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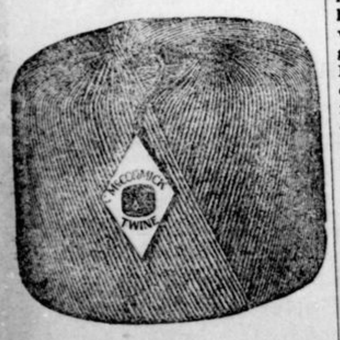

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CHAPTER XVI.

ALICE PAGE'S first impression of Frank Nason did not do him justice. She thought him a big, good natured, polite boy, rather conscious that he was likely to be sought after and disposed to sulk if he wasn't. His plea for sympathy on the score that his life of idleness was a bore, which he made the day they went sleighing, only provoked her derision, and as she was disposed to judge all men by the standard of her self reliant brother, he came near awakening contempt on her part. It was not until the last evening of his visit that she discovered her mistake and realized that he had more depth of character than she had thought. It is likely the keen enjoyment which he seemed to feel when she sang for him had weight, for we are prone to like those who like us, and it was natural also that she should feel a little gratitude for what he had done for her brother.

Her life, hidden as she was in a by-way corner of a country town and seeing no one all the week except her small band of pupils, gave her plenty of time for thought. Once a week, usually on Saturday, she received a letter from her brother, and that, together with the mild excitement of Sunday churchgoing, was all that broke the monotony of her life.

A week after the Christmas visit she received a package containing a new book, three of the latest popular songs and a box of candy, and pinned to the candy Frank Nason's card, on the back of which was written, "For the girl who wanted to kiss her teacher."

She wrote a polite note of thanks. It was midwinter and two weeks after her brother wrote that Frank had begun studying law in his office when she received a letter from that young man that surprised her. He wrote:

My Dear Miss Page—I trust you will pardon me for intruding myself upon you, but I wish you to know that a few pointed words spoken by you while I was enjoying your hospitality have not been forgotten and have influenced me to make an effort to be something better than an idler in the world. Your brother kindly consented to let me read law in his office, and I am now hard at it. I do not imagine this will interest you, but I felt that you had scant respect for useless people, and as you could rightly so regard me I wanted you to know that I am capable of rising above my aimless life.

I have recalled so many times all the little incidents of my visit to your home and lived over those evenings graced by your presence and lit by a cheerful fire time and again. Do not think me insincere when I assure you that they were the most delightful ones I ever passed. If you find time to write a line to one who is now a worker in the hive instead of a drone, it will be gratefully received by me.

To a girl with Alice Page's sympathetic nature and tender feelings words like these made her feel she was what she most enjoyed being—an inspiration and help to others. In this respect Frank Nason had read her better than she had read him, or else some fortunate intuition had led him aright. She answered the letter at once, thanking him for his flattering words, but forbidding him to use any more of them.

"I do not like flattery," she wrote, "because no one ever can feel quite sure it is sincere. I will answer all your letters if you will promise not to tell Bert we are corresponding. Not that I am ashamed of it by any means, but he is inclined to tease me, and I love him so dearly I can't bear to have him do so. The little girl you sent the candy to was both astonished and grateful. I did not tell her who sent it, for the fact would have been all over town in a week if I had, and I do not like to be gossiped about. I merely told her a good fairy had sent it, which was better."

Once a week thereafter Alice received a long letter from Frank and as regularly answered it.

"Frank is getting along nicely," Albert wrote Alice in the early spring. "I believe he has the making of a capable lawyer in him. He grinds away harder than I ever did when reading law and has never yet complained of how dry and dull it all is. He is a big, warm hearted fellow, too, and I am growing more fond of him every day. He is more devoted to me than a brother, and we have made a lot of plans for a month's outing on the Gypsy this coming summer. I like his family very much, and Mrs. Nason and both her daughters have invited me to bring you down when your school closes to make them a visit. I think I shall run up in June and stay over Sunday and bring Frank with me. I imagine he would like to come, for once in awhile I overhear him humming 'Ben Bolt.'"

"A very nicely worded little plot, but don't you imagine, my dear Bert, I do not see through it!" was the mental comment of Alice when she read the letter. "The young gentleman has bravely set to work to become a man instead of a cipher. My brother likes him; he whistles 'Ben Bolt;' my brother is to bring him up here again; I am expected to fall in love with Mr. Cipher that was and help him spend his money, and I am to be barely tolerated by mamma and both sisters! A most charming plot, surely, but it takes two to make a bargain. I think I know just the sort of people mamma and sisters are. He told me she read him a lecture every time he danced twice with a poor girl, and now I am expected to walk into the same trap and cringe to her ladyship for the sin of being poor. I guess not! I'll teach school till I die first, and he can think of me as having a 'slab of granite so gray' to keep me in place."

But this diplomatic "Sweet Alice" wrote to her brother: "I am delighted that you are coming up, for I am so lonesome, and the weeks drag so hard! Bring your friend up, by all means, and I'll sing 'Ben Bolt' till he hates the name of Sweet Alice. The country will be looking fine then, and he can go over to the cemetery and select the corner I am to occupy. Pardon the joke, and don't tell him I uttered it."

To Frank she wrote: "Be sure to come up with Bert. I will sing all the old songs and the new ones you have sent me as well. If you come up on a Thursday you may visit my school Friday afternoon, and then you can see the girl you sent the candy to. She wears a calico pinafore and comes to school barefooted."

Alice's tactful reply to her brother's letter, coupled with his own sincere affection for her, brought her a response by return mail in the form of a check for $100, with explicit orders to spend every cent of it before he came.

CHAPTER XVII.

SANDGATE was just budding forth in a new suit of green, the meadows dotted with daisies, and here and there a bunch of tiger lilies waved in the breeze when one Friday afternoon the teacher at the north district school heard a knock.

The class in reading, then in evidence, were halted in their singsong of concert utterance, and Alice Page opened the door to find two stalwart young men standing there. With a quick impulse of propriety she stepped out and closed the door behind her, only to find herself clasped in a big brother's arms and to receive a smack that was heard by every pupil in the little schoolroom. With a very red face she freed herself and then presented a small hand to the other young man with the remark:

"I think you are both just as mean as you can be to surprise me in this way!"

When explanations were duly made, the two visitors were invited inside and given seats. The class in reading was then dismissed and that in spelling called to what was now seemingly to them an unexpected misery. A bombshell or a ghost at the window would not have produced any more consternation than those two strange visitors. This class, that one by one filed up in front of the teacher's desk and ranged themselves in line, stood trembling, and the boy at the head, to whom was put the first word, was unable to utter a sound. The next one spelled it wrong, and it was tried by two others and finally spelled right by a girl who could hardly do better than whisper it. She was told to go to the head, and after that the rest did better. The search for knowledge in that school had received a setback, however, for that day, and Alice decided to do the wisest thing and dismiss her band of pupils w[illegible] delay. When the room was c[illegible] of them she turned to her two callers and said with mock seriousness, "The first class in deportment will now define propriety."

"Propriety is—is— Propriety," replied her brother, "consists in two young men surprising one small and very saucy schoolma'am and letting a lot of imprisoned boys and girls escape to the woods and enjoy an extra hour of freedom."

"Not right," said Alice severely. "The next pupil will now answer."

"Propriety," answered Frank, "consists in two young men escaping from the city and relieving one tired schoolteacher from her duty and permitting her to go and gather flowers if she will. But which was the girl you told the fairy tale to, Miss Page?" he added as Alice began putting her books away.

"The only one in the spelling class you two bold, bad men didn't scare half out of her wits," she answered.

Frank walked about the room, peering curiously at its rather primitive fittings.

"So this is what you call a temple of learning," he remarked as he surveyed the barnlike room. "It is a curiosity to me, and the first time I was ever in an old time country schoolhouse. I should like to peep through one of the knotholes some day and watch the performances and hear a scared boy speak a piece."

"You had better not try it," answered Alice, "unless you want two or three farmers to swoop down on you armed with scythes and demanding to know what you are doing there."

When she had locked the schoolhouse door they got into the carriage the two young men had come in and left the forlorn little temple to the solitude of the trees and bushes that almost hid it from sight.

"I will stop in the village," said Albert as they drove away, "and leave you two to go home or take a ride, as suits you best; only, mind, be home by tea time, for I shall be hungry."

There is no time when a drive along wooded country roads is more charming than when the trees are fast growing green and the meadows spangled with daisies and buttercups.

"Let's go around by the mill pond," said Alice after leaving her brother in the village. "The road to it follows the brook up a mile. We may find a few lilies in the pond."

The brook beside which they were soon walking the horse was a charming bit of scenery as it came leaping over mossy ledges, laughing, chattering and filling the pools with foam flecks, and the old mill, with its great wheel dripping and clattering, and the mill itself proved even a greater curiosity to Frank than the schoolhouse. He hitched the horse, and, helping his fair companion to alight, the two went inside the mill and watched the rumbling wheels. Alice introduced her escort to the miller, and after they had been shown the mysteries of grinding he invited them out to the pond, and after bailing the old leaky boat so it was usable the two visitors started after the lilies.

"Mind you don't tip me over," said Alice. "I can't swim."

"If I do I'll rescue you or drown with you," he answered gallantly. What silly nothings these two young people uttered as they made the circuit of that long wood bordered mill pond! One at least was just tasting the first sweet illusion of love, and the glassy surface of the water that reflected the trees bending over it, the bunches of water flag growing here and there and the scattered patches of broad lily pads, with now and then a white blossom, made a most picturesque background for the girl who sat in the stern. Her piquant face, shaded by a broad sun hat, was fairer to his eyes than any of the lilies she plucked, and as she drew one sleeve up a little to reach for them the round arm and dimpled hand she thrust into the water looked tempting enough to kiss. The miller had shut the gate and gone home when they returned to the mill.

"Do you know," remarked Frank when they had left the mill behind and were driving through a bit of woods, "that I have anticipated this visit for weeks? I know scarcely anything about the country, and it is all a revelation to me. I've seen pictures of old mills and ponds covered with lilies, but no painter can ever put the reality on canvas. Why, that great wheel, covered with moss and churning away all day so steadily, with a willow bending over it, is a poem in itself!"

"The mill was built over a hundred years ago," observed Alice, "and has been grinding away ever since. I love to visit it, for it takes me back to childhood, and," she added, a little sadly, "it makes me live over the happiest days of my life, when father used to take me with him everywhere he went."

"'But the mill will never grind with the water that has passed,'" quoted Frank, "and 'the tender grace of a day that is dead will never come back to me.' I wish I had been country born. I think I've missed countless pages of pleasant memories. Do you know," he added, turning to his companion, "I am rapidly falling in love with the country and—and its pretty sights?"

"Whose idea was it to pounce upon me that way at school?" exclaimed Alice suddenly, throwing off her retrospective mood and smiling again. "Was it yours or Bert's?"

"I confess I coaxed Bert to do it. We had to take the train at 5 o'clock in the morning and have coffee and rolls at the station for breakfast and pie and sandwiches for dinner."

"And all to surprise one poor little schoolma'am and break up her school," put in Alice. "Was it worth all that annoyance?"

"Up to the present moment," answered Frank, "I must honestly say it was. This drive and the mill I consider cheap at any price."

"I don't mean this part of the surprise," said Alice, blushing a little at his open admiration. And then in self defense she added: "What has become of the Gypsy? Bert writes me that you two are planning trips in her already."

"She is still in winter quarters," answered Frank. "I've been too busy studying law to do more than think of her. I've reformed, you know."

Alice made no reply. The memory of what he had so evidently wished her to infer regarding his reasons for this new departure came to her in an instant and brought a little wonderment as to the possible outcome of it. Turn which way she would and propose what topic she might, he seemed bound to use it as a vehicle of his undisguised admiration. She had wished to consider him as a friend, because he had been a friend to her adored brother when that brother needed one, and while she had written him a dozen chatty letters which might be printed for all the privacy they contained, she had studiously refrained from allowing him to infer even that she had any special interest in his actions.

What silly nothings these two young people uttered!

When they arrived home Albert was on the piazza and Aunt Susan had supper waiting. The table was set with blue ware of a very old and quaint pattern, and when Alice had filled a bowl with lilies for a centerpiece they gathered around and "passed things" in true country fashion. The evening was unusually warm for June, and after the two young men had smoked and chatted for half an hour Alice appeared dressed in spotless white, with a half open lily in her hair and another at her throat. The moon, which was nearing its full, shone through the open spaces of the vineclad porch and added an ethereal touch to the sylphlike picture she presented.

"Well," she remarked cheerfully as she seated herself near her brother, "my time is yours, and what can I do to entertain you?"

"I had planned to take Frank to a trout brook tomorrow morning," responded Albert, "and in the afternoon you and he can hunt for mill ponds and grottoes, if you like, or gather laurel."

"And leave me alone all the forenoon?" put in Alice. "No, thank you. I'm shut up for five days, and you can't get rid of me so easily. Why can't I go too?"

"I'm agreeable," replied her brother, "only a trout brook is not nice walking for a lady."

"I'm aware of that," she responded, "and you two can go fishing, and I'll hunt for laurel in the meantime. We can take a basket of lunch with us and make a day of it in the woods." Then, as a possible contingency presented itself to her, she added: "Why not let me invite my friend, Abby Miles, to go for company? She and I can pick laurel, and when you have caught all the harmless little trout you want we can meet where we leave the wagon and have a picnic."

"That suits me," said her brother, and without waiting for further discussion this diplomatic fairy in white arose and remarked: "I'll get a shawl, and then I'll trouble you, Mr. Nason, to escort me over to Abby's. It's only a few rods, and I want you to meet her. She's ever so nice."

The plan as mapped by Alice was carried out to the letter, and when the two young men joined the girls at noon they found a broad flat rock in the woods had been covered with a tablecloth and spread with a tempting meal. The girls had gathered great bunches of pink laurel, and a cluster of it decked the table. After dinner Alice insisted that they visit the mill pond once more, and when they returned at night with two baskets of trout and laurel and pond lilies enough to stock a flower stand the day was voted an eminent success.

Frank made one error, however, for just before they left the mill he slipped away unobserved and, finding the miller, put a bit of paper into his hand with the remark, "Keep this to pay for the boat," and left him hurriedly. When the old man made examination he found he had a five dollar bill. To surprises of this kind he was not accustomed, and before noon the next day there wasn't a man, woman or child in Sandgate who had not heard of it.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THAT evening Frank begged for music, and Alice sung for two long hours. When the concert was ended Albert observed: "If there's one song in the house that you have not sung, Alice, I wish you would sing it. I hate to have you omit any."

"I have only sung what I was asked to," she replied. "Is not that so, Mr. Nason?"

"That is true," replied he boldly, "and you have not sung one that I wouldn't enjoy hearing again tonight."

"Oh, I have enjoyed them all," said Albert, "only I thought you might have missed one, and, as Frank remarked coming home that he was hungry for music, I wanted him satisfied."

The next day they attended church, only this time all three walked back together. Alice was graciousness personified. All her jokes and smiles and all her conversation were lavished upon Frank. Several times Frank, who intuitively felt she did not wish to be left alone with him, started to ask her to take a walk that Sunday evening, but each time his discretion prevailed. "If she is willing to listen to any lovemaking, she has tact enough to give me a chance," he thought, "and unless she is I had better keep still." The evening was one to tempt Cupid, for the moonlight fell checkered through the half naked elms along the roadway, and where here and there a group of maples stood was a bit of shadow. The whippoorwills had just returned to Sandgate, and over the meadows scattered fireflies twinkled. The houses along the way to the village were wide apart and the evening air just right for a loitering walk. To Frank, anxious to say a few words that would further his hopes in the direction of this bewitching girl, it seemed a waste of good time not to take advantage of the evening. It was almost past and the lights in the houses across the valley had long since vanished when he obtained a little consolation.

The charm of the evening had stilled conversation, and neither had spoken for a long time when he said rather disconsolately: "My anticipated visit is almost over. May I ask you to go in and sing just one song for me, Miss Page?"

"With pleasure," she responded in her sweetest tone; "what shall it be?"

"I will leave that to your selection," he replied.

Without a word she led the way in and began searching among the pile of music on the piano, and, finding what she wanted, opened and spread the music on the rack.

It was "Ben Bolt."

She sang it in a minor key, and as the opening words, "Oh, don't you remember sweet Alice, Ben Bolt," floated out on the still evening air they seemed to him fraught with a new meaning and that a veritable sweet Alice was bidding him, another Ben Bolt, not to forget her. When the last note had faded into the night air she turned her now serious eyes toward him.

"I thank you," he almost whispered. "And there won't be many waking moments in my future when I shall not think of—sweet Alice!"

It was not much of a love scene, but to him it seemed a wide open door of hope, and when many miles separated them, and for days, weeks and months afterward, even when doing his best to crowd dull law reports into his brain, the one tender glance she gave him and the tones of her voice came back with unfailing accuracy.

The first visit of Frank Nason to the Page home, his sleighrides with Alice and his appearance at church had caused no end of comment. It was known that he had been a classmate of Albert and came from Boston, and later Aunt Susan vouchsafed the information that she "guessed he came from one o' the first families and that he appeared right well behaved."

It was all she really did know, for both Alice and her brother were considerate of her failings and knew it was not safe to discuss their visitor in her presence. The tempest of gossip had not more than half quieted down when it received a regular boom from his second coming. The pupils of the north end district school spread the news of their teacher's unexpected callers and that she had dismissed school at once and gone on with the

She turned her now serious eyes toward him.

stranger. Old Amos Curtis, the miller, told of their visit and, wonder upon wonder, how the next day "her beau" had given him a five dollar bill "jest fer lettin' 'em use a leaky old boat fer an hour."

The buxom Abby Miles had the best and longest story to tell, and her praise of Mr. Nason, how polite he was and "how he couldn't keep his eyes off'n Alice all the afternoon," was whispered to every girl she knew. The five dollar incident created the most gossip, however. The miller had remarked that a "young feller who threw money round that way must be rich," and that remark soon grew into a story that Alice Page's beau was worth a million and that she was engaged to him.

As might be expected, the subject of all this gossip heard none of it until the storm had reached alarming proportions. Mrs. Mears was the first one to tell the extent of the gossip.

"They tell me," said that worthy matron to Alice one Sunday after church, "that you ain't likely to teach school after this summer."

"And why not?" answered Alice. "Don't I give satisfaction?"

"Oh, 'tain't that. I guess you can imagine the reason, and I want to be the first to congratulate you. They tell me he's worth a pile o' money, an' he's sartinly well favored so far as looks goes; but, then, 'handsome is as

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