the trail, but was loath to consume such an amount of time when it seemed possible to reach the peak by a direct course. Then it became darker in the woods, and the bushes seemed damp with moisture. He wondered if he was entering a fog that had gathered on the mountain top, and, once there, if he could find what he sought. Only the big fish, swinging at his side and dragging in the leaves as he crept through underbrush, gave him comfort in what was rapidly becoming an unpleasant and difficult undertaking. Presently he was reduced to climbing hand over hand, clinging to bushes and bracing his feet as best he might. All at once, he was face to face with a cliff which rose sheer for sixty feet or more and which it seemed impossible to ascend. He followed it for a distance and came at last to where a heavy vine dropped from above, and this made a sort of ladder, by which, after a great deal of clinging and scrambling, he managed to reach the upper level, where he dropped down to catch breath, only to find, when he came to look for his big fish, that somehow in the upward struggle it had broken loose from the basket and was gone. It was most disheartening.

"If I were not a man I would cry," he said, wearily--then peering over the cliff he was overjoyed to see the lost fish hanging not far below, suspended by the willow loop he had made.

So then he climbed down carefully and secured it, and struggled back again, this time almost faint with weariness, but happy in regaining his treasure. And now he realized that a fog was indeed upon the mountain. At the foot of the cliff and farther down the air seemed clear enough, but above him objects only a few feet distant were lost in a white mist, while here and there a drop as of rain struck in the leaves. It would not do to waste time. A storm might be gathering, and a tempest, or even a chill rain on the top of McIntyre was something to be avoided. He rose, and climbing, stooping, crawling, struggled toward the mountain-top. The timber became smaller, the tangle closer, the white mist thickened. Often he paused from sheer exhaustion. Once he thought he heard some one call. But listening there came only silence, and staggering to his feet he struggled on.



CHAPTER VIII

WHAT CAME OUT OF THE MIST

It was several hours after Frank Weatherby had set out on the McIntyre trail--when the sun had risen to a point where it came mottling through the tree-tops and dried the vines and bushes along the fragrant, yielding path below--that a girl came following in the way which led up the mountain top. She wore a stout outing costume--short skirt and blouse, heavy boots, and an old felt school hat pinned firmly to luxuriant dark hair. On her arm she carried the basket of many wanderings, and her step was that of health and strength and purpose. One watching Constance Deane unawares--noting her carriage and sureness of foot, the easy grace with which she overcame the various obstructions in her path--might have said that she belonged by right to these woods, was a part of them, and one might have added that she was a perfect flowering of this splendid forest.

On the evening before, she had inquired of Robin the precise entrance to the McIntyre trail, and with his general directions she had no hesitation now in setting out on her own account to make the climb which would bring her to the coveted specimens at the mountain top. She would secure them with the aid of no one and so give Frank an exhibition of her independence, and perhaps impress him a little with his own lack of ambition and energy. She had avoided the Lodge, making her way around the lake to the trail, and had left no definite word at home as to her destination, for it was quite certain that Mrs. Deane would worry if it became known that Constance had set off up the mountain alone. Yet she felt thoroughly equal to the undertaking. In her basket she carried some sandwiches, and she had no doubt of being able to return to the Lodge during the afternoon, where she had a certain half-formed idea of finding Frank disconsolately waiting--a rather comforting--even if pathetic--picture of humiliation.

Constance did not linger at the trout-brook which had enticed Frank from the narrow upward path, save to dip up a cold drink with the little cup she carried, and to rest up a moment and watch the leaping water as it foamed and sang down the natural stairway which led from one mystery in the dark vistas above to another mystery and wider vistas below--somehow, at last, to reach that deeper and vaster and more impenetrable mystery--the sea. She recalled some old German lines beginning, "*Du Bachlein, silberhell und klar,*" and then she remembered having once recited them to Frank, and how he had repeated them in an English translation:

"Thou brooklet, silver-bright and clear--
Forever passing--always here--
Upon thy brink I sit, and think
Whence comest thou? Whence goest thou?"

He had not confessed it, but she suspected the translation to be his own, and it had exasperated her that one who could do a thing well and with such facility should set so little store by his gift, when another, with a heart hunger for achievement, should have been left so unfavored of the gods.

She walked rather more slowly when she had passed the brook--musing upon these things. Then presently the path became precipitous and narrow, and led through thick bushes, and over or under difficult obstructions. Constance drew on a thick pair of gloves to grapple with rough limbs and sharp points of rock. Here and there were fairly level stretches and easy going, but for the most part it was up and up--steeper and steeper--over stones and logs, through heavy bushes and vines that matted across the trail, so that one must stoop down and burrow like a rabbit not to miss the way.

Miss Deane began to realize presently that the McIntyre trail was somewhat less easy than she had anticipated.

"If Robin calls this an easy trail, I should like to know what he means by a hard one," she commented aloud, as she made her way through a great tumble of logs only to find that the narrow path disappeared into a clump of bushes beyond and apparently brought up plump against a plunging waterfall on the other side. "One would have to be a perfect salmon to scale that!"

But arriving at the foot of the fall, she found that the trail merely crossed the pool below and was clearly marked beyond. This was the brook which Frank had not reached. It was no great distance from the summit.

But now the climb became steeper than ever--a hand over hand affair, with scratched face and torn dress and frequent pauses for breath. There was no longer any tall timber, but only masses of dwarfed and twisted little oak trees--a few feet high, though gnarled and gray with age, and loaded with acorns. Constance knew these for the scrub-oak, that degenerate but persistent little scion of a noble race, that pushes its miniature forests to the very edge and into the last crevice of the barren mountain top. Soon this diminutive wilderness began to separate into segments and the trail

reached a comparative level. Then suddenly it became solid rock, with only here and there a clump of the stunted oak, or a bit of grass. The girl realized that she must be on the summit and would presently reach the peak, where, from a crevice, grew the object of her adventure. She paused a moment for breath, and to straighten her disheveled hair. Also she turned for a look at the view which she thought must lie behind her. But she gave a little cry of disappointment. A white wraith of mist, like the very ghost of a cloud, was creeping silently along the mountain side and veiled the vision of the wide lands below. Where she stood the air was still clear, but she imagined the cloud was creeping nearer and would presently envelop the mountain-top. She would hurry to the peak and try to get a view from the other side, which after all was considered the best outlook.

The trail now led over solid granite and could be followed only by little cairns or heaps of stone, placed at some distance apart, but in the clear air easily seen from one to the other. She moved rapidly, for the way was no longer steep, and ere long the tripod which marked the highest point, and near which Robin had seen the strange waxen flower, was outlined against the sky. A moment later when she looked it seemed to her less clear. The air, too, had a chill damp feeling. She turned quickly to look behind her, and uttered a little cry of surprise that was almost terror. The cloud ghost was upon her--she was already enveloped in its trailing cerements. Behind, all was white, and when she turned again the tripod too had well-nigh disappeared. As if about to lose the object of her quest, she started to run, and when an instant later the beacon was lost in a thick fold of white she again opened her lips in a wild despairing cry. Yet she did not stop, but raced on, forgetting even the little guiding cairns which pointed the way. It would have made no difference had she remembered them, for the cloud became so dense that she could not have seen one from the other. How close it shut her in, this wall of white, as impalpable and as opaque as the smoke of burning grass!

It seemed a long way to the tripod. It must have been farther than she had thought. Suddenly she realized that the granite no longer rose a little before her, but seemed to drop away. She had missed the tripod, then, and was descending on the other side. Turning, she retraced her steps, more slowly now, trying to keep the upward slope before her. But soon she realized that in this thick and mystifying whiteness she could not be certain of the level--that by thinking so she could make the granite seem to slope a little up or down, and in the same manner, now, she could set the tripod in any direction from her at will. Confused, half terrified at the thought, she stood perfectly still, trying to think. The tripod, she knew, could not be more than a few yards distant, but surrounded by these enchanted walls which ever receded, yet always closed about her she must only wander helplessly and find it by mere chance. And suppose she found it, and suppose she secured the object of her search, how, in this blind spot, would she find her way back to the trail? She recalled now what Robin had said of keeping the trail in the fog. Her heart became cold--numb. The chill mist had crept into her very veins. She was lost--lost as men have been lost in the snow--to die almost within their own door-yards. If this dread cloud would only pass, all would be well, but she remembered, too, hopelessly enough, that she had told no one of her venture, that no one would know where to seek her.

And now the sun, also, must be obscured, for the world was darkening. An air that pierced her very marrow blew across the mountain and a drop of rain struck her cheek. Oh, it would be wretched without shelter to face a storm in that bleak spot. She must at least try--she must make every effort to find the trail. She set out in what she believed to be a wide circuit of the peak, and was suddenly rejoiced to come upon one of the little piles of stones which she thought must be one of the cairns, leading to the trail. But which way must she look for the next? She strained her eyes through the milky gloom, but could distinguish nothing beyond a few yards of granite at her feet. It did not avail her to remain by the cairn, yet she dreaded to leave a spot which was at least a point in the human path. She did so, at last, only to wander down into an unmarked waste, to be brought all at once against a segment of the scrub-oak forest and to find before her a sort of opening which she thought might be the trail. Eagerly in the gathering gloom she examined the face of the granite for some trace of human foot and imagined she could make out a mark here and there as of boot nails. Then she came to a bit of grass that seemed trampled down. Her heart leaped. Oh, this must be the trail, after all!

She hastened forward, half running in her eagerness. Branches slapped and tore at her garments--long, tenuous filaments, wet and web-like, drew across her face. Twice she fell and bruised herself cruelly. And when she rose the second time, her heart stopped with fear, for she lay just on the edge of a ghastly precipice--the bottom of which was lost in mist and shadows. It had only been a false trail, after all. Weak and trembling she made her way back to the open summit, fearing even that she might miss this now and so be without the last hope of finding the way, or of being found at last herself.

Back on the solid granite once more, she made a feeble effort to find one of the cairns, or the tripod, anything that had known the human touch. But now into her confused senses came the recollection that many parties climbed McIntyre, and she thought that one such might have chosen to-day and be somewhere within call. She stood still to listen for possible voices, but there was no sound, and the bitter air across the summit made her shrink and tremble. Then she uttered a loud, long, "Hoo-oo-woo-o!" a call she had learned of mountaineers as a child. She listened breathlessly for an answer. It was no use. Yet she would call again--at least it was an effort--a last hope.

"Hoo-oo-woo-oo!" and again "Hoo-oo-woo-oo!" And then her very pulses ceased, for somewhere, far away it seemed, from behind that wall of white her ear caught an answering cry. Once more she called--this time wildly, with every bit of power she could summon. Once more came the answering "Hoo-oo-woo-oo!" and now it seemed much nearer.

She started to run in the direction of the voice, stopping every few steps to call, and to hear the reassuring reply. She was at the brushy edge of the summit when through the mist came the words--it was a man's voice, and it made her heart leap---

"Stay where you are! Don't move--I will come to you!"

She stood still, for in that voice there was a commanding tone which she was only too eager to obey. She called again and again, but she waited, and all at once, right in front of her it seemed, the voice said:

"Well, Conny, it's a good thing I found you. If you had played around here much longer you might have got wet."

But Constance was in no mood to take the matter lightly.

"Frank! Oh, Frank!" she cried, and half running, half reeling forward, she fell into his arms.

And then for a little she gave way and sobbed on his shoulder, just as any girl might have done who had been lost and miserable and had all at once found the shoulder of a man she loved. Then, brokenly---

"Oh, Frank--how did you know I was here?"

His arm was about her and he was holding her close. But for the rest, he was determined to treat it lightly.

"Well, you know," he said, "you made a good deal of noise about it, and I thought I recognized the tones."

"But how did you come to set out to look for me? How did you know that I came? Oh, it was brave of you--in this awful fog and with no guide!"

She believed, then, that he had set out purposely to search for her. He would let her think so for the moment.

"Why, that's nothing," he said; "a little run up the mountain is just fun for me, and as for fogs, I've always had a weakness for fogs since a winter in London. I didn't really know you were up here, but that might be the natural conclusion if you weren't at home, or at the Lodge--after what happened yesterday, of course."

"Oh, Frank, forgive me--I was so horrid yesterday."

"Don't mention it--I didn't give it a second thought."

"But, Frank--" then suddenly she stopped, for her eye had caught the basket, and the great fish dangling at his side. "Frank!" she concluded, "where in the world did you get that enormous trout?"

It was no use after that, so he confessed and briefly told her the tale--how it was by accident that he had found her--how he had set out at daybreak to find the wonderful flower.

"And haven't you found it either?" he asked, glancing down at her basket.

Then, in turn, she told how she had missed the tripod just as the fog came down and could not get near it again.

"And oh, I have lost my luncheon, too," she exclaimed, "and you must be starving. I must have lost it when I fell."

"Then we'll waste no time in getting home. It's beginning to rain a little now. We'll be pretty miserable if we stay up here any longer."

"But the trail--how will you find it in this awful mist?"

"Well, it should be somewhere to the west, I think, and with the compass, you see----"

He had been feeling in a pocket and now stared at her blankly.

"I am afraid I have lost something, too," he exclaimed, "my compass. I had it a little while ago and put it in the change pocket of my coat to have it handy. I suppose the last time I fell down, it slipped out."

He searched hastily in his other pockets, but to no purpose.

"Never mind," he concluded, cheerfully. "All ways lead down the mountain. If we can't find the trail we can at least go down till we find something. If it's a brook or ravine we'll follow that till we get somewhere. Anything is better than

shivering here."

They set out in the direction where it seemed to Frank the trail must lie. Suddenly a tall shape loomed up before them. It was the tripod.

"Oh!" Constance gasped, "and I hunted for it so long!"

"Those flowers, or whatever they were, should be over here, I think," Frank said, and Constance produced a little plan which Robin had given her. But when in the semi-dusk they groped to the spot only some wet, blackened pulp remained of the curious growth. The tender flower of the peak had perhaps bloomed and perished in a day. Frank lamented this misfortune, but Constance expressed a slighter regret. They made an effort now to locate the cairns, but with less success. They did not find even one, and after wandering about for a little could not find the tripod again, either.

"Never mind," consoled Frank, "we'll trust a little to instinct. Perhaps it will lead us to something." In fact, they came presently to the fringe of scrub-oak, and to what seemed an open way. But Constance shook her head.

"I do not think this is the beginning of the trail. I followed just such an opening, and it led me to that dreadful cliff."

Perhaps it was the same false lead, for presently an abyss yawned before them.

"I shouldn't wonder," speculated Frank, "if this isn't a part of the cliff that I climbed. If we follow along, it may lead us to the same place. Then we may be able to make our way over it and down to the river and so home. It's a long way, but a sure one, if we can only find it."

They proceeded cautiously along the brink for the light was dim and the way uncertain. They grew warmer now, for they were away from the bitter air of the mountain top, and in constant motion. When they had followed the cliff for perhaps half a mile, Frank suddenly stopped.

"What is it?" asked Constance, "is this where you climbed up?"

Her companion only pointed over the brink.

"Look," he said, "it is not a cliff, here, but one side of a chasm. I can see trees on the other side."

Sure enough, dimly through the gloom, not many feet away, appeared the outline of timber of considerable growth, showing that they had descended somewhat, also an increased depth of soil. It was further evident that the canon was getting narrower, and presently they came upon two logs, laid across it side by side, forming a sort of bridge. Frank knelt and examined them closely.

"Some one has used this," he said. "This may be a trail. Do you think we can get over, Conny?"

The girl looked at the narrow crossing and at the darkening woods beyond. It was that period of stillness and deepening gloom which precedes a mountain storm. Still early in the day, one might easily believe that night was descending. Constance shuddered. She was a bit nervous and unstrung.

"There is something weird about it," she said. "It is like entering the enchanted forest. Oh, I can cross well enough--it isn't that," and stepping lightly on the little footway she walked as steadily and firmly as did Frank, a moment later.

"You're a brick, Conny," he said heartily.

An opening in the bushes at the end of the little bridge revealed itself. They entered and pushed along, for the way led downward. The darkness grew momentarily. Rain was beginning to fall. Yet they hurried on, single file, Frank leading and parting the vines and limbs to make the way easier for his companion. They came presently to a little open space, where suddenly he halted.

"There's a light," he said, "it must be a camp."

But Constance clung to his arm. It was now quite dark where they stood, and there came a low roll of thunder overhead.

"Oh, suppose it is something dreadful!" she whispered--"a robbers' den, or moonshiners. I've heard of such things."

"It's more likely to be a witch," said Frank, "or an ogre, but I think we must risk it."

The rain came faster and they hurried forward now and presently stood at the door of a habitation, though even in the mist and gloom it impressed them as being of a curious sort. There was a window and a light, certainly, but the window

held no sash, and the single opening was covered with a sort of skin, or parchment. There was a door, too, and walls, but beyond this the structure seemed as a part of the forest itself, with growing trees forming the door and corner posts, while others rose apparently from the roof. Further outlines of this unusual structure were lost in the dimness. Under the low, sheltering eaves they hesitated.

"Shall we knock?" whispered Constance. "It is all so queer--so uncanny. I feel as if it might be the home of a real witch or magician, or something like that."

"Then we may at least learn our fate," Frank answered, and with his knuckles struck three raps on the heavy door.

At first there was silence, then a sound of movement within, followed by a shuffling step. A moment later the heavy door swung ajar, and in the dim light from within Frank and Constance beheld a tall bowed figure standing in the opening. In a single brief glance they saw that it was a man--also that his appearance, like that of his house, was unusual. He was dressed entirely in skins. His beard was upon his breast, and his straggling hair fell about his shoulders. He stood wordless, silently regarding the strangers, and Frank at first was at a loss for utterance. Then he said, hesitatingly:

"We missed our way on the mountain. We want shelter from the storm and directions to the trail that leads to Spruce Lodge."

Still the tall bent figure in the doorway made no movement and uttered no word. They could not see his face, but Constance felt that his eyes were fixed upon her, and she clung closer to Frank's arm. Yet when the strange householder spoke at last there was nothing to cause fear, either in his words or tone. His voice was gentle--not much above a whisper.

"I crave your pardon if I seem slow of hospitality," he said, quaintly, "but a visitor seldom comes to my door. Only one other has ever found his way here, and he comes not often." He pushed the rude door wider on its creaking with hinges. "I bid you welcome," he added, then, as Constance came more fully into the light shed by a burning pine knot and an open fire, he stopped, stared at her still more fixedly and muttered something under his breath. But a moment later he said gently, his voice barely more than a whisper: "I pray you will pardon my staring, but in that light just now you recalled some one--a woman it was--I used to know. Besides, I have not been face to face with any woman for nearly a score of years."



CHAPTER IX

A SHELTER IN THE FOREST

Certainly the house of the hermit, for such he undoubtedly was, proved a remarkable place. There was no regular form to the room in which Frank and Constance found themselves, nor could they judge as to its size. Its outlines blended into vague shadows, evidently conforming to the position of the growing trees which constituted its supports. The walls were composed of logs of varying lengths, adjusted to the spaces between the trees, intermingled with stones and smaller branches, the whole cemented or mud-plastered together in a concrete mass. At the corner of the fireplace, and used as one end of it, was a larger flat stone, which became not only a part of the wall but served as a wide shelf or table within, and this, covered with skins, supported a large wooden bowl of nuts, a stone hammer somewhat resembling a tomahawk, a few well-worn books, also a field glass in a leather case, such as tourists use. On a heavy rustic mantel were numerous bits and tokens of the forest, and suspended above it, on wooden hooks, was a handsome rifle. On the hearth below was a welcome blaze, with a heavy wooden settle, wide of seat, upon which skins were thrown, drawn up comfortably before the fire. The other furniture in the room consisted of a high-backed armchair, a wooden table, and what might have been a bench, outlined in the dimness of a far corner where the ceiling seemed to descend almost to the ground, and did, in fact, join the top of a low mound which formed the wall on that side. But what seemed most remarkable in this singular dwelling-place were the living trees which here and there like columns supported the roof. The heavy riven shingles and a thatching of twisted grass had been fitted closely about them above, and the hewn or puncheon floor was carefully joined around them below. Lower limbs had been converted into convenient hooks, while attached here and there near the ceiling were several rustic, nest-like receptacles, showing a fringe of grass and leaves. As Frank and Constance entered this strange shelter there had been a light scurrying of shadowy forms, a whisking into these safe retreats, and now, as the strangers stood in the cheerful glow of the fire and the sputtering pine-knot, they were regarded not only by the hermit, but by a score or more of other half-curious, half-timid eyes that shone bright out of the vague dimness behind. The ghostly scampering, the shadowy flitting, and a small, subdued chatter from the dusk enhanced in the minds of the visitors a certain weird impression of the place and constrained their speech. There was no sensation of fear. It was only a vague uneasiness, or rather that they felt themselves harsh and unwarranted intruders upon a habitation and a life in which they had no part. Their host broke the silence.

"You must needs pardon the demeanor of my little friends," he said. "They are unaccustomed to strangers." He indicated the settle, and added: "Be seated. You are weary, without doubt, and your clothes seem damp." Then he noticed the basket and the large fish at Frank's belt. "A fine trout," he said; "I have not seen so large a one for years."

Frank nodded with an anxious interest.

"Would you like it?" he asked. "I have a basketful besides, and would it be possible--could we, I mean, manage to cook a few of them? I am very hungry, and I am sure my companion, Miss Deane, would like a bite also."

Constance had dropped down on the settle, and was leaning toward the fire--her hands outspread before it.

"I am famished," she confessed, and added, "oh, and will you let me cook the fish? I can do it quite well."

The hermit did not immediately reply to the question.

"Miss Deane," he mused; "that is your name, then?"

"Yes, Constance Deane, and this is Mr. Frank Weatherby. We have been lost on the mountain all day without food. We shall be so thankful if you will let us prepare something, and will then put us on the trail that leads to Spruce Lodge."

The hermit stirred the fire to a brighter blaze and laid on a fresh piece of wood.

"That will I do right gladly," he said, "if you will accept my humble ways. Let me take the basket; I will set about the matter."

Gladly enough Frank unloosed his burden, and surrendered the big trout and the basket to his host. As the latter turned away from the fire a dozen little forms frisked out of the shadows behind and ran over him lightly, climbing to his shoulders, into his pockets, clinging on to his curious dress wherever possible--chattering, and still regarding the strange intruders with bright, inquisitive eyes. They were tiny red squirrels, it seemed, and their home was here in this nondescript dwelling with this eccentric man. Suddenly the hermit spoke to them--an unknown word with queer intonation. In an instant the little bevy of chatters leaped away from him, scampering back to their retreats. Frank, who stood watching, saw a number of them go racing to a tree of goodly size and disappear into a hole near the floor.

The hermit turned, smiling a little, and the firelight fell on his face. For the first time Frank noticed the refinement and delicacy of the meager features. The hermit said:

"That is their outlet. The tree is hollow, and there is another opening above the roof. In winter the birds use it, too."

He disappeared now into what seemed to be another apartment, shutting a door behind. Frank dropped down on the settle by Constance, thoroughly tired, stretched out his legs, and gave himself up to the comfort of the warm glow.

"Isn't it all wonderful?" murmured Constance. "It is just a dream, of course. We are not really here, and I shall wake up presently. I had just such fancies when I was a child. Perhaps I am still wandering in that awful mist, and this is the delirium. Oh, are you sure we are really here?"

"Quite sure," said Frank. "And it seems just a matter of course to me. I have known all along that this wood was full of mysteries--enchancements, and hermits, and the like. Probably there are many such things if we knew where to look for them."

The girl's voice dropped still lower.

"How quaintly he talks. It is as if he had stepped out of some old book."

Frank nodded toward the stone shelf by the fire.

"He lives chiefly in books, I fancy, having had but one other visitor."

The young man lifted one of the worn volumes and held it to the light. It was a copy of Shakespeare's works--a thick book, being a complete edition of the plays. He laid it back tenderly.

"He dwells with the men and women of the master," he said, softly.

There followed a little period of silence, during which they drank in the cheer and comfort of the blazing hearth. Outside, the thunder rolled heavily now and then, and the rain beat against the door. What did it matter? They were safe and sheltered, and together. Constance asked presently: "What time is it?" And, looking at his watch, Frank replied:

"A little after three. An hour ago we were wandering up there in the mist. It seems a year since then, and a lifetime since I took that big trout."

"It is ages since I started this morning," mused Constance. "Yet we divide each day into the same measurements, and by the clock it is only a little more than six hours."

"It is nine since I left the Lodge," reflected Frank, "after a very light and informal breakfast at the kitchen door. Yes, I am willing to confess that such time should not be measured in the ordinary way."

There was a sharper crash of thunder and a heavier gust of rain. Then a fierce downpour that came to them in a steady, muffled roar.

"When shall we get home?" Constance asked, anxiously.

"We won't worry, now. Likely this is only a shower. It will not take long to get down the mountain, once we're in the trail, and it's light, you know, until seven."

The door behind was pushed open and the hermit re-entered. He bore a flat stone and a wooden bowl, and knelt down with them before the fire. The glowing embers he heaped together and with the aid of a large pebble set the flat stone at an angle before them. Then from the wooden bowl he emptied a thick paste of coarse meal upon the baking stone, and smoothed it with a wooden paddle.

Rising he said:

"I fear my rude ways will not appétize you, but I can only offer you what cheer I have."

The aroma of the cooking meal began to fill the room.

"Please don't apologize," pleaded Constance. "My only hope is that I can restrain myself until the food is ready."

"I'll ask you to watch the bread for a moment," the hermit said, turning the stone a little.

"And if I let it burn you may punish me as the goodwife did King Alfred," answered Constance. Then a glow came into her cheeks that was not all of the fire, for the man's eyes--they were deep, burning eyes--were fixed upon her, and he

seemed to hang on her every word. Yet he smiled without replying, and again disappeared.

"Conny," admonished Frank, "if you let anything happen to that cake I'll eat the stone."

So they watched the pone carefully, turning it now and then, though the embers glowed very hot and a certain skill was necessary.

The hermit returned presently with a number of the trout dressed, and these were in a frying-pan that had a long wooden handle, which Constance and Frank held between them, while their host installed two large potatoes in the hot ashes. Then he went away for a little and placed some things on the table in the middle of the room, returning now and then to superintend matters. And presently the fish and the cakes and the potatoes were ready, and the ravenous wanderers did not wait to be invited twice to partake of them. The thunder still rolled at intervals and the rain still beat at the door, but they did not heed. Within, the cheer, if not luxurious, was plenteous and grateful. The table furnishings were rude and chiefly of home make. But the guests were young, strong of health and appetite, and no king's table could have supplied goodlier food. Oh, never were there such trout as those, never such baked potatoes, nor never such hot, delicious hoecake. And beside each plate stood a bowl of fruit--berries--delicious fresh raspberries of the hills.

Presently their host poured a steaming liquid into each of the empty cups by their plates.

"Perhaps you will not relish my tea," he said, "but it is soothing and not harmful. It is drawn from certain roots and herbs I have gathered, and it is not ill-tasting. Here is sweet, also; made from the maple tree."

An aromatic odor arose from the cups, and, when Constance tasted the beverage and added a lump of the sugar, she declared the result delicious--a decision in which Frank willingly concurred.

The host himself did not join the feast, and presently fell to cooking another pan of trout. It was a marvel how they disappeared. Even the squirrels came out of their hiding places to witness this wonderful feasting, a few bolder ones leaping upon the table, as was their wont, to help themselves from a large bowl of cracked nuts. And all this delighted the visitors. Everything was so extraordinary, so simple and near to nature, so savoring of the romance of the old days. This wide, rambling room with its recesses lost in the shadows; the low, dim roof supported by its living columns; the glowing fireplace and the blazing knot; the wild pelts scattered here and there, and the curious skin-clad figure in the firelight--certainly these were things to stir delightfully the heart of youth, to set curious fancies flitting through the brain.

"Oh," murmured Constance, "I wish we might stay in a place like this forever!" Then, reddening, added hastily, "I mean--I mean----"

"Yes," agreed Frank, "I mean that, too--and I wish just the same. We could have fish every day, and such hoecake, and this nice tea, and I would pick berries like these, and you could gather mushrooms. And we would have squirrels to amuse us, and you would read to me, and perhaps I should write poems of the hills and the storms and the haunted woods, and we could live so close to nature and drink so deeply of its ever renewing youth that old age could not find us, and we should live on and on and be always happy--happy ever after."

The girl's hand lay upon the table, and when his heavier palm closed over it she did not draw it away.

"I can almost love you when you are like this," she whispered.

"And if I am always like this----?"

They spoke very low, and the hermit sat in the high-back chair, bowed and staring into the blaze. Yet perhaps something of what they said drifted to his ear--perhaps it was only old and troubling memories stirring within him that caused him to rise and walk back and forth before the fire.

His guests had finished now, and they came back presently to the big, deep settle, happy in the comfort of plenteous food, the warmth and the cosy seat, and the wild unconvention of it all. The beat of the rain did not trouble them. Secretly they were glad of any excuse for remaining by the hermit's hearth.

Their host did not appear to notice them at first, but paced a turn up and down, then seated himself in the high-backed chair and gazed into the embers. A bevy of the little squirrels crept up and scaled his knees and shoulders, but with that curious note of warning he sent them scampering. The pine knot sputtered low and he tossed it among the coals, where it renewed its blaze. For a time there was silence, with only the rain sobbing at the door. Then by and by--very, very softly, as one who muses aloud--he spoke: "I, too, have had my dreams--dreams which were ever of happiness for me--and for another; happiness that would not end, yet which was to have no more than its rare beginning.

"That was a long time ago--as many as thirty years, maybe. I have kept but a poor account of time, for what did it matter here?"

He turned a little to Constance.

"Your face and voice, young lady, bring it all back now, and stir me to speak of it again--the things of which I have spoken to no one before--not even to Robin."

"To Robin!" The words came involuntarily from Constance.

"Yes, Robin Farnham, now of the Lodge. He found his way here once, just as you did. It was in his early days on the mountains, and he came to me out of a white mist, just as you came, and I knew him for her son."

Constance started, but the words on her lips were not uttered.

"I knew him for her son," the hermit continued, "even before he told me his name, for he was her very picture, and his voice--the voice of a boy--was her voice. He brought her back to me--he made her live again--here, in this isolated spot, even as she had lived in my dreams--even as a look in your face and a tone in your voice have made her live for me again to-day."

There was something in the intensity of the man's low speech, almost more than in what he said, to make the listener hang upon his words. Frank, who had drawn near Constance, felt that she was trembling, and he laid his hand firmly over hers, where it rested on the seat beside him.

"Yet I never told him," the voice went on, "I never told Robin that I knew him--I never spoke his mother's name. For I had a fear that it might sadden him--that the story might send him away from me. And I could have told nothing unless I told it all, and there was no need. So I spoke to him no word of her, and I pledged him to speak to no one of me. For if men knew, the curious would come and I would never have my life the same again. So I made him promise, and after that first time he came as he chose. And when he is here she who was a part of my happy dream lives again in him. And to you I may speak of her, for to you it does not matter, and it is in my heart now, when my days are not many, to recall old dreams."



CHAPTER X

THE HERMIT'S STORY

The hermit paused and gazed into the bed of coals on the hearth. His listeners waited without speaking. Constance did not move--scarcely did she breathe.

"As I said, it may have been thirty years ago," the gentle voice continued. "It may have been more than that--I do not know. It was on the Sound shore, in one of the pretty villages there--it does not matter which.

"I lived with my uncle in the adjoining village. Both my parents were dead--he was my guardian. In the winter, when the snow fell, there was merry-making between these villages. We drove back and forth in sleighs, and there were nights along the Sound when the moon path followed on the water and the snow, and all the hills were white, and the bells jingled, and hearts were gay and young.

"It was on such a night that I met her who was to become Robin's mother. The gathering was in our village that night, and, being very young, she had come as one of a merry sleighful. Half way to our village their sleigh had broken down, and the merry makers had gayly walked the remainder, trusting to our hospitality to return them to their homes. I was one of those to welcome them and to promise conveyance, and so it was that I met her, and from that moment there was nothing in all the world for me but her."

The hermit lifted his eyes from the fire and looked at Constance.

"My girl," he said, "there are turns of your face and tones of your voice that carry me back to that night. But Robin, when he first came here to my door, a stripling, he was her very self.

"I recall nothing of that first meeting but her. I saw nothing but her. I think we danced--we may have played games--it did not matter. There was nothing for me but her face. When it was over, I took her in my cutter and we drove together across the snow--along the moonlit shore. I do not remember what we said, but I think it was very little. There was no need. When I parted from her that night the heritage of eternity was ours--the law that binds the universe was our law, and the morning stars sang together as I drove homeward across the hills.

"That winter and no more holds my happiness. Yet if all eternity holds no more for me than that, still have I been blest as few have been blest, and if I have paid the price and still must pay, then will I pay with gladness, feeling only that the price of heaven is still too small, and eternity not too long for my gratitude."

The hermit's voice had fallen quite to a whisper, and he was as one who muses aloud upon a scene rehearsed times innumerable. Yet in the stillness of that dim room every syllable was distinct, and his listeners waited, breathless, at each pause for him to continue. Into Frank's eyes had come the far-away look of one who follows in fancy an old tale, but the eyes of Constance shone with an eager light and her face was tense and white against the darkness.

"It was only that winter. When the spring came and the wild apple was in bloom, and my veins were all a-tingle with new joy, I went one day to tell her father of our love. Oh, I was not afraid. I have read of trembling lovers and halting words. For me the moments wore laggingly until he came, and then I overflowed like any other brook that breaks its dam in spring.

"And he--he listened, saying not a single word; but as I talked his eyes fell, and I saw tears gather under his lids. Then at last they rolled down his cheeks and he bowed his head and wept. And then I did not speak further, but waited, while a dread that was cold like death grew slow upon me. When he lifted his head he came and sat by me and took my hand. 'My boy,' he said, 'your father was my friend. I held his hand when he died, and a year later I followed your mother to her grave. You were then a little blue-eyed fellow, and my heart was wrung for you. It was not that you lacked friends, or means, for there were enough of both. But, oh, my boy, there was another heritage! Have they not told you? Have you never learned that both your parents were stricken in their youth by that scourge of this coast--that fever which sets a foolish glow upon the cheek while it lays waste the life below and fills the land with early graves? Oh, my lad! you do not want my little girl.'"

The hermit's voice died, and he seemed almost to forget his listeners. But all at once he fixed his eyes on Constance as if he would burn her through.

"Child," he said, "as you look now, so she looked in the moment of our parting. Her eyes were like yours, and her face, God help me! as I saw it through the dark that last night, was as your face is now. Then I went away. I do not remember all the places, but they were in many lands, and were such places as men seek who carry my curse. I never wrote--I

never saw her, face to face, again.

"When I returned her father was dead, and she was married--to a good man, they told me--and there was a child that bore my name, Robin, for I had been called Robin Gray. And then there came a time when a stress was upon the land--when fortunes tottered and men walked the streets with unseeing eyes--when his wealth and then hers vanished like smoke in the wind--when my own patrimony became but worthless paper--a mockery of scrolled engravings and gaudy seals. To me it did not matter--nothing matters to one doomed. To them it was shipwreck. John Farnham, a high-strung, impetuous man, was struck down. The tension of those weeks, and the final blow, broke his spirit and undermined his strength. They had only a pittance and a little cottage in these mountains, which they had used as a camp for summer time. It stood then where it stands to-day, on the North Elba road, in view of this mountain top. There they came in the hope that Robin's father might regain health to renew the fight. There they remained, for the father had lost courage and only found a little health by tilling the few acres of ground about the cottage. There, that year, a second child--a little girl--was born."

It had grown very still in the hermitage. There was only a drip of the rain outside--the thunder had rolled away. The voice, too, ceased for a little, as if from weariness. The others made no sign, but it seemed to Frank that the hand locked closely in his had become quite cold.

"The word of those things drifted to me," so the tale went on, "and it made me sad that with my own depleted fortune and failing health I could do nothing for their comfort or relief. But one day my physician said to me that the air and the altitude of these mountains had been found beneficial for those stricken like me. He could not know how his words made my heart beat. Now, indeed, there was a reason for my coming--an excuse for being near her--with a chance of seeing her, it might be, though without her knowledge. For I decided that she must not know. Already she had enough burden without the thought that I was near--without the sight of my doleful, wasting features.

"So I sold the few belongings that were still mine--such things as I had gathered in my wanderings--my books, save those I loved most dearly--my furnishings, my ornaments, even to my apparel--and with the money I bought the necessaries of mountain life--implements, rough wear and a store of food. These, with a tent, my gun, the few remaining volumes, and my field glass--the companion of all my travels--I brought to the hills."

He pointed to the glass and the volumes lying on the stone at his hand.

"Those have been my life," he went on. "The books have brought me a world wherein there was ever a goodly company, suited to my mood. For me, in that world, there are no disappointments nor unfulfilled dreams. King, lover, courtier and clown--how often at my bidding have they trooped out of the shadows to gather with me about this hearth! Oh, I should have been poor indeed without the books! Yet the glass has been to me even more, for it brought me her.

"I have already told you that their cottage could be seen from this mountain top. I learned this when I came stealthily to the hills and sought out their home, and some spot amid the overhanging peaks where I might pitch my camp and there unseen look down upon her life. This is the place I found. I had my traps borne up the trail to the foot of the little fall, as if I would camp there. Then when the guides were gone I carried them here, and reared my small establishment, away from the track of hunters, on this high finger of rock which commanded the valley and her home. There is a spring here and a bit of fertile land. It was State land and free, and I pitched my tent here, and that summer I cleared an open space for tillage and built a hut for the winter. The sturdy labor and the air of the hills strengthened my arm and renewed my life. But there was more than that. For often there came a clear day, when the air was like crystal and other peaks drew so near that it seemed one might reach out and stroke them with his hand. On such a day, with my glass, I sought a near-by point where the mountain's elbow jutted out into the sky, and when from that high vantage I gazed down on the roof which covered her, my soul was filled with strength to tarry on. For distance became as nothing to my magic glass. Three miles it may be as the crow flies, but I could bring the tiny cottage and the door-yard, as it stood there at the turn of the road above the little hill, so close to me that it seemed to lie almost at my very feet."

Again the speaker rested for a moment, but presently the tale went on.

"You can never know what I felt when I first saw *her*. I had watched for her often, and I think she had been ill. I had seen him come and go, and sometimes I had seen a child--Robin it was--playing about the yard. But one day when I had gone to my point of lookout and had directed my glass--there, just before me, she stood. There she lived and moved--she who had been, who was still my life--who had filled my being with a love that made me surrender her to another, yet had lured me at last to this lonely spot, forever away from men, only that I might now and again gaze down across the tree tops, and all unseen, unknown to her, make her the companion of my hermit life.

"She walked slowly and the child walked with her, holding her hand. When presently she looked toward me, I started and shrank, forgetting for the moment that she could not see me. Not that I could distinguish her features at such a

range, only her dear outline, but in my mind's eyes her face was there before me just as I had seen it that last time--just as I have seen yours in the firelight."

He turned to Constance, whose features had become blurred in the shadows. Frank felt her tremble and caught the sound of a repressed sob. He knew the tears were streaming down her cheeks, and his own eyes were not dry.

"After that I saw her often, and sometimes the infant, Robin's sister, was in her arms. When the autumn came, and the hills were glorified, and crowned with snow, she stood many times in the door-yard to behold their wonder. When at last the leaves fell, and the trees were bare, I could watch even from the door of my little hut. The winter was long--the winter is always long up here--from November almost till May--but it did not seem long to me, when she was brought there to my door, even though I might not speak to her.

"And so I lived my life with her. The life in that cottage became my life--day by day, week by week, year by year--and she never knew. After that first summer I never but once left the mountain top. All my wants I supplied here. There was much game of every sort, and the fish near by were plentiful. I had a store of meal for the first winter, and during the next summer I cultivated my bit of cleared ground, and produced my full need of grain and vegetables and condiments. One trip I made to a distant village for seeds, and from that day never left the mountain again.

"It was during the fifth winter, I think, after I came here, that a group of neighbors gathered in the door-yard of the cottage, and my heart stood still, for I feared that she was dead. The air dazzled that day, but when near evening I saw a woman with a hand to each child re-enter the little house I knew that she still lived--and had been left alone.

"Oh, then my heart went out to her! Day and night I battled with the impulse to go to her, with love and such comfort and protection as I could give. Time and again I rose and made ready for the journey to her door. Then, oh, then I would remember that I had nothing to offer her--nothing but my love. Penniless, and a dying man, likely to become a helpless burden at any time, what could I bring to her but added grief. And perhaps in her unconscious heart she knew. For more than once that winter, when the trees were stripped and the snow was on the hills, I saw her gaze long and long toward this mountain, as if she saw the speck my cabin made, and once when I stretched my arms out to her across the waste of deadly cold, I saw a moment later that her arms, too, were out-stretched, as if somehow she knew that I was there."

A low moan interrupted the tale. It was from Constance.

"Don't, oh, don't," she sobbed. "You break my heart!" But a moment later she added, brokenly, "Yes, yes--tell me the rest. Tell me all. Oh, she was so lonely! Why did you never go to her?"

"I would have gone then. I went mad and cried out, 'My wife! my wife! I want my wife!' And I would have rushed down into the drifts of the mountain, but in that moment the curse of my heritage fell heavily upon me and left me powerless."

The hermit's voice had risen--it trembled and died away with the final words. In the light of the fading embers only his outline could be seen--wandering into the dusk and silence. When he spoke again his tone was low and even.

"And so the years went by. I saw the sturdy lad toil with his mother for a while, and then alone, and I knew by her slow step that the world was slipping from her grasp. I did not see the end. I might have gone, then, but it came at a time when the gloom hung on the mountains and I did not know. When the air cleared and for days I saw no life, I knew that the little house was empty--that she had followed him to rest. They two, whose birthright had been health and length of days, both were gone, while I, who from the cradle had made death my bed-fellow, still lingered and still linger through the years.

"I put the magic glass aside after that for my books. Nothing was left me but my daily round, with them for company. Yet from a single volume I have peopled all the woods about, and every corner of my habitation. Through this forest of Arden I have walked with Orlando, and with him hung madrigals on the trees, half believing that Rosalind might find them. With Nick the Weaver on a moonlit bank I have waited for Titania and Puck and all that lightsome crew. On the wild mountain top I have met Lear, wandering with only a fool for company, and I have led them in from the storm and warmed them at this hearthstone. In that recess Romeo has died with Juliet in the Capulets' tomb. With me at that table Jack Falstaff and Prince Hal have crossed their wit and played each the role of king. Yonder, beneath the dim eaves, in the moment just before you came, Macbeth had murdered Duncan, and I saw him cravenly vanish at the sound of your fearsome knocking.

"But what should all this be to you? It is but my shadow world--the only world I had until one day, out of the mist as you have come, so Robin came to me--her very self, it seemed--from heaven. At first it lay in my heart to tell him. But the fear of losing him held me back, as I have said. And of himself he told me as little. Rarely he referred to the past. Only once, when I spoke of kindred, he said that he was an orphan, with only a sister, who had found a home with kind

people in a distant land. And with this I was content, for I had wondered much concerning the little girl."

The voice died away. The fire had become ashes on the hearth. The drip of the rain had ceased--light found its way through the parchment-covered window. The storm had passed. The hermit's story was ended.

Neither Constance nor Frank found words, and for a time their host seemed to have forgotten their presence. Then, arousing, he said:

"You will wish to be going now. I have detained you too long with my sad tale. But I have always hungered to pour it into some human ear before I died. Being young, you will quickly forget and be merry again, and it has lifted a heaviness from my spirit. I think we shall find the sun on the hills once more, and I will direct you to the trail. But perhaps you will wish to pause a moment to see something of my means of providing for life in this retreat. I will ask of you, as I did of Robin, to say nothing of my existence here to the people of the world. Yet you may convey to Robin that you have been here--saying no more than that. And you may say that I would see him when next he builds his campfire not far away, for my heart of hearts grows hungry for his face."

Rising, he led them to the adjoining room.

"This was my first hut," he said. "It is now my storehouse, where, like the squirrels, I gather for the winter. I hoard my grain here, and there is a pit below where I keep my other stores from freezing. There in the corner is my mill--the wooden mortar and pestle of our forefathers--and here you see I have provided for my water supply from the spring. Furs have renewed my clothing, and I have never wanted for sustenance--chiefly nuts, fruits and vegetables. I no longer kill the animals, but have made them my intimate friends. The mountains have furnished me with everything--companions, shelter, clothing and food, savors--even salt, for just above a deer lick I found a small trickle from which I have evaporated my supply. Year by year I have added to my house--making it, as you have seen, a part of the forest itself--that it might be less discoverable; though chiefly because I loved to build somewhat as the wild creatures build, to know the intimate companionship of the living trees, and to be with the birds and squirrels as one of their household."

They passed out into the open air, and to a little plot of cultivated ground shut in by the thick forest. It was an orderly garden, with well-kept paths, and walks of old-fashioned posies.

Bright and fresh after the summer rain, it was like a gay jewel, set there on the high mountain side, close to the bending sky.

It was near sunset, and a chorus of birds were shouting in the tree tops. Coming from the dim cabin, with its faded fire and its story of human sorrow, into this bright living place, was stepping from enchantment of the play into the daylight of reality. Frank praised the various wonders in a subdued voice, while Constance found it difficult to speak at all. Presently, when they were ready to go, the hermit brought the basket and the large trout.

"You must take so fine a prize home," he said. "I do not care for it." Then he looked steadily at Constance and added: "The likeness to her I loved eludes me by daylight. It must have been a part of my shadows and my dreams."

Constance lifted her eyes tremblingly to the thin, fine, weather-beaten face before her. In spite of the ravage of years and illness she saw, beneath it all, the youth of long ago, and she realized what he had suffered.

"I thank you for what you have told us to-day," she said, almost inaudibly. "It shall be--it is--very sacred to me."

"And to me," echoed Frank, holding out his hand.

He led them down the steep hillside by a hidden way to the point where the trail crossed the upper brook, just below the fall.

"I have sometimes lain concealed here," he said, "and heard mountain climbers go by. Perhaps I caught a glimpse of them. I suppose it is the natural hunger one has now and then for his own kind." A moment later he had grasped their hands, bidden them a fervent godspeed, and disappeared into the bushes. The sun was already dipping behind the mountain tops and they did not linger, but rapidly and almost in silence made their way down the mountain.

CHAPTER XI

DURING THE ABSENCE OF CONSTANCE

Yet the adventure on the mountain was not without its ill effects. It happened that day that Mr. and Mrs. Deane had taken one of their rare walks over to Spruce Lodge. They had arrived early after luncheon, and learning that Frank and Constance had not been seen there during the morning, Mrs. Deane had immediately assured herself that dire misfortune had befallen the absent ones.

The possibility of their having missed their way was the most temperate of her conclusions. She had visions of them lying maimed and dying at the foot of some fearful precipice; she pictured them being assailed by wild beasts; she imagined them tasting of some strange mushroom and instantly falling dead as a result. Fortunately, the guide who had seen Frank set out alone was absent. Had the good lady realized that Constance might be alone in a forest growing dark with a coming storm, her condition might have become even more serious.

As it was, the storm came down and held the Deanes at the Lodge for the afternoon, during which period Mr. Deane, who was not seriously disturbed by the absence of the young people, endeavored to convince his wife that it was more than likely they had gone directly to the camp and would be there when the storm was over.

The nervous mother was far from reassured, and was for setting out immediately through the rain to see. It became a trying afternoon for her comforters, and the lugubrious croaking of the small woman in black and the unflinching optimism of Miss Carroway, as the two wandered from group to group throughout the premises, gave the episode a general importance of which it was just as well that the wanderers did not know.

Yet the storm proved an obliging one to Frank and Constance, for the sun was on the mountain long before the rain had ceased below, and as they made straight for the Deane camp they arrived almost as soon as Mrs. Deane herself, who, bundled in waterproofs and supported by her husband and an obliging mountain climber, had insisted on setting out the moment the rain ceased.

It was a cruel blow not to find the missing ones at the moment of arrival, and even their prompt appearance, in full health and with no tale of misfortune, but only the big trout and a carefully prepared story of being confused in the fog but safely sheltered in the forest, did not fully restore her. She was really ill next day, and carried Constance off for a week to Lake Placid, where she could have medical attention close at hand and keep her daughter always in sight.

It began by being a lonely week for Frank, for he had been commanded by Constance not to come to Lake Placid, and to content himself with sending occasional brief letters--little more than news bulletins, in fact. Yet presently he became less forlorn. He went about with a preoccupied look that discouraged the attentions of Miss Carroway. For the most part he spent his mornings at the Lodge, in his room. Immediately after luncheon he usually went for an extended walk in the forest, sometimes bringing up at the Deane camp, where perhaps he dined with Mr. Deane, a congenial spirit, and remained for a game of cribbage, the elder man's favorite diversion. Once Frank set out to visit the hermitage, but thought better of his purpose, deciding that Constance might wish to accompany him there on her return. One afternoon he spent following a trout brook and returned with a fine creel of fish, though none so large as the monster of that first day.

Robin Farnham was absent almost continuously during this period, and Edith Morrison Frank seldom saw, for the last weeks in August brought the height of the season, and the girl's duties were many and imperative. There came no opportunity for the talk he had meant to have with her, and as she appeared always pleasant of manner, only a little thoughtful--and this seemed natural with her responsibilities--he believed that, like himself, she had arrived at a happier frame of mind.

And certainly the young man was changed. There was a new light in his eyes, and it somehow spoke a renewed purpose in his heart. Even his step and carriage were different. When he went swinging through the forest alone it was with his head thrown back, and sometimes with his arms outspread he whistled and sang to the marvelous greenery above and about him. And he could sing. Perhaps his was not a voice that would win fame or fortune for its possessor, but there was in it a note of ecstasy which answered back to the call of the birds, to the shout or moan of the wind, to every note of the forest--that was, in fact, a tone in the deep chord of nature, a lilt in the harmony of the universe.

He forgot that his soul had ever been asleep. A sort of child frenzy for the mountains, such as Constance had echoed to him that wild day in March, grew upon him and possessed him, and he did not pause to remember that it ever had been otherwise. When the storm came down from the peaks, he strode out into it, and shouted his joy in its companionship, and raced with the wind, and threw himself face down in the wet leaves to smell the ground. And was

it no more than the happiness of a lover who believes himself beloved that had wrought this change, or was there in this renewal of the mad joy of living the reopening and the flow of some deep and half-forgotten spring?

From that day on the mountain he had not been the same. That morning with its new resolve; the following of the brook which had led him back to boyhood; the capture of the great trout; the battle with the mountain and the mist; the meeting with Constance at the top; the hermit's cabin with its story of self-denial and abnegation--its life so close to the very heart of nature, so far from idle pleasure and luxury--with that eventful day had come the change.

In his letters to Constance, Frank did not speak of these things. He wrote of his walks, it is true, and he told her of his day's fishing--also of his visits to her father at the camp--but of any change or regeneration in himself, any renewal of old dreams and effort, he spoke not at all.

The week lengthened before Constance returned, though it was clear from her letters that she was disinclined to linger at a big conventional hotel, when so much of the summer was slipping away in her beloved forest. From day to day they had expected to leave, she wrote, but as Mrs. Deane had persuaded herself that the Lake Placid practitioner had acquired some new and subtle understanding of nerve disorders, they were loath to hurry. The young lady ventured a suggestion that Mr. Weatherby was taking vast comfort in his freedom from the duties and responsibilities of accompanying a mushroom enthusiast in her daily rambles, especially a very exacting young person, with a predilection for trying new kinds upon him, and for seeking strange and semi-mythical specimens, peculiar to hazy and lofty altitudes.

"I am really afraid I shall have to restrain my enthusiasm," she wrote in one of these letters. "I am almost certain that Mamma's improvement and desire to linger here are largely due to her conviction that so long as I am here you are safe from the baleful Amanita, not to mention myself. Besides, it is a little risky, sometimes, and one has to know a very great deal to be certain. I have had a lot of time to study the book here, and have attended a few lectures on the subject. Among other things I have learned that certain Amanitas are not poison, even when they have the cup. One in particular that I thought deadly is not only harmless, but a delicacy which the Romans called 'Caesar's mushroom,' and of which one old epicure wrote, 'Keep your corn, O Libya--unyoke your oxen, provided only you send us mushrooms.'" She went on to set down the technical description from the text-book and a simple rule for distinguishing the varieties, adding, "I don't suppose you will gather any before my return--you would hardly risk such a thing without my superior counsel--but should you do so, keep the rule in mind. It is taken word for word from the book, so if anything happens to you while I am gone, either you or the book will be to blame--not I. When I come back--if I ever do--I mean to try at least a sample of that epicurean delight, which one old authority called 'food of the gods,' provided I can find any of them growing outside of that gruesome 'Devil's Garden.'"

Frank gave no especial attention to this portion of her letter. His interest in mushrooms was confined chiefly to the days when Constance could be there to expatiate on them in person.

In another letter she referred to their adventure on the mountain, and to the fact that Frank would be likely to see Robin before her return.

"You may tell Robin Farnham," she said, "about our visit to the hermit, and of the message he sent. Robin may be going in that direction very soon, and find time to stop there. Of course you will be careful not to let anything slip about the tale he told us. I am sure it would make no difference, but I know you will agree with me that his wishes should be sacred. Dear me, what a day that was, and how I did love that wonderful house! Here, among all these people, in this big modern hotel, it seems that it must have been all really enchantment. Perhaps you and Robin could make a trip up there together. I know, if there truly is a hermit, he will be glad to see you again. I wonder if he would like to see *me* again. I brought up all those sad memories. Poor old man! My sympathy for him is deeper than you can guess."

It happened that Robin returned to the Lodge that same afternoon. A little later Frank found him in the guide's cabin, and recounted to him his recent adventures with Constance on the mountain--how they had wandered at last to the hermitage, adding the message which their host had sent to Robin himself.

The guide listened reflectively, as was his habit. Then he said:

"It seems curious that you should have been lost up there, just as I was once, and that you should have drifted to the same place. You took a little different path from mine. I followed the chasm to the end, while you crossed on the two logs which the old fellow and I put there afterward to save me time. I usually have to make short visits, because few parties care to stay on McIntyre over night, and it's only now and then that I can get away at all. I have been thinking about the old chap a good deal lately, but I'm afraid it would mean a special trip just now, and it would be hard to find a day for that."

"I will arrange it," said Frank. "In fact, I have already done so. I spoke to Morrison this morning, and engaged you for a day as soon as you got in. I want to make another trip up the mountain, myself. We'll go to-morrow morning--directly to the cabin--and I'll see that you have plenty of time for a good visit. What I want most is another look around the place itself and its surroundings. I may want to construct a place like that some day--in imagination, at least."

So it was arranged that the young men should visit the hermitage together. They set out early next morning, following the McIntyre trail to the point below the little fall where the hermit had bidden good-by to mankind so many years before. Here they turned aside and ascended the cliff by the hidden path, presently reaching the secluded and isolated spot where the lonely, stricken man had established his domain.

As they drew near the curious dwelling, which because of its construction was scarcely noticeable until they were immediately upon it, they spoke in lowered voices, and presently not at all. It seemed to them, too, that there was a hush about the spot which they had not noticed elsewhere. Frank recalled the chorus of birds which had filled the little garden with song, and wondered at their apparent absence now. The sun was bright, the sky above was glorious, the gay posies along the garden paths were as brilliant as before, but so far as he could see and hear, the hermit's small neighbors and companions had vanished.

"There is a sort of Sunday quiet about it," whispered Frank. "Perhaps the old fellow is out for a ramble, and has taken his friends with him." Then he added, "I'll wait here while you go in. If he's there, stay and have your talk with him while I wander about the place a little. Later, if he doesn't mind, I will come in."

Frank directed his steps toward the little garden and let his eyes wander up and down among the beds which the hermit had planted. It was late summer now, and many of the things were already ripening. In a little more the blackening frost would come and the heavy snow drift in. What a strange life it had been there, winter and summer, with only nature and a pageantry of dreams for companionship. There must have been days when, like the Lady of Shalott, he had cried out, "I am sick of shadows!" and it may have been on such days that he had watched by the trail to hear and perhaps to see real men and women. And when the helplessness of very old age should come--what then? Within his mind Frank had a half-formed plan to persuade the hermit to return to the companionship of men. There were many retreats now in these hills--places where every comfort and the highest medical skill could be obtained for patients such as he. Frank had conceived the idea of providing for the hermit's final days in some such home, and he had partly confided his plan to Robin as they had followed the trail together. Robin, if anybody, could win the old fellow to the idea.

There came the sound of a step on the path behind. The young man, turning, faced Robin. There was something in the latter's countenance that caused Frank to regard him searchingly.

"He is not there, then?"

"No, he is not there."

"He will be back soon, of course."

But Robin shook his head, and said with gentle gravity:

"No, he will not be back. He has journeyed to a far country."

Together they passed under the low eaves and entered the curious dwelling. Light came through the open door and the parchment-covered window. In the high-backed chair before the hearth the hermit sat, his chin dropped forward on his breast. His years of exile were ended. All the heart-yearning and loneliness had slipped away. He had become one with the shadows among which he had dwelt so long.

Nor was there any other life in the room. As the birds outside had vanished, so the flitting squirrels had departed--who shall say whither? Yet the change had come but recently--perhaps on that very morning--for though the fire had dropped to ashes on the hearth, a tiny wraith of smoke still lingered and drifted waveringly up the chimney.

The intruders moved softly about the room without speaking. Presently Frank beckoned to Robin, and pointed to something lying on the table. It was a birch-bark envelope, and in a dark ink, doubtless made from some root or berry, was addressed to Robin. The guide opened it and, taking it to the door, read:

MY DEAR BOY ROBIN:

I have felt of late that my time is very near. It is likely that I shall see you no more in this world. It is my desire, therefore, to set down my wishes here while I yet have strength. They are but few, for a life like mine leaves not many desires behind it.

It is my wish that such of my belongings as you care to preserve should be yours. They are of little value, but

perhaps the field glass and the books may in future years recall the story in which they have been a part. In a little chest you will find some other trifles—a picture or two, some papers that were once valuable to those living in the world of men, some old letters. All that is there, all that is mine and all the affection that lingers in my heart, are yours. Yet I must not forget the little girl who was once your sister. If it chance that you meet her again, and if when she knows my story she will care for any memento of this lonely life, you may place some trifle in her hands.

It was my story that I had chiefly meant to set down for you, for it is nearer to your own than you suppose. But now, only a few days since, out of my heart I gave it to those who were here and who, perhaps, ere this, have given you my message to come. A young man and a woman they were, and their happiness together led me to speak of old days and of a happiness that was mine. The girl's face stirred me strangely, and I spoke to her fully, as I have long wished, yet feared, to speak to you. You will show her this letter, and she will repeat to you all the tale which I no longer have strength to write. Then you will understand why I have been drawn to you so strangely; why I have called you "my dear boy"; why I would that I might call you "son."

There is no more—only, when you shall find me here asleep, make me a bed in the corner of my garden, where the hollyhocks come each year, and the squirrels frisk overhead, and the birds sing. Lay me not too deeply away from it all, and cover me only with boughs and the cool, gratifying earth which shall soothe away the fever. And bring no stone to mark the place, but only breathe a little word of prayer and leave me in the comfortable dark.

Neither Robin nor Frank spoke for a time after the reading of the letter. Then faithfully and with a few words they carried out the hermit's wishes. Tenderly and gently they bore him to the narrow resting-place which they prepared for him, and when the task was finished they stood above the spot for a little space with bowed heads. After this they returned to the cabin and gathered up such articles of Robin's inheritance as they would be able to carry down the mountain—the books and field glass, which had been so much to him; the gun above the mantel, a trout rod and a package of articles from the little chest which they had brought to the door and opened. At the top of the package was a small, cheap ferrotype picture, such as young people are wont to have made at the traveling photographer's. It was of a sweet-faced, merry-lipped girl, and Robin scanned it long and thoughtfully.

"That is such a face as my mother had when young," he said at last. Then turning to Frank, "Did he know my mother? Is that the story?"

Frank bent his head in assent.

"That is the story," he said, "but it is long. Besides, it is his wish, I am sure, that another should tell it to you."

He had taken from the chest some folded official-looking papers as he spoke, and glanced at them now, first hastily, then with growing interest. They were a quantity of registered bonds—the hermit's fortune, which in a few brief days had become, as he said, but a mockery of scrolled engraving and gaudy seals. Frank had only a slight knowledge of such matters, yet he wondered if by any possibility these old securities of a shipwrecked company might be of value to-day. The corporation title, he thought, had a familiar sound. A vague impression grew upon him that this company had been one of the few to be rehabilitated with time; that in some measure at least it had made good its obligations.

"Suppose you let me take these," he suggested to Robin. "They may not be wholly worthless. At least, it will do no harm to send them to my solicitor."

Robin nodded. He was still regarding the little tintype and the sweet, young face of the mother who had died so long ago.



CHAPTER XII

CONSTANCE RETURNS AND HEARS A STORY

"I only told him," Frank wrote that night to Constance, "that the hermit's story had a part in his mother's life. I suppose I might have told him more, but he seemed quite willing to wait and hear it from you, as suggested by the hermit's letter, and I was only too willing that he should do so. Knowing Robin, as you have, from childhood, and the sorrow of his early days and all, you are much better fitted to tell the story, and you will tell it much better than I. Robin is to leave again to-morrow on a trip over Marcy (Tahawus, I mean, for I hate these modern names), but will be back by the end of the week, by which time I hope you also will once more make glad these lonesome forest glades. Seriously, Conny, I long for you much more than perhaps you realize or, I am sure, would permit me to say. And I don't mean to write a love letter now. In the first place, I would not disobey orders to that degree, and even if I did, I know that you would say that it was only because poor old Robin Gray's story and his death, and all, and perhaps wandering about in these woods alone, had made me a bit sentimental. Well, who knows just whence and how emotions come? Perhaps you would be right, but if I should tell you that, during the two weeks which have nearly slipped by since that day when we found our way through the mist to the hermit's cabin, my whole point of view has somehow changed, and that, whatever the reasons, I see with different eyes--with a new heart and with an uplifted spirit--perhaps I should be right, too; and if from such a consecration my soul should speak and say, 'Dear, my heart, I love you, and I will love you all my days!' it may be that you would believe and understand."

Whether it was this letter, or the news it contained, or whether Mrs. Deane's improved condition warranted--from whatever reason, Constance and her mother two days later returned to the camp on the Au Sable. They were given a genuine ovation as they passed the Lodge, at which point Mr. Deane joined them. Frank found his heart in a very disturbing condition indeed as he looked once more into Miss Deane's eyes and took her hand in welcome. Later in the day, he deemed it necessary to take a walk in the direction of the camp to see if he could be of any assistance in making the new arrivals comfortable. It was a matter of course that he should remain for dinner, and whatever change may have taken place in him, he certainly appeared on this occasion much like the old light-hearted youth, with little thought beyond the joy of the event and the jest of the moment.

But that night, when he parted from Constance to take the dark trail home, he did not find it easy to go, nor yet to make an excuse for lingering. The mantle of gayety had somehow slipped away, and as they stood there in the fragrance of the firs, with the sound of falling water coming through the trees, the words he had meant to utter did not come.

He spoke at last of their day together on the mountain and of their visit to the hermit's cabin. To both of them it seemed something of a very long time ago. Then Frank recounted in detail all that had happened that quiet morning when he and Robin had visited the place, and spoke of the letter and last wishes of the dead man.

"You are sure you do not mind letting me tell Robin the story?" she said; "alone, I mean? I should like to do so, and I think he would prefer it."

Frank looked at her through the dusk.

"I want you to do it that way," he said earnestly. "I told you so in my letter. I have a feeling that any third person would be an intruder at such a time. It seems to me that you are the only one to tell him."

"Yes," she agreed, after a pause, "I am. I--knew Robin's mother. I was a little girl, but I remember. Oh, you will understand it all, some day."

Frank may have wondered vaguely why she put it in that way, but he made no comment. His hand found hers in the dusk, and he held it for a moment at parting.

"That is a dark way I am going," he said, looking down the trail. "But I shall not even remember the darkness, now that you are here again."

Constance laughed softly.

"Perhaps it is my halo that makes the difference."

A moment later he had turned to go, but paused to say--casually, it seemed:

"By the way, I have a story to read to you--a manuscript. It was written by some one I know, who had a copy mailed me. It came this morning. I am sure the author, whose name is to be withheld for the present, would appreciate your opinion."

"And my judgment is to be final, of course. Very well; Minerva holds her court at ten to-morrow, at the top of yon small mountain, which on the one side slopes to the lake, and on the other overlooks the pleasant Valley of Decision, which borders the West Branch."

"And do I meet Minerva on the mountain top, or do I call for her at the usual address--that is to say, here?"

"You may call for Minerva. After her recent period of inactivity she may need assistance over the hard places."

Frank did, in fact, arrive at the camp next morning almost in time for breakfast. Perhaps the habit of early rising had grown upon him of late. Perhaps he only wished to assure himself that Constance had really returned. Even a wish to hear her opinion of the manuscript may have exerted a certain influence.

They set out presently, followed by numerous injunctions from Mrs. Deane concerning fogs and trails and an early return. Frank had never ascended this steep little mountain back of the camp, save once by a trail that started from near the Lodge. He let Constance take the lead.

It was a rare morning--one of the first September days, when the early blaze of autumn begins to kindle along the hills, when there is just a spice of frost in the air, when the air and sunlight combine in a tonic that lifts the heart, the soul, almost the body itself, from the material earth.

"If you are Minerva, then I am Mercury," Frank declared as they ascended the first rise. "I feel that my feet have wings."

Then suddenly he paused, for they had come to a little enclosure, where the bushes had been but recently cleared away. There was a gate, and within a small grave, evidently that of a child; also a headstone upon which was cut the single word, "CONSTANCE."

Frank started a little as he read the name, and regarded it wonderingly without speaking. Then he turned to his companion with inquiry in his face.

"That was the first little Constance," she said. "I took her place and name. She always loved this spot, so when she died they laid her here. They expected to come back sooner. Her mother wanted just the name on the stone."

Frank had a strange feeling as he regarded the little grave.

"I never knew that you had lost a sister," he said. "I mean that your parents had buried a little girl. Of course, she died before you were born."

"No," she said, "but her death was a fearful blow. Mamma can hardly speak of it even to-day. She could never confess that her little girl was dead, so they called me by her name. I cannot explain it all now."

Frank said musingly:

"I remember your saying once that you were not even what you seemed to be. Is this what you meant?"

She nodded.

"Yes; that is what I meant."

They pushed on up the hill, without many words.

The little enclosure and the graven stone had made them thoughtful. Arriving at the peak they found, at the brow of a cliff, a broad, shelving stone which hung out over a deep, wooded hollow, where here and there the red and gold were beginning to gleam. From it they could look across toward Algonquin, where they tried to locate the spot of the hermit's cabin, and down upon the lake and the Lodge, which seemed to lie almost at their feet.

At first they merely rested and drank in the glory of the view. Then at last Frank drew from his pocket a folded typewritten paper.

"If the court of Minerva is convened, I will lay this matter before her," he said.

It was not a story of startling theme that he read to her--"The Victory of Defeat"; it was only a tale of a man's love, devotion and sacrifice, but it was told so simply, with so little attempt to make it seem a story, that one listening forgot that it was not indeed a true relation, that the people were not living and loving and suffering toward a surrender which rose to triumph with the final page. Once only Constance interrupted, to say:

"Your friend is fortunate to have so good a reader to interpret his story. I did not know you had that quality in your

voice."

He did not reply, and when he had finished reading and laid the manuscript down he waited for her comment. It was rather unexpected.

"You must be very fond of the one who wrote that," she said.

He looked at her quickly, hardly sure of her meaning. Then he smiled.

"I am. Almost too much so, perhaps."

"But why? I think I could love the man who did that story."

An expression half quizzical, half gratified, flitted across Frank's features.

"And if it were written by a woman?" he said.

Constance did not reply, and the tender look in her face grew a little cold. A tiny bit of something which she did not recognize suddenly germinated in her heart. It was hardly envy--she would have scorned to call it jealousy. She rose--rather hastily, it seemed.

"Which perhaps accounts for your having read it so well," she said. "I did not realize, and--I suppose such a story might be written by almost any woman except myself."

Frank caught up the manuscript and poised it like a missile.

"Another word and it goes over the cliff," he threatened.

She caught back his arm, laughing naturally enough.

"It is ourselves that must be going over the cliff," she declared. "I am sure Mamma is worrying about us already."



CHAPTER XIII

WHAT THE SMALL WOMAN IN BLACK SAW

With September the hurry at the Lodge subsided. Vacations were beginning to be over--mountain climbers and wood rangers were returning to office, studio and classroom. Those who remained were chiefly men and women bound to no regular occupations, caring more for the woods when the crowds of summer had departed and the red and gold of autumn were marching down the mountain side.

It had been a busy season at the Lodge, and Edith Morrison's face told the tale. The constant responsibility, and the effort to maintain the standard of entertainment, had left a worn look in her eyes and taken the color from her cheeks. The burden had lain chiefly on her young shoulders. Her father was invaluable as an entertainer and had a fund of information, but he was without practical resources, and the strain upon Edith had told. If for another reason a cloud had settled on her brow and a shadow had gathered in her heart, she had uttered no word, but had gone on, day by day, early and late, devising means and supervising methods--doing whatever was necessary to the management of a big household through all those busy weeks.

Little more than the others had she seen Robin during those last August days. He had been absent almost constantly. When he returned it was usually late, and such was the demand upon this most popular of Adirondack guides that in nearly every case he found a party waiting for early departure. If Edith suspected that there were times when he might have returned sooner, when she believed that he had paused at the camp on the west branch of the Au Sable, she still spoke no word and made no definite outward sign. Whatever she brooded in her heart was in that secret and silence which may have come down to her, with those black eyes and that glossy hair, from some old ancestor who silently in his wigwam pointed his arrows and cuddled his resentment to keep it warm. It had happened that during the days when Constance had been absent with her mother Robin had twice returned at an earlier hour, and this could hardly fail to strengthen any suspicion that might already exist of his fidelity, especially as the little woman in black had commented on the matter in Edith's presence, as well as upon the fact that immediately after the return of the absent ones he failed to reach the Lodge by daylight. It is a fact well established that once we begin to look for heartache we always find it--and, as well, some one to aid us in the search.

Not that Edith had made a confidante of the sinister-clad little woman. On the whole, she disliked her and was much more drawn toward the good-natured but garrulous old optimist, Miss Carroway, who saw with clear undistorted vision, and never failed to say a word--a great many words, in fact--that carried comfort because they constituted a plea for the creed of general happiness and the scheme of universal good. Had Edith sought a confidante merely for the sake of easing her heart, it is likely that it was to this good old spinster that she would have turned. But a nature such as hers does not confide its soul-hurt merely for the sake of consolation. In the beginning, when she had hinted something of it to Robin, he had laughed her fears away. Then, a little later, she had spoken to Frank Weatherby, for his sake as well as for her own. He had not laughed, but had listened and reflected, for the time at least; and his manner and his manhood, and that which she considered a bond of sympathy between them, made him the one to whom she must turn, now when the time had come to speak again.

There came a day when Robin did not go to the woods. In the morning he had been about the Lodge and the guides' cabin, of which he was now the sole occupant, greeting Edith in his old manner and suggesting a walk later in the day. But the girl pleaded a number of household duties, and presently Robin disappeared to return no more until late in the afternoon. When he did appear he seemed abstracted and grave, and went to the cabin to prepare for a trip next morning. Frank Weatherby, who had been putting in most of the day over some papers in his room, now returning from a run up the hillside to a point where he could watch the sunset, paused to look in, in passing.

"Miss Deane has been telling me the hermit's story," Robin said, as he saw who it was. "It seems to me one of the saddest stories I ever heard. My regret is that he did not tell it to me himself, years ago. Poor old fellow! As if I would have let it make any difference!"

"But he could not be sure," said Frank. "You were all in the world to him, and he could not afford to take the chance of losing you."

"And to think that all those years he lived up there, watching our struggle. And what a hard struggle it was! Poor mother--I wish she might have known he was there!"

Neither spoke for a time. Then they reviewed their visit to the hermitage together, when they had performed the last sad offices for its lonely occupant. Next morning Robin was away with his party and Frank wandered over to the camp, but found no one there besides the servants.

He surmised that Constance and her parents had gone to visit the little grave on the hillside, and followed in that direction, thinking to meet them. He was nearing the spot when, at a turn in the path, he saw them. He was unobserved, and he saw that Constance had her arms about Mrs. Deane, who was weeping. He withdrew silently and walked slowly back to the Lodge, where he spent the rest of the morning over a writing table in his room, while on the veranda the Circle of Industry--still active, though much reduced as to numbers--discussed the fact that of late Mr. Weatherby was seen oftener at the Lodge, while, on the other hand, Constance had scarcely been seen there since her return. The little woman in black shook her head ominously and hinted that she might tell a good deal if she would, an attitude which Miss Carroway promptly resented, declaring that she had thus far never known her to keep back anything that was worth telling.

It was during the afternoon that Frank, loitering through a little grove of birches near the boat landing, came face to face with Edith Morrison. He saw in an instant that she had something to say to him. She was as white as the birches about her, while in her eyes there was the bright, burning look he had seen there once before, now more fierce and intensified. She paused by a mossy-covered boulder called the "stone seat," and rested her hand upon it. Frank saw that she was trembling violently. He started to speak, but she forestalled him.

"I have something to tell you," she began, with hurried eagerness. "I spoke of it once before, when I only suspected. Now I know. I don't think you believed me then, and I doubted, sometimes, myself. But I do not doubt any longer. We have been fools all along, you and I. They have never cared for us since she came, but only for each other. And instead of telling us, as brave people would, they have let us go on--blinding us so they could blind others, or perhaps thinking we do not matter enough for them to care. Oh, you are kind and good, and willing to believe in them, but they shall not deceive you any longer. I know the truth, and I mean that you shall know it, too."

Out of the varying emotions with which the young man listened to the rapid torrent of words, there came the conviction that without doubt the girl, to have been stirred so deeply, must have seen or heard something which she regarded as definite. He believed that she was mistaken, but it was necessary that he should hear her, in order, if possible to convince her of her error. He motioned her into the seat formed by the boulder, for she seemed weak from over-excitement. Leaning against it, he looked down into her dark, striking face, startled to see how worn and frail she seemed.

"Miss Morrison," he began gently, "you are overwrought. You have had a hard summer, with many cares. Perhaps you have not been able to see quite clearly--perhaps things are not as you suppose--perhaps----"

She interrupted him.

"Oh," she said, "I do not suppose--I know! I have known all the time. I have seen it in a hundred ways, only they were ways that one cannot put into words. But now something has happened that anybody can see, and that can be told--something *has* been seen and told!"

She looked up at Frank--those deep, burning eyes of hers full of indignation. He said:

"Tell me just what you mean. What has happened, and who has seen it?"

"It was yesterday, in the woods--the woods between here and the camp on the Au Sable. They were sitting as we are, and he held her hand, and she had been crying. And when they parted he said to her, 'We must tell them. You must get Mrs. Deane's consent. I am sure Edith suspects something, and it isn't right to go on like this. We must tell them.' Then--then he kissed her. That--of course----"

The girl's voice broke and she could not continue. Frank waited a moment, then he said:

"And who witnessed this scene?"

"Mrs. Kitcher."

"You mean the little woman who dresses in black?"

"Yes, that is the one."

"And you would believe that tale-bearing eavesdropper?"

"I must. I have seen so much myself."

"Then, let me say this. I believe that most of what she told you is false. She may have seen them together. She may have seen him take her hand. I know that Miss Deane told Robin something yesterday that related to his past life, and that it was a sad tale. It might easily bring the tears, and she would give him her hand as an old friend. There may have

been something said about his telling you, for there is no reason why you should not know the story. It is merely of an old man who is dead, and who knew Robin's mother. So far as anything further, I believe that woman invented it purely to make mischief. One who will spy and listen will do more. I would not believe her on oath--nor must you, either."

But Edith still shook her head.

"Oh, you don't know!" she persisted. "There has been much besides. It is all a part of the rest. You have not a woman's intuition, and Robin has not a woman's skill in deceiving. There is something--I know there is something--I have seen it all along. And, oh, what should Robin keep from me?"

"Have you spoken to him of it?"

"Once--about the time you came--he laughed at me. I would hardly mention it again."

"Yet it seems to me that would be the thing to do," Frank reflected aloud. "At least, you can ask him about the story told him by Miss Deane. You--you may say I mentioned it."

Edith regarded him in amaze.

"And you think I could do that--that I could ask him of anything that he did not tell me of his own accord? Will you ask Miss Deane about that meeting in the woods?"

Frank shook his head.

"I do not need to do so. I know about it."

She looked at him quickly--puzzled for the moment as to his meaning--wondering if he, too, might be a part of a conspiracy against her happiness. Then she said, comprehending:

"No, you only believe. I have not your credulity and faith. I see things as they are, and it is not right that you should be blinded any longer. I had to tell you."

She rose with quick suddenness as if to go.

"Wait," he said. "I am glad you told me. I believe everything is all right, whatever that woman saw. I believe she saw very little, and until you have seen and learned for yourself you must believe that, too. Somehow, everything always comes out right. It must, you know, or the world is a failure. And this will come out right. Robin will tell you the story when he comes back, and explain everything. I am sure of it. Don't let it trouble you for a single moment."

He put out his hand instinctively and she took it. Her eyes were full of hot tears. It came upon Frank in that instant that if Mrs. Kitcher were watching now she would probably see as much to arouse suspicion as she had seen the day before, and he said so without hesitation. Edith made a futile effort to reflect his smile.

"Yes," she agreed, "but, oh, that was different! There was more, and there has been so much--all along."

She left him then, followed by a parting word of reassurance. When she had disappeared he dropped back on the stone seat and sat looking through the trees toward the little boat landing, revolving in his mind the scene just ended. From time to time he applied unpleasant names to the small woman in black, whose real name had proved to be Kitcher. What, after all, had she really seen and heard? He believed, very little. Certainly not so much as she had told. But then, one by one, certain trifling incidents came back to him--a word here--a look there--the tender speaking of a name--even certain inflections and scarcely perceptible movements--the things which, as Edith had said, one cannot put into words. Reviewing the matter carefully, he became less certain in his faith. Perhaps, after all, Edith was right--perhaps there was something between those two; and troubling thoughts took the joy out of the sunlight and the brightness from the dancing waters.

The afternoon was already far gone, and during the rest of the day he sat in the little grove of birches above the landing, smoking and revolving many matters in his mind. For a time the unhappiness of Edith Morrison was his chief thought, and he resolved to go immediately to Constance and lay the circumstances fully before her, that she might clear up the misunderstanding and restore general happiness and good will. Twice, indeed, he rose to set out for the camp, but each time returned to the stone seat. What if it were really true that a great love had sprung up between Constance and Robin--a love which was at once a glory and a tragedy--such a love as had brightened and blotted the pages of history since the gods began their sports with humankind and joined them in battle on the plains of Troy? What if it were true after all? If it were true, then Constance and Robin would reveal it soon enough, of their own accord. If it were not true, then Edith Morrison's wild jealousy would seem absurd to Constance, and to Robin, who would be obliged to know. Frank argued that he had no right to risk for her such humiliation as would result to one of

her temperament for having given way to groundless jealousy. These were the reasons he gave himself for not going with the matter to Constance. But the real reason was that he did not have the courage to approach her on the subject. For one thing, he would not know how to begin. For another--and this, after all, comprised everything--he was afraid it *might be true*.

So he lingered there on the stone seat while the September afternoon faded, the sun slipped down the west, and long, cool mountain shadows gathered in the little grove. If it were true, there was no use of further endeavor. It was for Constance, more than for any other soul, living or dead, that he had renewed his purpose in life, that he had recalled old ambitions, re-established old effort.

Without Constance, what was the use? Nobody would care--he least of all. If it were true, the few weeks of real life that had passed since that day with her on the mountain, when they had been lost in the mist and found the hermitage together, would remain through the year to come a memory somewhat like that which the hermit had carried with him into the wilderness. Like Robin Gray, he, too, would become a hermit, though in that greater wilderness--the world of men. Yet he could be more than Robin Gray, for with means he could lend a hand. And then he remembered that such help would not be needed, and the thought made the picture in his mind seem more desolate--more hopeless.

But suddenly, from somewhere--out of the clear sky of a sub-conscious mind, perhaps--a thought, a resolve, clothed in words, fell upon his lips. "If it is true, and if I can win her love, I will marry Edith Morrison," he said.



CHAPTER XIV

WHAT MISS CARROWAY DID

The Circle of Industry had been minus an important member that afternoon. The small woman in black was there, and a reduced contingent of such auxiliary members as still remained in the wilds, but the chief director and center of affairs, Miss Carroway, was absent. She had set out immediately after luncheon, and Mrs. Kitcher had for once enjoyed the privilege of sowing discord, shedding gloom and retailing dark hints, unopposed and undismayed. Her opponent, for the time at least, had abandoned the field.

Miss Carroway had set out quietly enough, taking the path around the lake that on the other side joined the trail which led to the Deane camp. It was a rare afternoon, and the old lady, carefully dressed, primly curled, and with a bit of knitting in her hand, sauntered leisurely through the sunlit woods toward the West Branch. She was a peaceful note in the picture as she passed among the tall spruces, or paused for a moment amid a little grove of maples that were turning red and gold, some of the leaves drifting to her feet. Perhaps she reflected that for them, as for her, the summer time was over--that their day of usefulness was nearly ended. Perhaps she recalled the days not long ago when the leaves had been fresh and fair with youth, and it may be that the thought brought back her own youth, when she had been a girl, climbing the hills back of Haverford--when there had been young men who had thought her as fresh and fair, and one who because of a misunderstanding had gone away to war without a good-bye, and had died at Wilson's Creek with a bullet through her picture on his heart.

As she lingered here and there in the light of these pleasant places, it would have been an easy task to reconstruct in that placid, faded face the beauty of forty years ago, to see in her again the strong, handsome girl who had put aside her own heritage of youth and motherhood to carry the burdens of an invalid sister, to adopt, finally, as her own, the last feeble, motherless infant, to devote her years and strength to him, to guide him step by step to a place of honor among his fellow-men. Seeing her now, and knowing these things, it was not hard to accord her a former beauty--it was not difficult even to declare her beautiful still--for something of it all had come back, something of the old romance, of awakened purpose and the tender interest of love.

Where the trail crossed the Au Sable Falls, she paused and surveyed the place with approval.

"That would be a nice place for a weddin'," she reflected aloud. "Charlie used to say a piece at school about 'The groves was God's first temples,' an' this makes me think of it."

Then she forgot her reflections, for a little way beyond the falls, assorting something from a basket, was the object of her visit, Constance Deane. She had spread some specimens on the grass and was comparing them with the pictures in the book beside her. As Miss Carroway approached, she greeted her cordially.

"Welcome to our camp," she said. "I have often wondered why you never came over this way. My parents will be so glad to see you. You must come right up to the house and have a cup of tea."

But Miss Carroway seated herself on the grass beside Constance, instead.

"I came over to see *you*," she said quietly, "just you alone. I had tea before I started. I want to talk about one or two things a little, an' mebbe to give you some advice."

Constance smiled and looked down at the mushrooms on the grass.

"About those, you mean," she said. "Well, I suppose I need it. I find I know less than I thought I did in the beginning."

Miss Carroway shook her head.

"No," she admitted; "I've give up that question. I guess the books know more than I do. You ain't dead yet, an' if they was pizen you would 'a' been by this time. It's somethin' else I want to talk about--somethin' that's made a good many people unhappy, includin' me. That was a long time ago, but I s'pose I ain't quite got over it yet."

A good deal of the September afternoon slipped away as the two women talked there in the sunshine by the Au Sable Falls. When at last Miss Carroway rose to go, Constance rose, too, and, taking her hand, kissed the old lady on the cheek.

"You are sweet and good," she said, "and I wish I could do as much for you as you have done, and are willing to do for me. If I have not confided in you, it is only because I cannot--to-day. But I shall tell you all that there is to tell as soon--almost as soon--as I tell any one. It may be to-morrow, and I promise you that there shall be no unhappiness that I can

help."

"Things never can be set straight too soon," said the old lady. "I've had a long time to think of that."

Miss Deane's eyes grew moist.

"Oh, I thank you for telling me your story!" she said. "It is beautiful, and you have lived a noble life."

The shadows had grown deeper in the woods as Miss Carroway followed a path back to the lake, and so around to the Lodge. The sun had vanished from the tree tops, and some of the light and reflex of youth had faded from the old lady's face.

Perhaps she was a little weary with her walk, and it may be a little disappointed at what she had heard, or rather what she had not heard, in her talk with Constance Deane. At the end of the lake she followed the path through the little birch grove and came upon Frank Weatherby, where he mused, on the stone seat.

Miss Carroway paused as he rose and greeted her.

"I just come from a good walk," she said peacefully. "I've been over to the Deanes' camp. It's a pretty place."

Frank nodded.

"I suppose you saw the family," he said.

"No; only Miss Deane. She was studyin' tudstools, but I guess they wa'n't pizen. I guess she knows 'em."

Frank made no comment on this remark, and the old lady looked out on the lake a moment and added, as one reflecting aloud on a matter quite apart from the subject in hand:

"If I was a young man and had anything on my mind, I'd go to the one it was about and get it off as quick as I could."

Then she started on up the path, Frank stepping aside to let her pass. As he did so, he lifted his hat and said:

"I think that is good advice, Miss Carroway, and I thank you for it."

But he dropped back on the seat when she was gone, and sat staring out on the water, that caught and gave back the colors of the fading sky. Certainly it was good advice, and he would act on it--to-morrow, perhaps--not to-day. Then he smiled, rather quaintly.

"I wonder who will be next on the scene," he thought. "First, the injured girl. Then the good old busybody, whose mission it is to help things along. It would seem about time for the chief characters to appear."

Once the sun is gone, twilight gathers quickly in the hills. The color blended out of the woods, the mountains around the lake faded into walls of tone, a tide of dusk crept out of the deeper forest and enclosed the birches. Only the highest mountain peaks, Algonquin and Tahawus, caught the gold and amethyst of day's final tokens of good-bye. Then that faded, and only the sky told the story to the lake, that repeated it in its heart.

From among the shadows on the farther side a boat drifted into the evening light. It came noiselessly. Frank's eye did not catch it until it neared the center of the lake. Then presently he recognized the silhouetted figures, holding his breath a little as he watched them to make sure. Evidently Robin had returned with his party and stopped by the Deane camp. Frank's anticipation was to be realized. The chief characters in the drama were about to appear.

Propelled by Robin's strong arms, the Adirondack canoe shot quickly to the little dock. A moment later the guide took a basket handed to him and assisted his two passengers, Constance and Mrs. Deane, to land. As they stood on the dock they were in the half dusk, yet clearly outlined against the pale-green water behind. Frank wondered what had brought Mrs. Deane to the Lodge. Probably the walk and row through the perfect evening.

The little group was but a few yards distant, but it never occurred to Frank that he could become an eavesdropper. The presence of Mrs. Deane would have dispelled any such idea, even had it presented itself. He watched them without curiosity, deciding that when they passed the grove of birches he would step out and greet them. For the moment, at least, most of his recent doubts were put aside.

But all at once he saw Constance turn to her mother and take her hands.

"You are sure you are willing that we should make it known to-night?" she said.

And quite distinctly on that still air came the answer:

"Yes, dear. I have kept you and Robin waiting long enough. After all, Robin is more to you than I am," and the elder woman held out her hand to Robin Farnham, who, taking it, drew closer to the two.

Then the girl's arms were about her mother's neck, but a moment later she had turned to Robin.

"After to-night we belong to each other," she said. "How it will surprise everybody," and she kissed him fairly on the lips.

It had all happened so quickly--so unexpectedly--they had been so near--that Frank could hardly have chosen other than to see and hear. He sat as one stupefied while they ascended the path, passing within a few feet of the stone seat. He was overcome by the suddenness of the revelation, even though the fact had been the possibility in his afternoon's brooding. Also, he was overwhelmed with shame and mortification that he should have heard and seen that which had been intended for no ears and eyes but their own.

How fiercely he had condemned Mrs. Kitcher, who, it would seem, had been truthful, after all, and doubtless even less culpable in her eavesdropping. He told himself that he should have turned away upon the first word spoken by Constance to her mother. Then he might not have heard and seen until the moment when they had intended that the revelation should be made. That was why Mrs. Deane had come--to give dignity and an official air to the news.

He wondered if he and Edith were to be told privately, or if the bans were to be announced to a gathered company, as in the old days when they were published to church congregations. And Edith--what would it mean to her--what would she do? Oh, there was something horrible about it all--something impossible--something that the brain refused to understand. He did not see or hear the figure that silently--as silently as an Indian--from the other end of the grove stole up the incline toward the Lodge, avoiding the group, making its way to the rear by another path. He only sat there, stunned and hopeless, in the shadows.

The night air became chill and he was growing numb and stiff from sitting in one position. Still he did not move. He was trying to think. He would not go to the Lodge. He would not be a spectacle. He would not look upon, or listen to, their happiness. He would go away at once, to-night. He would leave everything behind and, following the road to Lake Placid, would catch an early train.

Then he remembered that he had said he would marry Edith Morrison if he could win her love. But the idea had suddenly grown impossible. Edith--why, Edith would be crushed in the dust--killed. No, oh, no, that was impossible--that could not happen--not now--not yet.

He recalled, too, what he had resolved concerning a life apart, such a life as the hermit had led among the hills, and he thought his own lot the more bitter, for at least the hermit's love had been returned and it was only fate that had come between. Yet he would be as generous. They would not need his help, but through the years he would wish them well--yes, he could do that--and he would watch from a distance and guard their welfare if ever time of need should come.

Long through the dark he sat there, unheeding the time, caring nothing that the sky had become no longer pale but a deep, dusky blue, while the lake carried the stars in its bosom.



CHAPTER XV

EDITH AND FRANK

It may have been an hour--perhaps two of them--since Robin with Constance and her mother had passed him on the way to the Lodge, when suddenly Frank heard some one hurrying down the path. It was the rustle of skirts that he heard, and he knew that it was a woman running. Just at the little grove of birches she stopped and seemed to hesitate. In the silence of the place he could hear her breath come pantingly, as from one laboring under heavy excitement. Then there was a sort of sobbing moan, and a moment later a voice that he scarcely recognized as that of Edith Morrison, so full of wild anguish it was, called his name. He had already risen, and was at her side in an instant.

"What is it?" he demanded; "tell me everything--tell me quickly!"

"Oh," she wailed, "I knew you must be here. They couldn't find you, and I knew why. I knew you had been here, and had seen what I saw, and heard what I heard. Oh, you must go to her--you must go at once!"

She had seized his arm with both hands, shaking with a storm of emotion--of terror, it seemed--her eyes burning through the dark.

"When I saw that, I went mad," she raved on. "I saw everything through a black mist, and out of it the devil came and tempted me. He put the means in my hands to destroy my enemy, and I have done it--oh, I have done it! You said it was the Devil's Garden, and it is! Oh, it is his--I know it! I know it!"

The girl was fairly beside herself--almost incoherent--but there was enough in her words and fierce excitement to fill Frank with sudden apprehension.

"What is it you have done?" he demanded. "Tell me what you mean by the devil tempting you to destroy your enemy. What have you done?"

A wave of passion, anguish, remorse broke over her, and she clung to him heavily. She could not find voice at first. When she did, it had become a shuddering whisper.

"I have killed her!" she managed to gasp. "I have killed her! I did it with the Yellow Danger--you remember--the Yellow Danger--that day in the Devil's Garden--that poison one--that deadly one with the cup--there were some among those she brought to-night. She must have left them there by mistake. I knew them--I remembered that day--and, oh, I have been there since. But I was about to throw them away when the devil came from his garden and tempted me. He said no one could ever suspect or blame me. I put one of the deadly ones among those that went to her place at dinner. When it was too late I was sorry. I realized, all at once, that I was a murderer and must not live. So I ran down here to throw myself in the lake. Then I remembered that you were here, and that perhaps you could do something to save her. Oh, she doesn't know! She is happy up there, but she is doomed. You must help her! You must! Oh, I do not want to die a murderer! I cannot do that--I cannot!"

The girl's raving had been in part almost inaudible, but out of it the truth came clearly. Constance had brought some mushrooms to the Lodge, and these, as usual, had been sent in to Edith to prepare. Among them Edith had found some which she recognized as those declared by Constance to be deadly, and these she had allowed to go to Constance's plate. Later, stricken with remorse, she had rushed out to destroy herself, and was now as eager to save her victim.

All this rushed through Frank's brain in an instant, and for a moment he remembered only that day in the Devil's Garden, and the fact that a deadly fungus which Constance had called the Yellow Danger was about to destroy her life. But then, in a flash, came back the letter, written from Lake Placid, in which Constance had confessed a mistake, and referred to a certain Amanita which she had thought poisonous as a choice edible mushroom, called by the ancients "food of the gods." He remembered now that this was the Orange Amanita or "Yellow Danger," and a flood of hope swept over him; but he must be certain of the truth.

"Miss Morrison," he said, in a voice that was at once gentle and grave, "this is a bitter time for us all. But you must be calm, and show me, if you can, one of those yellow mushrooms you did not use. I have reason to hope that they are not the deadly ones after all. But take me where I can see them, at once."

His words and tone seemed to give the girl new strength and courage.

"Oh, don't tell me that unless it is true!" she pleaded. "Don't tell me that just to get me to go back to the Lodge! Oh, I will do anything to save her! Come--yes--come, and I will show them to you!"

She started hurriedly in the direction of the Lodge, Frank keeping by her side. As they neared the lights she seized his arm and detained him an instant.

"You will not let her die?" She trembled, her fear returning. "She is so young and beautiful--you will not let her die? I will give up Robin, but she must not die."

He spoke to her reassuringly, and they pushed on, making a wide detour which brought them to the rear of the Lodge. Through the window they saw the servants still passing to and fro into the dining-room serving a few belated guests. From it a square of light penetrated the woods behind, and on the edge of this they paused--the girl's eyes eagerly scanning the ground.

"I hid them here," she said. "I did not put them in the waste, for fear some one would see them."

Presently she knelt and brushed aside the leaves. Something like gold gleamed before her and she seized upon it. A moment later she had uncovered another similar object.

"There," she said chokingly; "there they are! Tell me--tell me quick! Are they the deadly ones?"

He gave them a quick glance in the light, then he said:

"I think not, but I cannot be sure here. Come with me to the guide's cabin. It was dark as we came up, but it was open. I will strike a light."

They hurried across to the little detached cabin and pushed in. Frank struck a match and lit a kerosene bracket lamp. Then he laid the two yellow mushrooms on the table beneath it, and from an inner pocket drew a small and rather mussed letter and opened it--his companion watching every movement with burning eager eyes.

"This is a letter from Miss Deane," he said, "written me from Lake Placid. In it she says that she made a mistake about the Orange Amanita that she called the Yellow Danger. These are her words--a rule taken from the book:

"If the cup of the Yellow Amanita is present, the plant is harmless. If the cup is absent, it is poisonous."

He bent forward and looked closely at the specimens before him.

"That is surely the cup," he said. "She gathered these and put them among the others by intention, knowing them to be harmless. She is safe, and you have committed no crime."

His last words fell on insensate ears. Edith drew a quick breath that was half a cry, and an instant later Frank saw that she was reeling. He caught her and half lifted her to a bench by the door, where she lay insensible. An approaching step caught Frank's ear and, as he stepped to the door, Robin Farnham, who had seen the light in the cabin, was at the entrance. A startled look came into his eyes as he saw Edith's white face, but Frank said quietly:

"Miss Morrison has had a severe shock--a fright. She has fainted, but I think there is no danger. I will remain while you bring a cup of water."

There was a well at the end of the Lodge, and Robin returned almost immediately with a filled cup.

Already Edith showed signs of returning consciousness, and Frank left the two, taking his way to the veranda, where he heard the voices of Constance and her mother, mingled with that of Miss Carroway. He ascended the steps with a resolute tread and went directly to Constance, who came forward to meet him.

"And where did you come from?" she demanded gayly. "We looked for you all about. Mamma and I came over on purpose to dine with you, and I brought a very especial dish, which I had all to myself. Still, we did miss you, and Miss Carroway has been urging us to send out a searching party."

Frank shook hands with Mrs. Deane and Miss Carroway, apologizing for his absence and lateness. Then he turned to Constance, and together they passed down to the further end of the long veranda. Neither spoke until they were out of earshot of the others. Then the girl laid her hand gently on her companion's arm.

"I have something to tell you," she began. "I came over on purpose--something I have been wanting to say a long time, only----"

He interrupted her.

"I know," he said; "I can guess what it is. That was why I did not come sooner. I came now because I have something to say to you. I did not intend to come at all, but then something happened and--I have changed my mind. I will only keep you a moment."

His voice was not quite steady, but grave and determined, with a tone in it which the girl did not recognize. Her hand slipped from his arm.

"Tell me first," he went on, "if you are quite sure that the mushrooms you brought for dinner--all of them--the yellow ones--are entirely harmless."

Certainly this was an unexpected question. Something in the solemn manner and suddenness of it may have seemed farcical. For an instant she perhaps thought him jesting, for there was a note of laughter in her voice as she replied:

"Oh, yes; quite certain. Those are the Caesar mushrooms--food of the gods--I brought them especially for you. But how did you know of them?"

He did not respond to this question, nor to her light tone.

"Miss Deane," he went on, "I know perfectly well what you came here to say. I happened to be in the little grove of birches to-night when you landed with your mother and Robin Farnham, and I saw and heard what took place on the dock, almost before I realized that I was eavesdropping. Unfortunately, though I did not know it then, another saw and heard, as well, and the shock of it was such that it not only crushed her spirit but upset her moral balance for the time. You will know, of course, that I refer to Edith Morrison. She had to know, and perhaps no one is to blame for her suffering--and mine; only it seems unfortunate that the revelation should have come just as it did rather than in the gentler way which you perhaps had planned."

He paused a moment to collect words for what he had to say next. Constance was looking directly at him, though her expression was lost in the dusk. Her voice, however, was full of anxiety.

"There is a mistake," she began eagerly. "Oh, I will explain, but not now. Where is Edith? Tell me first what has happened to Edith."

"I will do that, presently. She is quite safe. The man she was to marry is with her. But first I have something to say--something that I wish to tell you before--before I go. I want to say to you in all honesty that I consider Robin Farnham a fine, manly fellow--more worthy of you than I--and that I honor you in your choice, regretting only that it must bring sorrow to other hearts. I want to confess to you that never until after that day upon the mountain did I realize the fullness of my love for you--that it was all in my life that was worth preserving--that it spoke to the best there was in me. I want you to know that it stirred old ambitions and restored old dreams, and that I awoke to renewed effort and to the hope of achievement only because of you and of your approval. The story I read to you that day on the mountain was my story. I wrote it those days while you were away. It was the beginning of a work I hoped to make worth while. I believed that you cared, and that with worthy effort I could win you for my own. I had Robin Gray's character in mind for my hero, not dreaming that I should be called upon to make a sacrifice on my own account, but now that the time is here I want you to know that I shall try not to make it grudgingly or cravenly, but as manfully as I can. I want to tell you from my heart and upon my honor that I wish you well--that if ever the day comes when I can be of service to you or to him, I will do whatever lies in my power and strength. It is not likely such a time will ever come, for in the matter of means you will have ample and he will have enough. Those bonds which poor old Robin Gray believed worthless all these years have been restored to their full value, and more; and, even if this were not true, Robin Farnham would make his way and command the recognition and the rewards of the world. What will become of my ambition I do not know. It awoke too late to mean anything to you, and the world does not need my effort. As a boy, I thought it did, and that my chances were all bright ahead. But once, a long time ago, in these same hills, I gave my lucky piece to a little mountain girl, and perhaps I gave away my opportunities with it, and my better strength. Now, there is no more to say except God bless you and love you, as I always will."

And a moment later he added:

"I left Miss Morrison with Robin Farnham in the guide's cabin. If she is not there you will probably find her in her room. Be as kind to her as you can. She needs everything."

He held out his hand then, as if to leave her. But she took it and held it fast. He felt that hers trembled.

"You are brave and true," she said, "and you cannot go like this. You will not leave the Lodge without seeing me again. Promise me you will not. I have something to say to you--something it is necessary you should know. It is quite a long story and will take time. I cannot tell it now. Promise me that you will walk once more with me to-morrow morning. I will go now to Edith; but promise me what I ask. You must."

"It is not fair," he said slowly, "but I promise you."

"You need not come for me," she said. "Our walk will be in the other direction. I will meet you here quite early."

He left her at the entrance of the wide hall and, ascending to his room, began to put his traps together in readiness for departure by stage next day.

Constance descended the veranda steps and crossed over to the guides' cabin, where a light still shone. As she approached the open door she saw Edith and Robin sitting on the bench, talking earnestly. Edith had been crying, but appeared now in a calmer frame of mind. Robin held both her hands in his, and she made no apparent attempt to withdraw them. Then came the sound of footsteps and Constance stood in the doorway. For a moment Edith was startled. Then, seeing who it was, she sprang up and ran forward with extended arms.

"Forgive me! Oh, forgive me!" she cried; "I did not know! I did not know!"

CHAPTER XVI

THE LUCKY PIECE

True to her promise, Constance was at the Lodge early next morning. Frank, a trifle pale and solemn, waited on the veranda steps. Yet he greeted her cheerfully enough, for the Circle of Industry, daily dwindling in numbers but still a quorum, was already in session, and Miss Carroway and the little woman in black had sharp eyes and ears. Constance went over to speak to this group. With Miss Carroway she shook hands.

Frank lingered by the steps, waiting for her, but instead of returning she disappeared into the Lodge and was gone several minutes.

"I wanted to see Miss Morrison," she exclaimed, in a voice loud enough for all to hear. "She did not seem very well last night. I find she is much better this morning."

Frank did not make any reply, or look at her. He could not at all comprehend. They set out in the old way, only they did not carry the basket and book of former days, nor did the group on the veranda call after them with warning and advice. But Miss Carroway looked over to the little woman in black with a smile of triumph. And Mrs. Kitcher grimly returned the look with another which may have meant "wait and see."

A wonderful September morning had followed the perfect September night. There was a smack of frost in the air, but now, with the flooding sunlight, the glow of early autumn and the odors of dying summer time, the world seemed filled with anodyne and glory. Frank and Constance followed the road a little way and then, just beyond the turn, the girl led off into a narrow wood trail to the right--the same they had followed that day when they had visited the Devil's Garden.

She did not pause for that now. She pushed ahead as one who knew her ground from old acquaintance, with that rapid swinging walk of hers which seemed always to make her a part of these mountains, and their uncertain barricaded trails. Frank followed behind, rarely speaking save to comment upon some unusual appearance in nature--wondering at her purpose in it all, realizing that they had never continued so far in this direction before.

They had gone something less than a mile, perhaps, when they heard the sound of tumbling water, and a few moments later were upon the banks of a broad stream that rushed and foamed between the bowlders. Frank said, quietly:

"This is like the stream where I caught the big trout--you remember?"

"It is the same," she said, "only that was much farther up. Come, we will cross."

He put out his hand as if to assist her. She did not take it, but stepped lightly to a large stone, then to another and another--springing a little to one side here, just touching a bowlder all but covered with water there, and so on, almost more rapidly than Frank could follow--as one who knew every footing of that uncertain causeway. They were on the other side presently, and took up the trail there.

"I did not know you were so handy crossing streams," said Frank. "I never saw you do it before."

"But that was not hard. I have crossed many worse ones. Perhaps I was lighter of foot then."

They now passed through another stretch of timber, Constance still leading the way. The trail was scarcely discernible here and there, as one not often used, but she did not pause. They had gone nearly a mile farther when a break of light appeared ahead, and presently they came to a stone wall and a traveled road. Constance did not scale the wall, but seated herself on it as if to rest. A few feet away Frank leaned against the barrier, looking at the road and then at his companion, curious but silent. Presently Constance said:

"You are wondering what I have to tell you, and why I have brought you all this way to tell it. Also, how I could follow the trail so easily--aren't you?" and she smiled up at him in the old way.

"Yes," admitted Frank; "though as for the trail, I suppose you must have been over it before--some of those times before I came."

She nodded.

"That is true. You were not here when I traveled this trail before. It was Robin who came with me the last time. But that was long ago--almost ten years."

"You have a good memory."

"Yes, very good--better than yours. That is why I brought you here to-day--to refresh your memory."

There was something of the old banter in her voice, and something in her expression, inscrutable though it was, that for some reason set his heart to beating. He wondered if she could be playing with him. He could not understand, and said as much.

"You brought me here to tell me a story," he concluded. "Isn't that what you said? I shall miss the Lake Placid hack if we do not start back presently."

Again that inscrutable, disturbing look.

"Is it so necessary that you should start to-day?" she asked. "Mr. Meelie, I am sure, will appreciate your company just as much another time. And to-day is ours."

That look--it kept him from saying something bitter then.

"The story--you are forgetting it," he said, quietly.

"No, I am not forgetting." The banter had all gone out of her voice, and it had become gentle--almost tender. A soft, far-away look had come into her eyes. "I am only trying to think how to tell it--how to begin. I thought perhaps you might help me--only you don't--your memory is so poor."

He had no idea of her meaning now, and ventured no comment.

"You do not help me," she went on. "I must tell my little story alone. After all, it is only a sequel--do you care for sequels?"

There was something in her face just then that, had it not been for all that had come between them, might have made him take her in his arms.

"I--I care for what you are about to tell," he said.

She regarded him intently, and a great softness came into her eyes.

"It is the sequel of a story we heard together," she began, "that day on McIntyre, in the hermit's cabin. You remember that he spoke of the other child--a little girl--hers. This is the story of that little girl. You have heard something of her already--how the brother toiled for her and his mother--how she did not fully understand the bitterness of it all. Yet she tried to help--a little. She thought of many things. She had dreams that grew out of the fairy book her mother used to read to her, and she looked for Aladdin caves among the hills, and sometimes fancied herself borne away by the wind and the sea to some far Eastern land where the people would lay their treasures at her feet. But more than all she waited for the wonderful fairy prince who would one day come to her with some magic talisman of fortune which would make them all rich, and happy ever after.

"Yet, while she dreamed, she really tried to help in other ways--little ways of her own--and in the summer she picked berries and, standing where the stage went by, she held them out to the tourists who, when the stage halted, sometimes bought them for a few pennies. Oh, she was so glad when they bought them--the pennies were so precious--though it meant even more to her to be able to look for a moment into the faces of those strangers from another world, and to hear the very words that were spoken somewhere beyond the hills."

She paused, and Frank, who had leaned a bit nearer, started to speak, but she held up her hand for silence.

"One day, when the summer was over and all the people were going home--when she had gathered her last few berries, for the bushes were nearly bare--she stood at her place on the stone in front of the little house at the top of the hill, waiting for the stage. But when it came, the people only looked at her, for the horses did not stop, but galloped past to the bottom of the hill, while she stood looking after them, holding that last saucer of berries, which nobody would buy.

"But at the foot of the hill the stage did stop, and a boy, oh, such a handsome boy and so finely dressed, leaped out and ran back all the way up the hill to her, and stood before her just like the prince in the fairy tales she had read, and told her he had come to buy her berries. And then, just like the prince, he had only an enchanted coin--a talisman--his lucky piece. And this he gave to her, and he made her take it. He took her hand and shut it on the coin, promising he would come for it again some day, when he would give her for it anything she might wish, asking only that she keep it safe. And then, like the prince, he was gone, leaving her there with the enchanted coin. Oh, she hardly dared to look, for fear it might not be there after all. But when she opened her hand at last and saw that it had not vanished, then she was sure that all the tales were true, for her fairy prince had come to her at last."

Again Frank leaned forward to speak, a new light shining in his face, and again she raised her hand to restrain him.

"You would not help me," she said, "your memory was so poor. Now, you must let me tell the story.

"The child took the wonderful coin to her mother. I think she was very much excited, for she wept and sobbed over the lucky talisman that was to bring fortune for them all. And I know that her mother, pale, and in want, and ill, kissed her and smiled, and said that now the good days must surely come.

"They did not come that winter--a wild winter of fierce cold and terrible storms. When it was over and the hills were green with summer, the tired mother went to sleep one day, and so found her good fortune in peace and rest.

"But for the little girl there came a fortune not unlike her dreams. That year a rich man and woman had built a camp in the hills. There was no Lodge, then; everything was wild, and supplies hard to get. The child's brother sold vegetables to the camp, sometimes letting his little sister go with him. And because she was of the same age as a little girl of the wealthy people, now and then they asked her to spend the day, playing, and her brother used to come all the way for her again at night. There was one spot on the hillside where they used to play--an open, sunny place that they loved best of all--and this they named their Garden of Delight; and it was truly that to the little girl of the hills who had never had such companionship before.

"But then came a day when a black shadow lay on the Garden of Delight, for the little city child suddenly fell ill and died. Oh, that was a terrible time. Her mother nearly lost her mind, and was never quite the same again. She would not confess that her child was dead, and she was too ill to be taken home to the city, so a little grave was made on the hillside where the children had played together, and by and by the feeble woman crept there to sit in the sun, and had the other little girl brought there to play, as if both were still living. It was just then that the mother of Robin and his little sister died, and the city woman, when she heard of it, said to the little girl: 'You have no mother and I have no little girl. I will be your mother and you shall be my little girl. You shall have all the dresses and toys; even the name--I will give you that.' She would have helped the boy, too, but he was independent, even then, and would accept nothing. Then she made them both promise that neither would ever say to any one that the little girl was not really hers, and she made the little girl promise that she would not speak of it, even to her, for she wanted to make every one, even herself, believe that the child was really hers. She thought in time it might take the cloud from her mind, and I believe it did, but it was years before she could even mention the little dead girl again. And the boy and his sister kept their promise faithfully, though this was not hard to do, for the rich parents took the little girl away. They sailed across the ocean, just as she had expected to do some day, and she had beautiful toys and dresses and books, just as had always happened in the fairy tales.

"They did not come back from across the ocean. The child's foster father had interests there and could remain abroad for most of the year, and the mother cared nothing for America any more. So the little girl grew up in another land, and did not see her brother again, and nobody knew that she was not really the child of the rich people, or, if any did know, they forgot.

"But the child remembered. She remembered the mountains and the storms, and the little house at the top of the hill, and her mother, and the brother who had stayed among the hills, and who wrote now and then to tell them he was making his way. But more than all she remembered the prince--her knight she called him as she grew older--because it seemed to her that he had been so noble and brave to come back up the hill and give her his lucky piece that had brought her all the fortune. Always she kept the coin for him, ready when he should call for it, and when she read how Elaine had embroidered a silken covering for the shield of Launcelot, she also embroidered a little silken casing for the coin and wore it on her neck, and never a day or night did she let it go away from her. Some day she would meet him again, and then she must have it ready, and being a romantic schoolgirl, she wondered sometimes what she might dare to claim for it in return. For he would be a true, brave knight, one of high purpose and noble deeds; and by day the memory of the handsome boy flitted across her books, and by night she dreamed of him as he would some day come to her, all shining with glory and high resolve."

Again she paused, this time as if waiting for him to speak. But now he only stared at the bushes in front of him, and she thought he had grown a little pale. She stepped across the wall into the road.

"Come," she said; "I will tell you the rest as we walk along."

He followed her over the wall. They were at the foot of a hill, at the top of which there was a weather-beaten little ruin, once a home. He recognized the spot instantly, though the hill seemed shorter to him, and less steep. He turned and looked at her.

"My memory has all come back," he said; "I know all the rest of the story."

"But I must tell it to you. I must finish what I have begun. The girl kept the talisman all the years, as I have said, often taking it out of the embroidered case to study its markings, which she learned to understand. And she never lost faith

in it, and she never failed to believe that one day the knight with the brave, true heart would come to claim it and to fulfill his bond.

"And by and by her school-days were ended, and then her parents decided to return to their native land. The years had tempered the mother's sorrow, and brought back a measure of health. So they came back to America, and for the girl's sake mingled with gay people, and by and by, one day--it was at a fine place and there were many fine folk there--she saw him. She saw the boy who had been her fairy prince--who had become her knight--who had been her dream all through the years.

"She knew him instantly, for he looked just as she had known he would look. He had not changed, only to grow taller, more manly and more gentle--just as she had known he would grow with the years. She thought he would come to her--that like every fairy prince, he must know--but when at last he stood before her, and she was trembling so that she could hardly stand, he bowed and spoke only as a stranger might. He had forgotten--his memory was so poor.

"Yet something must have drawn him to her. For he came often to where she was, and by and by they rode and drove and golfed together over the hills, during days that were few but golden, for the child had found once more her prince of the magic coin--the knight who did not remember, yet who would one day win his coin--and again she dreamed, this time of an uplifting, noble life, and of splendid ambitions realized together.

"But, then, little by little, she became aware that he was not truly a knight of deeds--that he was only a prince of pleasure, poor of ambition and uncertain of purpose--that he cared for little beyond ease and pastime, and that perhaps his love-making was only a part of it all. This was a rude awakening for the girl. It made her unhappy, and it made her act strangely. She tried to rouse him, to stimulate him to do and to be many things. But she was foolish and ignorant and made absurd mistakes, and he only laughed at her. She knew that he was strong and capable and could be anything he chose, if he only would. But she could not choose for him, and he seemed willing to drift and would not choose for himself.

"Then, by and by, she returned to her beloved mountains. She found the little cottage at the hill-top a deserted ruin, the Garden of Delight with its little grave was overgrown. There was one recompense. The brother she had not seen since her childhood had become a noble, handsome man, of whom she could well be proud. No one knew that he was her brother, and she could not tell them, though perhaps she could not avoid showing her affection and her pride in him, and these things were misunderstood and caused suspicion and heartache and bitterness.

"Yet the results were not all evil, for out of it there came a moment when she saw, almost as a new being, him who had been so much a part of her life so long."

They were nearly at the top of the hill now. But a little more and they would reach the spot where ten years before the child with the saucer of berries had waited for the passing stage.

"He had awakened at last," she went on, "but the girl did not know it. She did not realize that he had renewed old hopes and ambitions; that some feeling in his heart for her had stirred old purposes into new resolves. He did not tell her, though unconsciously she may have known, for after a day of adventure together on the hills something of the old romance returned, and her old ideal of knighthood little by little seemed about to be restored. And then, all at once, it came--the hour of real trial, with a test of which she could not even have dreamed--and he stood before her, glorified."

They were at the hill-top. The flat stone in front of the tumbled house still remained. As they reached it she stopped, and turning suddenly stretched out her hand to him, slowly opening it to disclose a little silken case. Her eyes were wet with tears.

"Oh, my dear!" she said. "Here, where you gave me the talisman, I return it. I have kept it for you all the years. It brought me whatever the world had to give--friends, fortune, health. You did not claim it, dear; but it is yours, and in return, oh, my fairy prince--my true knight--I claim the world's best treasure--a brave man's faithful love!"

EPILOGUE

It is a lonely thoroughfare, that North Elba road. Not many teams pass to and fro, and the clattering stage was still a mile away. The eternal peaks alone looked down upon these two, for it is not likely that even the leveled glass of any hermit of the mountain-tops saw what passed between them.

Only, from Algonquin and Tahawus there came a gay little wind--the first brisk puff of autumn--and frolicking through a yellow tree in the forsaken door-yard it sent fluttering about them a shower of drifting gold.

THE END