

A TRANSFER OF LOVE.

Mabel emptied her dipper of blueberries into the ten-quart pail she and Fred had brought into partnership.

"Full!" she announced to Fred, coming to empty his quart.

"We've beaten the crowd. Guess I'll give these to Bess, as a reward of laziness."

The others of the party were scattered over the slopes below them. The sound of much laughter and aimless jesting floated up to where Mabel and her cousin stood.

"To estimate by the noise they make, their pails can't be half full. And the sun is still high; we shall have plenty of time to climb to the top. Take the pail down to the girls, and come after me."

Mabel was a long way on the upward path before Fred overtook her. She scrambled adventurously over the rocks as the path grew steeper, in happy eagerness to reach the summit.

In the pictures of heaven which Mabel's fancy had drawn in her childhood, the top of Blueberry Hill had always been somewhat included. In her maturer years she still reverently believed that in the moments she spent on that summit she tasted heavenly peace. It was not every one whose companionship she would ask in these moments; Fred never struck notes discordant with her mood. She and Fred had been most congenial companions from the day of his coming into his uncle's family; in sympathy with this older cousin.

Fred, muscular and agile, easily passed Mabel in the ascent. The last bit of climbing was over a rough ledge; Mabel had played the spendthrift with her energy, and held up her hands, laughing and panting, for Fred's help over the last rocky barrier.

Fred's hands and Mabel's had clasped uncounted times before—in help as now, in encouragement, in simple good fellowship. This time, a strange thing happened. A force swift as an electric current quivered along Fred's nerves, and gave him the briefest possible interval of unconsciousness between the future and the past. He was still wondering at it and at himself when, Mabel having chosen her seat, he threw himself down beside her, resting easily on one elbow.

Mabel did not care to talk; she watched the panorama around her. Behind her lay fold on fold of sombre New Hampshire hill-country, sparsely dotted with farm-buildings; below were the valley and the village. The white cupola of the academy marked itself ostentatiously; the elm-shaded mansion which was her home stood next in prominence.

The horizon she loved was the limit of her world. Mabel lived it with love fed by all the memories of her happy childhood, but she had her longings to go beyond it and taste more deeply of life's cup. She felt in herself, in occasional romantic moments, capabilities for playing the heroine on a more ambitious stage. Burnstead offered no background for soul-stirring situations.

These faint shadows of longing did not dim in any perceptible degree her content in the place and season; but if Mabel was happy, much more was Fred. He found a new charm in the landscape—in the sunlight—in Mabel! For, watching her, he all at once knew what had come to him,—he loved her!

He had never dreamed much of love; his had been a merry, healthy boyhood. Certainly, he had not supposed love came like this. Did Mabel guess? How could she help understanding it in that handclasp which had changed the whole world?

Mabel's face was of undisturbed serenity; she kept her happy silence; and Fred had time to think over and over how strange it was that this had come to him,—to him, of all the world!—and how stranger still that it should be Mabel who had waked it,—Mabel, his playmate, his friend, almost his sister!

Mabel was startled by finding Fred close beside her, his arms around her, his eyes seeking hers.

"Oh, Mabel, Mabel, I love you so!" he cried, and released her, surprised at his own words. He threw himself on the ground with his head in her lap, as he had done before in many moments of discouragement and weariness. And just as was her habit Mabel tangled his hair beyond its usual confusion; only instead of the familiar complaint, "Oh Fred, why have I straight hair, and yours so curly, and curly hair no use to a boy!" she said, moved with great surprise, "What is the matter, Fred? Of course you love me. What should I do if you didn't?"

"Ah, but not that way!" His shining eyes were on a level with hers again. "Mabel, I shall die if you do not love me as I do you—if you will not say you will marry me some day."

"Fred! Are you crazy? You know I love you, but not in that way. How could I? We have been such friends always—you are almost my brother. You must not talk in this way. What can you mean by it?"

"But I am not your brother!" Fred answered in happy triumph. He poured out his boyish, foolish, impetuous eloquence upon her; he forced the reality of his feeling upon her belief at last.

"Fred, how old are you?" she asked. She was emerging from the confusion of her ideas, and smiled on him with something of her accustomed serenity.

It was cruel; Fred blushed, but he answered bravely.

"I'm seventeen; and, Mabel"—with one of his mischievous twinkles—"I shall be older some time, but I couldn't love you better if I were a hundred and seventeen."

"And how old am I, please?"

"Oh, Mabel, Mabel, what does it matter,—a few years more or less either way? Three years is nothing. Has that three years ever come between us in any way? Haven't we been just as good friends as if I had been three years the older? Has it ever made any difference in your feeling for me? Answer me that."

Mabel answered slowly, thinking her way out of the tangle.

"No, it never has. I think I do love you more than any one else—unless, perhaps, father; but that is different. You understand me, always better than the girls—very much better than my brother ever did. But, Fred, though I can't tell you how I know, I am sure it is not as you are asking me to love you. I am sure it could never be like that. Please put all this away and forget it. You will spoil all our good times."

Fred was not to be silenced. He put

orth every argument hackneyed in such service,—all fresh and vital enough for him. His life would be nothing without her; she, and she only, could make him any use in the world, could keep him in the right path.

Here he touched a vibrant string, and Mabel mused more seriously as he rambled on. In a few weeks Fred was to go to college. "The world" was a place of vague terrors to the girl whose horizon was bounded by the Burnstead hills; already she had thought anxiously of Fred in the midst of the undefined temptations he was about to meet. Perhaps, she reflected, Fred was partly right; perhaps here lay a safeguard which it was her privilege, even her duty, to give him.

The sun was low; already part of the valley lay in shadow. Faint echoes of voices came from the lower slopes.

"We must go down," Mabel said, starting up. "They are calling to us. Answer them, Fred, and come."

Fred barred her way. He took her hands.

"Not till you answer me something, dear." A manly dignity had come to him. Mabel's sense of superiority was shaken.

"I can't consent to an engagement," she said. "It would not be right. You will change; you will find someone better suited to you. Hush! Don't answer me yet. If you wish it so much—if it will content you—I will let it be an understanding between us. It must not bind you; you must be as free as if you had never told me; and when we are older, we will talk it over again. Understand, I promise nothing; and we must stay just good friends, as we have always been. Will that do?"

"If it must," Fred answered, and kissed her, somewhat gravely.

"You must not kiss me any more," Mabel sighed. "Oh, Fred, you have spoiled everything!"

"You shall not always think that," he answered, out of his boyish hopefulness. He helped down the ledge with an air of insistent proprietorship, not deeming worthy of notice her derisive caution:

"How you will laugh at all this some day!"

Mabel's days passed dreamlike till Fred went away. He made little rebellion against the conditions with which she retained their intercourse. His love was of a sort which could find satisfaction in silent contemplation of its object. He treasured her picture, scraps of her writing, her hitherto only half-appreciated holiday and birthday gifts to him. Best of all there was constant delight in the exchange of subtle sympathies by words and looks that all the world might unheeding observe.

Mabel was troubled by doubts of her wisdom in assenting to this understanding; but she had no one of whom to ask advice. Since the marriage of her elder sister, she had been nominally the head of the household: the fact was that each one of the four sisters left at home was a law unto herself, mutual love and helpfulness being the controlling forces in the home.

She smiled at the thought of appealing to her father. Gardner Mansfield would have made any sacrifice, even to his life, for the welfare of his daughters; but if he had been required to state their exact ages and describe their tastes he must have failed miserably. With Fred, his nephew and ward, he had something in common; but girls were a hopeless mystery to him. He would have been quite as much amazed if Mabel had submitted a proposal of marriage to him as if thirteen-year-old Kitty had done the same thing; and would have been equally helpless in either case.

Mabel and her brother had never been congenial; and if she had given her confidence in this case to the married sister, Charlotte would simply laugh at Fred and think that ended her concern with the matter.

Secrecy was not Mabel's habit, but here there seemed no other course so advisable. If, as she believed, Fred would outlive this fancy in a maturer love for some other woman, it would be better for him that his passing folly should not be known. Nothing need be changed; their intimate companionship was a fact too familiar for comment.

Fred's first letters confirmed Mabel in the belief that she had acted wisely. They were the letters of a healthy-minded lad, deeply interested in his environment. Indeed, they betrayed an absorption in athletics calculated to arouse alarm in the conservative home circle. This alarm he failed to quiet in visits at home through the year, but it had to yield at a summing up of his year's work expressed in official and irrefutable figures.

Part of his first summer vacation was spent in a bicycle tour with college friends, and the rest was for Mabel's pleasure almost unalloyed. Fred seemed to have grown much older, and as she told him, more reasonable. They had one talk of the relations between them, and after that their intercourse seemed to be almost on its old free basis.

"I must have seemed very boyish and silly to you, with all that wild talk," Fred said. "I'm not so conceited as I was. I know better what it means to ask for the love of a girl like you. Cool, asking you to wait for me to grow up, wasn't it? You deserve the best in the world, and if it comes to you I'll try to be glad you've got it. Only—I mean to be something of a man myself, and if the time ever comes when you are sure you can be satisfied with me,—that will be my heaven on earth. I don't mean to tease you with love-making; I should have no right,—now. But in a few years—we'll see."

If these sentiments, moderate as they might seem, caused Mabel to doubt the wisdom of her plan of action, she could find comfort in other lines of Fred's conversation. She could not fail to see how strong was her influence with him, how powerful an incentive was the hope of her approval, how steady a restraint was his knowledge of her high principle.

"It was best," she assured herself. "I am not all he thinks me; but if he keeps himself honest and manly for my sake, he will have an honest and manly self to offer to that other woman."

If Mabel failed to detect that her judgment was warped by the flattery there was for her in this situation, she was not the first woman to make a like mistake. And, whatever the future might hold, these were happy days for them both. Fred's life had broadened,—much they believed,—and his companionship became more stimulating to Mabel; while he still found sympathy and

intelligence equal to all his demands on them.

There came to Mabel, after two more college years had drifted by, some irrepressible compunctions. Their friendship still rested on a plane of the frankest good fellowship. Yet Fred's acceptance of Mabel's guardianship seemed less his choice than a necessary condition of his existence. This became so plain that Mabel's uneasiness grew day by day.

For now, more than ever, she was sure she did not want to marry Fred. Her ideals had become more definite than in her girlhood. One does not see many men in Burnstead—men, that is, one could think of in connection with love and marriage. But a Burnstead girl may, rarely, meet a man of experience, culture, and magnetic manner; a trustee of the academy, for instance, a visiting minister, or one of one's father's friends from the outside world. And one makes occasional little trips away from home. Chaperoned by Charlotte, Mabel had seen one Class Day. Naturally, when one goes to Class Day as the guest of an undergraduate, one's perspective is faulty, and the undergraduate singly and the undergraduate as a species fill an undue proportion of the foreground. Still, Mabel was able to give a few keen glances into the background of the delightful gaiety, into "the world," which was still in her crude thought a separate, bounded sphere in which she had no part.

Duties enough and little cares kept her wholesomely occupied, she had no time to grow morbid over her anxieties. As if the oversight of her younger sisters were not enough, an opportunity came to do much for another school-girl, so different from those she had known best as to be at once a perplexing and a fascinating career.

Dr. Emery, an old friend of Mabel's father, brought his motherless daughter to Burnstead academy begging that she might share the home influences during her school terms which had shaped such charming personalities as he thought the Mansfield girls. Elly Emery conceived for Mabel the violent passion an emotional girl delights to bestow on some older woman; her union of innate rectitude with wayward impulse made her a deeply interesting study, and she filled a large share of Mabel's thoughts.

Dr. Emery, coming occasionally to watch his daughter's progress, was well pleased with her development under the new influences.

One day, Mabel standing by her window, looked up the valley to Blueberry Hill. Blueberry Hill suggested Fred; she reflected that June was passing, and Fred would soon be at home. For some reason Mabel did not question herself why her thoughts of Fred had been unwontedly persistent of late. She no longer formulated her perplexities; she went about under a cloud of discontent, which, oddly, seemed about to break away into some indefinite expanse of clear sky.

Grace running upstairs, startled her out of her reverie.

"Dr. Emery is downstairs, Mabel, sitting out on the porch."

"Hasn't anyone called Elly? or father?" Mabel asked. But her hands were instantly busy about her hair and dress.

"Father? Elly?" Grace mocked as she went away. "Do you suppose your delightful demure ways impose on us? Do you suppose we girls believe Dr. Emery comes here just to see father and Elly?"

Mabel had no answer to make. Her face was slightly flushed as she started down the stairs, and the flush deepened painfully when she saw that Dr. Emery had come into the hall, and could hardly have failed to hear Grace's jesting.

Her distress was so painfully betrayed that he could not ignore it. They were alone; the culprit Grace had fled in a fright.

Dr. Emery was more moved than even the awkwardness of the situation called for. Mabel fluttered a few words of greeting.

"I had not supposed," he said, retaining the hand she had offered, "that it was possible for you to be annoyed in that way."

"It did not—it is no matter," Mabel tried to answer.

His eyes rested steadily upon her.

"Your father knew—how did it happen that he has not told you that Elly's mother is living?"

Mabel smiled as she answered, "Oh, father's knowing a thing is not at all the same as our knowing it." Afterwards, she wondered how at that moment she could find room for the familiar sense of amusement at her father's absentmindedness.

"I must not come here again in this way. I see I have made mistakes. But I should like to explain it a little before I go—all I can explain of it."

He seemed to wait for permission to speak, but was forced to go on without it.

"There is nothing but her death that could give me the freedom I never till lately much cared for. Not all men would have chosen to act as I did. I left her Elly's sake; I have never seen reason to doubt that I did right. Elly does not know; she believes her mother dead and it is best that she should."

Mabel lost accurate sense of the passage of time, as one does when half recovered from an anæsthetic. If he said more, it many minutes of silence passed, if she spoke, she could not afterwards be sure. They were saying good-bye; he had taken both her hands. Their eyes met, at the last, in a long, intense look. Mabel felt a curious sensation about her face, and thought she must be blushing to an unaccustomed degree; when she saw herself in the hall glass, after Dr. Emery had gone, she saw that her face had an odd, grayish color.

She went to her room, and looked out at Blueberry Hill again, but not to think of Fred. She knew what had happened to her; her one chance of the love she had dreamed of had been shown her and taken away; and her heart was broken—only hearts never did really break.

She wondered why she did not cry; tears usually came to her only too readily. She wondered why she found it so easy to go down to the duties that awaited her, and perform them with accustomed fidelity. She wondered how she was able to keep the family from suspecting that the world had changed for her.

"The world"—she had become a part of it at last; she was akin to all who had hoped, lost, suffered!

At night, moving about her room, she by chance brushed to the floor a letter of Fred's.

Fred! The first thought of him was aversion, almost anger; a feeling of great remoteness from the part of her life with which he had been concerned. Then came an overwhelming revulsion of emotion; she

read over his letter, drinking in the love and sympathy told even in its commonplace of college gossip.

Dear, faithful Fred! There was restfulness in his devotion.

She would tell Fred what had come to her; she would tell him how it had taught her to value his unflinching affection; then, if he still cared for so worthless a thing as her sisterly but heart-deep love, she would give herself entirely to him.

Then tears came; and Mabel's days were strangely interwoven with pain and anticipation.

She wondered after Fred came if it were because of the change in herself that he seemed moody and more silent than usual. The younger girls commented on the alteration with the result of ruffling his usually sunny temper.

The girls and their summer guests were out on one of their field rambles one afternoon, Mabel and Fred a little ahead as usual.

"Let's climb Blueberry Hill," Mabel said. It had just occurred to her that there would be a poetic fitness in beginning another chapter of their story in the place where the last had begun. She had been only waiting a favorable opportunity to make her confession to Fred.

As she had foreseen, only Fred and herself cared to climb to the summit. The others would rest comfortably and wait for them in the pines half way up the hill.

Fred kept pace with her in a moody silence which became so marked that when they had reached the top of the ledge he seemed to recognize that it could not pass without apology. He looked at Mabel with a frank smile, awaiting her reproof.

"Bess says it must be some college scrape."

The two had grown so thoroughly in sympathy that his smile and her seemingly unconnected remark were recognized as question and answer.

"It's no college scrape."

Fred threw himself down beside her; he pulled his hat down over his eyes.

"I suppose you have thought I was sulking about something. I've been more miserable than I ever was in my life before. I've got to tell you, and I could do it easier if I could make you understand how I despise myself. Sometimes I have thought—There! What's the use of all this palaver? Mabel, you were right, I didn't know myself. I've gone and fallen in love with somebody else."

Before Mabel was ready with words, he continued his boyishly blunt confession.

"I know well enough—I knew it all the time, if I would have owned it to myself—that you never would have cared enough for me to marry me. You had sense enough to see it wasn't the right thing. But it makes me feel like a contumacious fool all the same."

Mabel allowed him to exonerate himself in silence for some minutes before she relieved him by an answer. Indeed, it was not easy for her to decide what to say. Dr. began rambling apologies again before she adopted her pose.

"Fred, my dear," she made a distinct pause to force him to turn and look at her.

"You have scolded yourself all the occasion demands. I will be good to you; I will not say 'I told you so,'—unless I imply it too strongly in saying that this is what I have always wished." ("Always? Yes, always," Mabel inwardly silenced her conscience.) "That brief aberration needn't count." "Let's call that all done away with, and now let me hear all about her. It is Churchill's pretty little sister, of course; I have been very stupid not to see it before."

"Mabel, you are an angel! Oh, you needn't look at me like that,—Alice knows all about it. She wouldn't have a word to say to me till I should have told you all about it. She knows I think there is nobody like you, and she will not beat all jealous of you."

"Perhaps," Mabel's cynical thought ran.

She laughed at him, comfortably for his rapture. She promised to love Alice as a sister, after she had forgiven her for robbing her of the first place in Fred's heart. She warned him gravely to be very good to this sweet girl he had won.

When the calls from the lower slopes grew insistent, Mabel laughed oddly as she stood up for a parting sweep of the horizon.

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