

CHAPTER XXV.

I WIN A WIFE AND HOME OF MY OWN, AND THE MANSION I OSEB
AND GAINS A MISTRESS.

IN those early days, professional study was carried on very generally without the aid of professional schools; and during my three years at the academy, accomplished with sufficient pecuniary success, I read all the elementary books of the profession I had chosen, and, at the close, was admitted to the bar, after an examination which placed me at once at the head of the little clique of young men who had fitted themselves for the same pursuit. Henry, meantime, had realized a wish, long secretly cherished, to study divinity, and, under a license from the ministerial association of the county, had preached many times in the vacant pulpits of the city and the surrounding country. Mrs. Sanderson always went to hear him when the distance did not forbid her; and I suppose that the city did not hold two young men of more unwearied industry than ourselves.

My acquaintance with Millie Bradlord ripened into confidential friendship, and, so far as I was concerned, into something warmer and deeper, yet nothing of love was ever alluded to between us. I saw that she did not encourage the advances of other young men which were made upon every side, and I was quite content to let matters rest as they were, until my prospects for life were more definite and reliable than they were then. We read the same books, and talked about them. We engaged in the same efforts to arouse the spirit of literary culture and improvement in the neighborhood. In the meantime her womanhood ripened day by day, and year by year, until she

became the one bright star of my life. I learned to look at my own character and all my actions through her womanly eyes. I added her conscience to my own. I added her sense of that which was proper and becoming and tasteful to my own. Through her sensibilities I learned to see things finely, and by persuasions which never shaped themselves to words, I yielded myself to her, to be led to fine consummations of life and character. She was a being ineffably sacred to me. She was never associated in my mind with a coarse thought. She lifted me into a realm entirely above the atmosphere of sensuality, from which I never descended for a moment; and I thank God that I have never lost that respect for woman which she taught me.

I have seen, since those days, so charged with pure and precious memories, many women of unworthy aims, and low and frivolous tastes, yet I have never seen anything that bore the form of woman that did not appeal to my tender consideration. I have never seen a woman so low that her cry of distress or appeal for protection did not stir me like a trumpet, or so base that I did not wish to cover her shame from ribald eyes, and restore her to that better self which, by the grace of her nature, can never be wholly destroyed.

Soon after the term had closed which severed the connection of Claire and myself with the academy, I was made half wild with delight by an invitation, extended to Henry and Claire, as well as to Millie and myself, to visit Hillsborough, and join the Bird's Nest in their biennial encampment. I knew every rod of ground around the beautiful mountain-lake upon whose shores the white tents of the school were to be planted, for, though six miles away from my early school, I had visited it many times during holidays, and had sailed and angled and swam upon its waters. For many years it had been Mr. Bird's habit, at stated intervals, to take his whole school to this lovely spot during the fervors of the brief New England summer and to yield a fortnight to play. The boys looked forward to this event, through the long months of their study, with the most

charming anticipations, and none of them could have been more delighted with the prospect than Henry and myself. We were now the old boys going back, to be looked at and talked about by the younger boys. We were to renew our boyhood and our old associations before undertaking the professional work of our lives.

As both Mr. Bradford and my father trusted Mr. and Mrs. Bird, it was not difficult to obtain their consent that Millie and Claire should accompany us; and when the morning of our departure arrived, we were delighted to find that we should be the only occupants of the old stage-coach which was to bear us to our destination. The day was as beautiful as that on which my father and I first made the journey over the same route. The objects along the way were all familiar to Henry and myself, but it seemed as if we had lived a whole lifetime since we had seen them. We gave ourselves up to merriment. The spirit of play was upon us all; and the old impassive stage-driver must have thought us half insane. The drive was long, but it might have been twice as long without wearying us.

I was going back to the fountain from which I had drunk so much that had come as a pure force into my life. Even the privilege to play, without a thought of work, or a shadow of care and duty, I had learned from the teachings of Mr. Bird. I had been taught by him to believe—what many others had endeavoured to make me doubt—that God looked with delight upon his weary children at play,—that the careless lambs that gambolled in their pasture, and the careless birds singing and flying in the air, were not more innocent in their sports than men, women and children, when, after work faithfully done, they yielded to the recreative impulse, and with perfect freedom gave themselves to play. I believed this then, and I believe it still; and I account that religion poor and pitiful which ascribes to the Good Father of us all less delight in the free and careless sports of his children than we take in the frolic of our own.

The whole school was out to see the new-comers when we

arrived, and we were received literally with open arms by the master and mistress of the establishment. Already the tents and cooking utensils had gone forward. A few of the older boys were just starting on foot for the scene of the fortnight's play, to sleep in neighboring barns, so as to be on the ground early to assist in raising the tents. They could have slept in beds, but beds were at a discount among lads whose present ambition was to sleep upon the ground. The whole building was noisy with the notes of preparation. Food was preparing in incredible quantities, and special preparations were in progress for making Millie and Claire comfortable; for it was supposed that "roughing it" was something foreign to their taste and experience.

On the following morning, I was roused from my dreams by the same outcry of the boys to which I had responded, or in which I had joined, for a period of five happy years. I was obliged to rub my eyes before I could realize that more than seven years lay between me and that golden period. When at last I remembered how, under that roof, breathed the woman dearer to me than all the rest of the world, and that for two precious weeks she would be my companion, amid the most enchanting scenes of nature, and under circumstances so fresh and strange as to touch all her sensibilities, I felt almost guilty that I could not bring to Mr. and Mrs. Bird an undivided heart, and that The Bird's Nest, and the lake, and the camp-fires, and the free life of the wilderness would be comparatively meaningless to me without her.

Our breakfast was a hurried one. The boys could hardly wait to eat anything, and started off by pairs and squads to make the distance on foot. A huge lumber-wagon, loaded with supplies, was the first carriage dispatched. Then those who would need to ride took their seats in such vehicles as the school and village afforded, and the straggling procession moved on its way. Henry and I spurned the thought of being carried, and took our way on foot. We had not gone half the distance, however, when Millie and Claire insisted on joining us. So

our little party bade the rest good-by, and we were left to take our own time for the journey.

We were the last to arrive at the encampment, and the sun was already hot in the sky. Poor Claire was quite exhausted, but Millie grew stronger with every step. The flush of health and happiness upon her face drew forth a compliment from Mr. Bird which deepened her color, and made her more charming than ever. The life was as new to her as if she had exchanged planets; and she gave herself up to it, and all the pleasant labor which the provision for so many rendered necessary, with a ready and hearty helpfulness that delighted every one. She could not move without attracting a crowd of boys. She walked and talked with them; she sang to them and read to them; and during the first two or three days of camp-life, I began to fear that I should have very little of her society.

The days were not long enough for our pleasures. Bathing, boating, ball-playing and eating through the day, and singing and story-telling during the evening, constituted the round of waking delights, and the nights, cool and sweet, were long with refreshing and dreamless slumber.

There is no kinder mother than the earth, when we trustfully lay our heads upon her bosom. She holds balm and blessing for the rich and the poor, for the hardy and the dainty alike, which the bed of luxury never knows. Pure air to breathe, pure water to drink and a pillow of stone—ah! how easy it is for the invisible ministers of health and happiness to build ladders between such conditions and heaven!

Far back over the dim years that have come between, I see those camp-fires glowing still, through evenings full of music and laughter. I see the groups of merry boys dancing around them. I hear their calls for Echo to the woods, and then, in the pauses, the plash of oars, as some group of late sailors comes slowly in, stirring the lake into ripples that seem phosphorescent in the firelight. I watch those fires crumbling away, and dying at last into cloudy darkness, or into the milder moonlight which then asserts its undivided sway, and floods

lake and forest and mountain, and all the night-sweet atmosphere with its steady radiance. I see the tent in which my sister and my love are sleeping, and invoke for them the guardian care of God and all good angels. I go at last to my own tent, and lie down to a sleep of blessed, blank unconsciousness, from which I am roused by the cry of healthy lungs that find no weariness in play, and by the tramping of feet around me that spring to the tasks and sports of the day with unflagging appetite and interest.

Did Mr. and Mrs. Bird know how much pleasure they were giving to the young life around them? Did they know that they were enabling us all to lay up memories more precious than gold? Did they know they were developing a love of nature and of healthful and simple pleasures that should be a constant guard around those young feet, when they should find themselves among the slippery places of life and the seductive influences of artificial society. Did they know that making the acquaintance of the birds and flowers and open sky and expanding water and rough life was better than the culture and restraint of drawing-rooms? Did they know that these boys, deprived of this knowledge and these influences, would go through life lacking something inexpressibly valuable? Surely they did, or they would not have sacrificed labour and care and comfort to achieve these objects and results. A thousand blessings on you, my wise, patient, self-sacrificing friends! It is no wonder that all who have lived under your ceaseless and self-devoted ministry love you!

The moon was new when we went into camp, and as it grew larger the weather grew finer, until, as the fortnight waned, it came to its glorious full, on a night whose events made it forever memorable to me.

I do not know why it is that a boy, or a collection of boys, is so keen in the discovery of tender relations between young men and young women, but I think that, from the first, the school understood exactly the relations of Henry to Claire and of Millie to myself. There was a lively family interest in

us all, and the young rogues seemed to understand that matters were all settled between the former pair, and that they had not reached a permanent adjustment between the latter. Henry and Claire could always be with each other without interruption. They could go down to the shore at any time of the day or evening, enter a boat, and row out upon the lake, and find nothing to interfere with their privacy; but Millie and I could never approach a boat without finding half a dozen little fellows at our side, begging to be taken out with us upon the water. There was always mischief in their eyes, and an evident wish to make the course of true love rough to us. There was something so amusing in all this, to me, that I never could get angry with them, but Millie was sometimes disturbed by their good-natured persecutions.

On one of the later evenings, however, Millie and I took advantage of their momentary absorption in some favorite game, and quietly walked to the shore, unnoticed by any of them. She took her seat in the boat, and, shoving it from the sand, I sprang in after her, and we were afloat and free upon the moonlit water. For some minutes I did not touch the oars, but let the boat drift out with the impulse I had given it, while we watched the outlines of the white tents against the sky, and the groups which the camp-fires made fantastic.

It was the first time, since our residence at the camp, that I had been alone with her under circumstances which placed us beyond hearing and interruption. I had been longing and laboring for this opportunity, and had determined to bring matters between us to a crisis. I had faithfully tried, to do those things and to adopt those plans and purposes of life which would command her respect and confidence. I had been so thoroughly sincere, that I had the consciousness of deserving her esteem, even though her heart might not have been drawn toward me with any tenderer regard. I had been in no haste to declare my passion, but the few days I had spent with her in camp had so ripened and intensified it, that I saw I could not carry it longer, uncertain of its issue, without

present torment or prospective danger. It seemed, sometimes to my great horror, as if my life hung entirely upon hers—as if existence would be a curse without her companionship.

After a while spent in silence and a strange embarrassment, I took the oars, and as quietly as possible rowed out into the middle of the lake. The deep blue sky and the bright moon were above us, and the pure water below; and all the sounds that came to us from the shore were softened into music.

At last I broke the spell that had held my voice with what I intended for a common-place, and said: "It seems a comfort to get away from the boys for a little while, doesn't it!"

"Does it?" she responded. "You know you have the advantage of me; I haven't that pleasure yet."

"Oh! thank you," I said. "I didn't know that you still regarded me as a boy."

"You were to remain a boy, you know. Didn't you promise? Have you forgotten?"

"Have I fulfilled my promise?"

"Yes, after a weary time."

"And you recognize the boy again, do you?"

"I think so."

"Are you pleased?"

"I have no fault to find, at least."

"And you are the same girl I used to know?" I said.

"Yes."

"Does the fact forbid us to talk as men and women talk?"

"We are here to play," she replied, "and I suppose we may play that we are man and woman."

"Very well," I said, "suppose we play that we are man and woman, and that I am very fond of you and you are very fond of me."

"It seems very difficult to play this, especially when one of us is so very much in earnest."

"Which one?"

"The one who wishes to play."

"Ah! Millie," I said, "you really must not bandy words

with me. Indeed, I am too much in earnest to play. I have a secret to tell you, and this is my first good opportunity to tell it, and you must hear it."

"A secret? do you think so? I doubt it."

"Do you read me so easily?"

She reached out her hand upon the water to grasp a dark little object, past which we were slowly drifting, and broke off from its long, lithe stem a water-lily, and tossed it to my feet. "There's a secret in that little cone," she said, "but I know what it is as well as if the morning sun had unfolded it."

"Do you mean to say that my secret has opened under the spell of your eyes every day like the water-lily to the sun?"

"Yes, if you insist on putting it in that very poetical way."

"Are you fond of water-lilies?"

"Very: fonder of them than of any other flower I know."

"Well," I responded, "I'm a man, or a boy—just which you choose—and don't pretend to be a water-lily, though I wish my roots were as safely anchored and my life as purely surrounded and protected. I believe that maidenhood monopolizes all the lilies for its various impersonations, but for the present purpose, I should really like to ask you if you are willing to take the water-lily for the one flower of your life, with all its secrets which you claim to understand so fully."

"Charmingly done," she said—"for a boy."

"You taunt me."

"No, Arthur," she responded, "but you really are hurrying things so. Just think of trying to settle everything in five minutes, and think, too, of the inconvenience of this little boat. You cannot get upon your knees without upsetting us, and then you know I might be compelled to adopt a water lily."

"Particularly if the lily should save your life."

"Yes."

"Suppose we go ashore."

"Not for the world."

"Ah! Millie, I think I know your secret," I said.

"It isn't hard to discover."

"Well, then let's not talk in riddles any more. I love you more than life, Millie! may I continue to love you?"

She paused, and I saw tears upon her face, glittering in the moonlight.

"Yes," she said, "always."

"Thank you! thank God!" I said with a hearty impulse. "Life is all bright to me now, and all full of promise. I wish I could come to you and close this business in the good old orthodox fashion."

She laughed at my vexation, and counseled patience.

There is something very provoking about the coolness of a woman under circumstances like those in which I found myself. For many days I had permitted myself to be wrought into an exalted state of feeling. Indeed, I had been mustering strength for this interview during all the time I had lived in the camp. I was prepared to make a thousand protestations of everlasting devotion. I was ready to cast at her feet my hopes, my life, my all; yet she had anticipated everything, and managed to hold the conversation in her own hands. Then she apparently took delight in keeping me at my end of the boat, and in dissuading me from my ardent wish to reach the shore. I said I thought it was time for us to return. She protested. The people would miss us, I assured her, and would be apprehensive that we had met with an accident. She was equally sure that they would not miss us at all. Besides, if they should, a little scare would give piquancy to the night's pleasure, and she would not like to be responsible for such a deprivation. In truth, I think she would have been delighted to keep me on the lake all night.

I finally told her that I held the oars, that if she wished to remain longer she would accommodate me by jumping overboard, and assured her that I would faithfully deliver her last messages. As she made no movement, I dipped my oars and rowed toward the dying lights of the camp-fires, congratulating myself that I should land first, and help her from the boat.

Under the sheltering willows, I received her into my arms, and gave her my first lover's kiss. We walked to her tent hand in hand, like children, and there, while the boys gathered round us to learn where we had been, and to push their good-natured inquiries, I bent and gave her a good-night kiss, which told the whole story to them all.

It seems strange to me now that I could have done so, and that she would have permitted it, but it really was so like a family matter, in which all were interested in the most friendly or brotherly way, that it was quite the natural thing to do. Millie immediately disappeared behind her muslin walls, while I was overwhelmed with congratulations. Nor was this all. One little fellow called for three cheers for Miss Bradford, which were given with a will; and then three cheers were given to Arthur Bonnicastle; and as their lungs were in practice, they cheered Henry and Claire, and Mr. and Mrs. Bird, and wound up that part of their exercise by three cheers for themselves. Then they improvised a serenade for the invisible lady, selecting "Oft in the stilly night," and "The Pirate's Serenade," as particularly appropriate to the occasion, and went to their beds at last only under the peremptory commands of Mr. Bird.

There were two persons among the fifty that lay down upon the ground that night who did not sleep very soundly, though the large remainder slept, I presume, much as usual. I had lain quietly thinking over the events of the evening, and trying to realize the great blessing I had won, when, at about two o'clock in the morning, I heard the word "Arthur" distinctly pronounced. Not having removed all my clothing, I leaped from my blanket, and ran to the door of the tent. There I heard the call again, and recognized the voice of Millie Bradford.

"Well, what is it?" I said.

"There is some one about the camp."

By this time Henry was on his feet and at my side, and both of us went out together. We stumbled among the tent-stakes in different directions, and at last found a man so muddled with

liquor that he hardly knew where he was. We collared him, and led him to our tent, where we inquired of him his business. As he seemed unable to tell us, I searched his pockets for the bottle which I presumed he bore about him somewhere, and in the search found a letter, the address of which I read with the expectation of ascertaining his name. Very much to my surprise, the letter was addressed to Henry. Then the whole matter became plain to me. He had been dispatched with this letter from Hillsborough, and on the way had fallen in with dissolute companions, though he had retained sufficient sense to know that the camp was his destination,

Henry broke the seal. The letter was from his mother, informing him that Mrs. Sanderson was very ill, and that she desired his immediate return to Bradford. I entered Mr. Bird's tent and told him of the letter, and then satisfied the curiosity of Millie and Claire. In such clothing as we could snatch readily from our tents we gathered for a consultation, which resulted in the conclusion that any sickness which was sufficiently serious to call Henry home, was sufficient to induce the entire Bradford party to accompany him. He protested against this, but we overruled him. So we simply lay down until daylight, and then rose for a hurried breakfast. Mr. Bird drove us to Hillsborough, and at seven o'clock we took the stage for home.

The ride homeward was overshadowed by a grave apprehension, and the old driver probably never had a quieter fare over his route, than the party which, only a few days before, had astonished him by their hilarity.

On reaching Bradford we found our worst fears realized. The old lady was rapidly declining, and for three days had been vainly calling for her grandson. When he arrived he brought to her a great flood of comfort, and with her hand in his, she descended into the dark valley. What words she spoke I never knew. I was only sure that she went out of her earthly life in an atmosphere of the most devoted filial affection, that words of Christian counsel and prayer were tenderly spoken to her deafening senses, and that hands bathed in tears closed her eyes.

The funeral was the largest and most remarkable I had ever seen in Bradford, and Henry went back to his home, its owner and master.

On the day following the funeral my father was summoned to listen to the reading of Mrs. Sanderson's will. We were all surprised at this, and still more surprised to learn, when he returned, that the house in which he lived had been bequeathed to him, with an annuity which would forever relieve me from supporting him after he should cease to labor. This I knew to be Henry's work. My father was the father of his future wife, and to save him the mortification of being dependent on his children, he had influenced Mrs. Sanderson to do that which he or I should be obliged to do at some time not far in the future.

My father was very grateful and tearful over this unexpected turn in his fortunes. My mother could not realize it at all, and was sure there must be some mistake about it. One of the most touching things in the prayer offered that night at our family altar was the earnest petition by this simple and humble saint, that his pride might not be nourished by this good fortune.

After this the matter came to a natural shape in the good man's mind. It was not Mrs. Sanderson's gift. She had been only the almoner of Providence. The God whom he had trusted, seeing that the time of helplessness was coming, had provided for his necessities, and relieved him of all apprehension of want, and more than all, had relieved me of a burden. Indeed, it had only fulfilled a life-long expectation. His natural hopefulness would have died amid his hard life and circumstances if it had not fed itself upon dreams.

I am sure, however, that he never felt quite easy with his gift, so long as he lived, but carried about with him a sense of guilt. Others—his old companions in labor—were not blessed with him, and he could not resist the feeling that he had wronged them. They congratulated him on his "luck," as they called it, for they were all his friends; but their allusions to the matter always pained him, and he had many an hour of torment over

the thought that some of them might think him capable of forgetting them, and of pluming his pride upon his altered circumstances.

It was, perhaps, a fortnight after the death of Mrs. Sanderson, that Henry came to my father's house one morning, and asked me when I intended to begin business. I informed him that I had already been looking for an eligible office, and that I should begin the practice of the law as soon as the opportunity should come. Then he frankly told me that looking after his multiplied affairs was very distasteful to him, and that he wished, as soon as possible, to place everything in my hands. He advised me to take the best and most central chambers I could find, and offered me, at little more than a nominal rent, a suite of rooms in one of his own buildings. I took the rooms at once, and furnished them with such appointments and books as the savings of three industrious years could command, and Henry was my first, as he has remained my constant, client. The affairs of the Sanderson estate, of which I knew more than any man except Mrs. Sanderson's lawyer, were placed in my hands, where they remain at this present writing. The business connected with them was quite enough for my support in those days of moderate expenses and incomes, but it brought me so constantly into contact with the business men of the city that, gradually, the tide of legal practice set towards me, until, in my maturer years, I was almost overwhelmed by it. I was energetic, enthusiastic, persevering, indomitable, and successful; but amid all my triumphs there was nothing that gave me such pure happiness as my father's satisfaction with my efforts.

I never engaged in an important public trial for many years, in which he was not a constant attendant at the court-house. All the lawyers knew him, and my position commanded a seat for him inside the bar. Every morning he came in, leaning on his cane, and took the seat that was left or vacated for him, and there, all day long, he sat and watched me. If for a day he happened to be absent, I missed the inspiration of his interested face and approving eyes, as if he were a lover. My

office was his lounging-place, and my public efforts were his meat and drink. A serener, sweeter old age than his I never saw, and when, at last, I missed him—for death came to him as it comes to all—I felt that one of the loveliest lights of my life had gone out. I have never ceased to mourn for him, and I would not cease to mourn for him if I could.

A year after I commenced the practice of my profession, Mr. Grimshaw exhausted his narrow lode and went to mine in other fields. Naturally, Henry was called upon to fill temporarily the vacant pulpit, and quite as naturally, the people learned in a few weeks that they could serve themselves no better than by calling him to a permanent pastorate. This they did, and as he was at home with them, and every circumstance favored his settlement over them, he accepted their invitation. On the day of his ordination—a ceremony which was very largely attended—he treated his new people to a great surprise. Before the benediction was pronounced, he descended from the pulpit, took his way amid the silence of the congregation to my father's pew, and then led my sister Claire up the broad aisle to where an aged minister stood waiting to receive them, and join them in holy wedlock. The words were few which united these two lives that had flowed in closely parallel currents through so long a period, but they were spoken with great feeling, and amid the tears of a crowd of sympathetic friends. So the church had once more a pastor, and The Mansion once more a mistress; and two widely divided currents of the Bonnicastle blood united in the possession and occupation of the family estate.

I do not need to give the details of my own marriage, which occurred a few months later, or of our first experiments at house-keeping in the snug home which my quick prosperity enabled me to procure, or of the children that came to bless us in the after-years. The memory of these events is too sweet and sacred to be unveiled, and I cannot record them, though my tears wet the paper as I write. The freshness of youth has long passed away, the silver is stronger than the jet among the curls of the dear woman who gave herself to me, and bore in

loving pain, and reared with loving patience, my priceless flock of children; my own face is deeply furrowed by care and labor and time; but those days of young love and life never come back to me in memory save as a breeze across a weary sea from some far island loaded with odors of balm and whispers of blessing.

Thank God for home and woman! Thank God a thousand times for that woman who makes home her throne! When I remember how bright and strong a nature my young wife possessed—how her gifts and acquirements and her whole personality fitted her to shine in society as a center and a sun—and then recall her efforts to serve and solace me, and train my children into a Christian manhood and womanhood, until my house was a heaven, and its presiding genius was regarded with a love that rose to tender adoration—I turn with pity, not unmingled with disgust, from those I see around me now, who cheapen marriage, the motherly office and home, and choose and advocate courses and careers of life independent of them all.

Neither Henry's marriage nor my own was in the slightest degree romantic—hardly romantic enough to be of interest to the average reader.

It was better so. Our courtships were long and our lives were so shaped to each other that when marriage came it was merely the warrant and seal of a union that had already been established. Each lover knew his love, and no misunderstandings supervened. The hand of love, by an unconscious process, had shaped each man to his mate, each woman to her mate, before they were joined, and thus saved all after-discords and collisions. All this may be very uninteresting to outsiders, but to those concerned it was harmony, satisfaction and peace.