

Marian Mayfield

Or, The Strange Disappearance

CHAPTER VIII.

On the afternoon of the same day spent by Miss Nancy Skamp at Old Field Cottage, the family at Luckenough were assembled in that broad central passage, their favorite resort in warm weather.

Five years had made very little alteration here, excepting in the case of Jacqueline, who had grown up to be the most enchanting sprite that ever bewitched the hearts, or turned the heads of men. She was petite, slight, agile, graceful; clustering curls of shining gold encircled a round, white forehead, laughing in light; springs under springs of fun and frolic sparkled up from the bright, blue eyes, whose flashing light few bird-like everywhere, but rested nowhere. She seemed even less human and irresponsible than when a child—verily a being of the air, a fairy, without human thoughtfulness, or sympathy, or affections! She only seemed so—under all that fay-like levity there was a heart. Poor heart! little food or cultivation had it had in all its life.

For who had been Jacqueline's educators?

First, there was the commodore, with his alternations of blustering wrath and foolish fondness, giving way to his anger, or indulging his love, without the slightest regard to the effect produced upon his young ward—too often abusing her for something really admirable in her nature—and full as frequently praising her for something proportionately reprehensible in her conduct.

Next, there was the dark, and solemn, and fanatical Dr. Grimshaw, her destined bridegroom, who really and truly loved the child to fatuity, and conscientiously did the very best he could for her mental and moral welfare, according to his light. Alas! "when the light that is in one is darkness, how great is that darkness!" Jacqueline rewarded his serious efforts with laughter, and flattered him with the pet names of Hobgoblin, Ghoul, Gnome, Ogre, etc. Yet she did not dislike her solemn suitor—she never had taken the matter so seriously! And he on his part bore the eccentricities of the elf with matchless patience, for he loved, her, as I said, to fatuity—doted on her with a passion that increased with ripening years, and of late consumed him like a fever.

And then there was her mother, last named because, whatever she should have been, she really was the least important of Jacqueline's teachers. Fear was the keynote of Mrs. L'Oiseau's character—the keystone in the arch of her religious faith—she feared everything—the opinion of the world, the unfaithfulness of friends, changes in the weather, reverses of fortune, pain, sickness, sorrow, want, labor!

Now the time had not yet come for this proposed marriage to shock the merry maiden. She was "over young to marry yet."

So thought not the commodore; for a year past, since his niece had attained the age of fourteen, he had been worrying himself and the elders of the family to have the marriage solemnized, "before the little devil shall have time to get some other notion into her erratic head," he said. All were opposed to him, holding over his head the only rod he dreaded, the opinion of the world. "What would people say if you were to marry your niece of fourteen to a man of thirty-four?" they urged.

"But I tell you, young men are beginning to pay attention to her now, and I can't take her to church that some jackanapes don't come capering around her, and the mix will get some whim in her head like Edith did—I know she will! Just see how Edith disappointed me! ungrateful huzzy! after my bringing her up and educating her, for her to do so! While, if she had married Grim when I wanted her to do it, by this time I'd have had my granchil—I mean nieces and nephews climbing about my knees. But by—I won't be frustrated this time!"

And so Jacqueline was kept more secluded than ever. Secluded from society, but not from nature. The forest became her haunt. And a chance traveler passing through it, and meeting her fay-like form, might well suppose he was deceived with the vision of a wood-nymph.

The effervescent spirits of the elf had to expend themselves in the same way. As a child she had ever been as remarkable for surprising of agility as for fun, frolic, mischief, and diablerie. And every one of these traits augmented with her growth. Feats of agility became a passion with her—her airy spirit seemed only to find its full freedom in rapid motion, in daring flights, in difficult achievements, and in hair-breadth escapes. Everything that she read of in that way, which could possibly be imitated, was attempted. She had her bows and arrows, and by constant practice, as well as by constant marksmanship. She had her well-trained horse, and her vaulting bars, and made nothing of flying over a high fence or a wide ditch. But her

bedchamber, near the top of the house, fast asleep!

"Good heaven! will no one attempt to save him?" screamed Henrietta, running wildly from one to the other. They all gazed on each other, and then in consternation upon the burning building, every window of which was belching flame, while the sound of some falling rafter, or the explosion of some combustible substance, was continually heard! To venture into that blazing house, with its sinking roof and falling rafters, seemed certain death.

"Oh! my God! my God! will none even try to save him?" cried Henrietta, wringing her hands in extreme anguish.

Suddenly: "Pray for me, aunty!" exclaimed Jacqueline, and she darted like a bird toward the house, into the passage, and seemed lost in the smoke and flame!

Wrapping her woolen shawl closely about her, and keeping near the floor, she glided swiftly up the stairs after flight, and through the subterranean passages, until she reached her uncle's door. It was open, and his room was clearer of smoke than any other, from the wind blowing through the open window.

There he lay in a deep sleep! She sprang to the bedside, seized and shook the arm of the sleeper.

"Uncle! uncle! wake, for God's sake, wake! the house is on fire!" "Hum-m-m-e!" muttered the old man, giving a great heave and plunge and turning over into a heavier sleep than before.

"Uncle! uncle! you will be burned to death if you don't wake up!" cried Jacqueline, shaking him violently.

"Thump! Yes, Jacqueline! um-um-um—Grim! um-um—Luckenough, muttered the dreamer, flinging about his great arms."

"Luckenough is in flames! Uncle! wake! wake!" she cried shaking him frantically.

"Ah! ha! yes! the little rascal is at her tricks again!" he said, laughing in his sleep.

At that moment there was the sound of a falling rafter in the adjoining room. Every instant was worth a life, and there he lay in a sudden, hopeless sleep.

Suddenly Sans Souci ran to the ewer; it was empty. There was no time to be lost! every second was invaluable! He must be instantly roused, and Jacqueline was not fastidious as to the means in doing so! Leaping upon the bolster behind his great, stupid head, she reached over, and, seizing the mass of his gray, grizzly beard, she pulled up the wrong way with all her might, until, roaring with pain, he started up in a fury, and, seeing her, exclaimed: "Oh! you abominable little vixen! is that you? Do you dare! Are you frantic, then? Oh, you outrageous little dare-devil! Won't I send you to a mad-house, and have you put in a strait-jacket, till you know how to behave yourself! You infernal little wretch, you!"

A sudden thought struck Sans Souci to move him by his affection for herself.

"Uncle, look around you! The house is burning! if you do not rouse yourself and save your poor little wretch," she must perish in the flames!"

This effectually brought him to his senses; he understood everything! he leaped from his bed, seized a blanket enveloped her in it, raised her in his arms, and, forgetting gout, lameness, leg, and all, bore her down the creaking, heated stairs, flight after flight, and through the burning passages out of the house in safety.

A shout of joy greeted the commodore as he appeared with Jacqueline in the yard.

But heeding nothing but the burden he bore in his arms, the old sailor strode on until he reached a convenient spot, where he threw the blanket off her face to give her air.

She had fainted—the terror and excitement had been too great—the reaction was too powerful—it had overwhelmed her, and she lay insensible across his arms, her fair head hanging back, her white garments streaming in the air, her golden locks floating, her witching eyes closed, and her blue lips apart and rigid on her glistening teeth—so she lay like dead Cordelia in the arms of old Lear.

Henrietta and Mrs. L'Oiseau, followed by all the household, crowded around them with water, the only restorative at hand.

At length she recovered and looked up, a little bewildered, but soon memory and understanding returned and, gazing at her uncle, she suddenly threw her arms around his neck and burst into tears.

She was then carried away into one of the best negro quarters and laid upon a bed, and attended by her mother and her maid Maria.

The commodore, with his wife, found shelter in another quarter. And the few remaining members of the household were accommodated in a similar manner elsewhere.

It was near noon before they were all ready to set forth from the scene of disaster, and it was the middle of the afternoon when they found themselves temporarily settled at the little hotel at Benedict in the very apartments formerly occupied by Edith and Marian.

Here Jacqueline suffered a long and severe spell of illness, during which her bright hair was cut off.

And here beautiful Marian came, with her gift of tender nursing, and devoted herself day and night to the service of the young invalid. And all the leisure time she found while sitting by the sick bed she busily employed in making up clothing for the almost denuded family. And never



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had the dear girl's nimble fingers flown so fast or so willingly.

Every day the commodore, accompanied by Dr. Grimshaw, rode over to Luckenough to superintend the labors of the workmen in pulling down and clearing away the ruins of the old mansion and preparing the site for a new building.

Six weeks passed and brought the first of August, before Jacqueline was able to sit up, and then the physicians recommended change of air and the waters of Bentley Springs for the re-establishment of the health.

During her illness, Jacqueline had become passionately attached to Marian, as all persons did who came under the daily influence of the beautiful girl. Dr. Grimshaw was to accompany the family to Bentley. Jacqueline insisted that Marian should be asked to make one of the party. Accordingly, the commodore and Mrs. Waugh, nothing loth, invited and pressed the kind maiden to go with them. But Marian declined the journey, and Commodore Waugh, with his wife, his niece and his Grim set out in the family carriage for Bentley Springs. Jacqueline rapidly regained health and rushed again to her mad breaks. After a stormy scene with the commodore, the latter vowed she should either marry Dr. Grimshaw or be sent to a nunnery. To the convent of St. Serena she went, but within a week she was home in disgrace.

(To be Continued.)

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"I would rather send a patient of mine to a country asylum than to a private institution, however wealthy he or she might be," averred the doctor.

These rate-maintained homes of the growing army of mentally inefficient do not, as the doctor showed, tally with the common impression of being cheerless, prison-like places, whose inmates droop dismally under the burden of their affliction. An enumeration by Dr. Forbes Winslow of the "attractions"—if the word be permissible—provided in an average modern asylum included all the comforts of a good hotel and



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