

CHAPTER III.

MASTER JACKY CARLING was a very nice boy, but not at that time in his career the safest person to whom to intrust a missive in case its sure and speedy delivery were a matter of importance. But he protested with so much earnestness and good will that it should be put into the very first post-box he came to on his way to school, and that nothing could induce him to forget it, that Mary Blake, his aunt, confidante and not unfrequently counsel and advocate, gave it him to post, and dismissed the matter from her mind. Unfortunately the weather, which had been very frosty, had changed in the night to a summer-like mildness. As Jacky opened the door, three or four of his school-fellows were passing. He felt the softness of the spring morning, and to their injunction to "Hurry up and come along!" replied with an entreaty to "Wait a minute till he left his overcoat" (all boys hate an overcoat), and plunged back into the house.

If John Lenox (John Knox Lenox) had received Miss Blake's note of condolence and sympathy, written in reply to his own, wherein, besides speaking of his bereavement, he had made allusion to some changes in his prospects and some necessary alterations in his ways for a time, he might perhaps have read between the lines

something more than merely a kind expression of her sorrow for the trouble which had come upon him, and the reminder that he had friends who, if they could not do more to lessen his grief, would give him their truest sympathy. And if some days later he had received a second note, saying that she and her people were about to go away for some months, and asking him to come and see them before their departure, it is possible that very many things set forth in this narrative would not have happened.

Life had always been made easy for John Lenox, and his was not the temperament to interpose obstacles to the process. A course at Andover had been followed by two years at Princeton; but at the end of the second year it had occurred to him that practical life ought to begin for him, and he had thought it rather fine of himself to undertake a clerkship in the office of Rush & Co., where in the ensuing year and a half or so, though he took his work in moderation, he got a fair knowledge of accounts and the ways and methods of "the Street." But that period of it was enough. He found himself not only regretting the abandonment of his college career, but feeling that the thing for which he had given it up had been rather a waste of time. He came to the conclusion that, though he had entered college later than most, even now a further acquaintance with text-books and professors was more to be desired than with ledgers and brokers. His father (somewhat to his wonderment, and possibly a little to his chagrin) seemed rather to welcome the suggestion that he spend a couple of years in Europe, taking some lectures at

Heidelberg or elsewhere, and traveling; and in the course of that time he acquired a pretty fair working acquaintance with German, brought his knowledge of French up to about the same point, and came back at the end of two years with a fine and discriminating taste in beer, and a scar over his left eyebrow which could be seen if attention were called to it.

He started upon his return without any definite intentions or for any special reason, except that he had gone away for two years and that the two years were up. He had carried on a desultory correspondence with his father, who had replied occasionally, rather briefly, but on the whole affectionately. He had noticed that during the latter part of his stay abroad the replies had been more than usually irregular, but had attributed no special significance to the fact. It was not until afterward that it occurred to him that in all their correspondence his father had never alluded in any way to his return.

On the passenger list of the *Altruria* John came upon the names of Mr. and Mrs. Julius Carling and Miss Blake.

"Blake, Blake," he said to himself. "Carling—I seem to remember to have known that name at some time. It must be little Mary Blake whom I knew as a small girl years ago, and, yes, Carling was the name of the man her sister married. Well, well, I wonder what she is like. Of course, I shouldn't know her from Eve now, or she me from Adam. All I can remember seems to be a pair of very slim and active legs, a lot of flying hair, a pair of brownish-gray or grayish-brown eyes, and that I thought her a very nice girl, as girls went. But it doesn't in the least follow that

I might think so now, and shipboard is pretty close quarters for seven or eight days."

Dinner is by all odds the chief event of the day on board ship to those who are able to dine, and they will leave all other attractions, even the surpassingly interesting things which go on in the smoking-room, at once on the sound of the gong of promise. On this first night of the voyage the ship was still in smooth water at dinner time, and many a place was occupied which would know its occupant for the first, and very possibly for the last, time. The passenger list was fairly large, but not full. John had assigned to him a seat at a side table. He was hungry, having had no luncheon but a couple of biscuits and a glass of "bitter," and was taking his first mouthful of Perrier-Jouet, after the soup, and scanning the dinner card when the people at his table came in. The man of the trio was obviously an invalid of the nervous variety, and the most decided type. The small, dark woman who took the corner seat at his left was undoubtedly, from the solicitous way in which she adjusted a small shawl about his shoulders—to his querulous uneasiness—his wife. There was a good deal of white in the dark hair, brushed smoothly back from her face.

A tall girl, with a mass of brown hair under a felt traveling hat, took the corner seat at the man's right. That was all the detail of her appearance which the brief glance that John allowed himself revealed to him at the moment, notwithstanding the justifiable curiosity which he had with regard to the people with whom he was likely to come more or less in contact for a number of days. But though their faces, so far as

he had seen them, were unfamiliar to him, their identity was made plain to him by the first words which caught his ear. There were two soups on the *menu*, and the man's mind instantly poised itself between them.

"Which soup shall I take?" he asked, turning with a frown of uncertainty to his wife.

"I should say the *consommé*, Julius," was the reply.

"I thought I should like the broth better," he objected.

"I don't think it will disagree with you," she said.

"Perhaps I had better have the *consommé*," he argued, looking with appeal to his wife and then to the girl at his right. "Which would you take, Mary?"

"I?" said the young woman; "I should take both in my present state of appetite.—Steward, bring both soups.—What wine shall I order for you, Julius? I want some champagne, and I prescribe it for you. After your mental struggle over the soup question you need a quick stimulant."

"Don't you think a red wine would be better for me?" he asked; "or perhaps some sauterne? I'm afraid that I sha'n't go to sleep if I drink champagne. In fact, I don't think I had better take any wine at all. Perhaps some ginger ale or Apollinaris water."

"No," she said decisively, "whatever you decide upon, you know that you'll think whatever I have better for you, and I shall want more than one glass, and Alice wants some, too. Oh, yes, you do, and I shall order a quart of champagne."

—Steward"—giving her order—"please be as quick as you can."

John had by this fully identified his neighbors, and the talk which ensued between them, consisting mostly of controversies between the invalid and his family over the items of the bill of fare, every course being discussed as to its probable effect upon his stomach or his nerves—the question being usually settled with a whimsical high-handedness by the young woman—gave him a pretty good notion of their relations and the state of affairs in general. Notwithstanding Miss Blake's benevolent despotism, the invalid was still wrangling feebly over some last dish when John rose and went to the smoking room for his coffee and cigarette.

When he stumbled out in search of his bath the next morning the steamer was well out, and rolling and pitching in a way calculated to disturb the gastric functions of the hardiest. But, after a shower of sea water and a rub down, he found himself with a feeling for bacon and eggs that made him proud of himself, and he went in to breakfast to find, rather to his surprise, that Miss Blake was before him, looking as fresh—well, as fresh as a handsome girl of nineteen or twenty and in perfect health could look. She acknowledged his perfunctory bow as he took his seat with a stiff little bend of the head; but later on, when the steward was absent on some order, he elicited a "Thank you!" by handing her something which he saw she wanted, and, one thing leading to another, as things have a way of doing where young and attractive people are concerned, they were presently engaged in an interchange of small talk, but before John was moved to the

point of disclosing himself on the warrant of a former acquaintance she had finished her breakfast.

The weather continued very stormy for two days, and during that time Miss Blake did not appear at table. At any rate, if she breakfasted there it was either before or after his appearance, and he learned afterward that she had taken luncheon and dinner in her sister's room.

The morning of the third day broke bright and clear. There was a long swell upon the sea, but the motion of the boat was even and endurable to all but the most susceptible. As the morning advanced the deck began to fill with promenaders, and to be lined with chairs, holding wrapped-up figures, showing faces of all shades of green and gray.

John, walking for exercise, and at a wholly unnecessary pace, turning at a sharp angle around the deck house, fairly ran into the girl about whom he had been wondering for the last two days. She received his somewhat incoherent apologies, regrets, and self-accusations in such a spirit of forgiveness that before long they were supplementing their first conversation with something more personal and satisfactory; and when he came to the point of saying that half by accident he had found out her name, and begged to be allowed to tell her his own, she looked at him with a smile of frank amusement and said: "It is quite unnecessary, Mr. Lenox. I knew you instantly when I saw you at table the first night; but," she added mischievously, "I am afraid your memory for people you have known is not so good as mine."

"Well," said John, "you will admit, I think,

that the change from a little girl in short frocks to a tall young woman in a tailor-made gown might be more disguising than what might happen with a boy of fifteen or so. I saw your name in the passenger list with Mr. and Mrs. Carling, and wondered if it could be the Mary Blake whom I really did remember, and the first night at dinner, when I heard your sister call Mr. Carling 'Julius,' and heard him call you 'Mary,' I was sure of you. But I hardly got a fair look at your face, and, indeed, I confess that if I had had no clew at all I might not have recognized you."

"I think you would have been quite excusable," she replied, "and whether you would or would not have known me is 'one of those things that no fellow can find out,' and isn't of supreme importance anyway. We each know who the other is now, at all events."

"Yes," said John, "I am happy to think that we have come to a conclusion on that point. But how does it happen that I have heard nothing of you all these years, or you of me, as I suppose?"

"For the reason, I fancy," she replied, "that during that period of short frocks with me my sister married Mr. Carling and took me with her to Chicago, where Mr. Carling was in business. We have been back in New York only for the last two or three years."

"It might have been on the cards that I should come across you in Europe," said John. "The beaten track is not very broad. How long have you been over?"

"Only about six months," she replied. "We have been at one or another of the German Spas most of the time, as we went abroad for Mr. Carling's health, and we are on our way home

on about such an impulse as that which started us off—he thinks now that he will be better off there.”

“I am afraid you have not derived much pleasure from your European experiences,” said John.

“Pleasure!” she exclaimed. “If ever you saw a young woman who was glad and thankful to turn her face toward home, I am that person. I think that one of the heaviest crosses humanity has to bear is to have constantly to decide between two or more absolutely trivial conclusions in one’s own affairs; but when one is called upon to multiply one’s useless perplexities by, say, ten, life is really a burden.”

“I suppose,” she added after a pause, “you couldn’t help hearing our discussions at dinner the other night, and I have wondered a little what you must have thought.”

“Yes,” he said, “I did hear it. Is it the regular thing, if I may ask?”

“Oh, yes,” she replied, with a tone of sadness; “it has grown to be.”

“It must be very trying at times,” John remarked.

“It is, indeed,” she said, “and would often be unendurable to me if it were not for my sense of humor, as it would be to my sister if it were not for her love, for Julius is really a very lovable man, and I, too, am very fond of him. But I must laugh sometimes, though my better nature should rather, I suppose, impel me to sighs.”

“A little laughter is much more worth,” he quoted.

CHAPTER IV.

THEY were leaning upon the rail at the stern of the ship, which was going with what little wind there was, and a following sea, with which, as it plunged down the long slopes of the waves, the vessel seemed to be running a victorious race. The sea was a deep sapphire, and in the wake the sunlight turned the broken water to vivid emerald. The air was of a caressing softness, and altogether it was a day and scene of indescribable beauty and inspiration. For a while there was silence between them, which John broke at last.

“I suppose,” he said, “that one would best show his appreciation of all this by refraining from the comment which must needs be comparatively commonplace, but really this is so superb that I must express some of my emotion even at the risk of lowering your opinion of my good taste, provided, of course, that you have one.”

“Well,” she said, laughing, “it may relieve your mind, if you care, to know that had you kept silent an instant longer I should have taken the risk of lowering your opinion of my good taste, provided, of course, that you have one, by remarking that this was perfectly magnificent.”

“I should think that this would be the sort