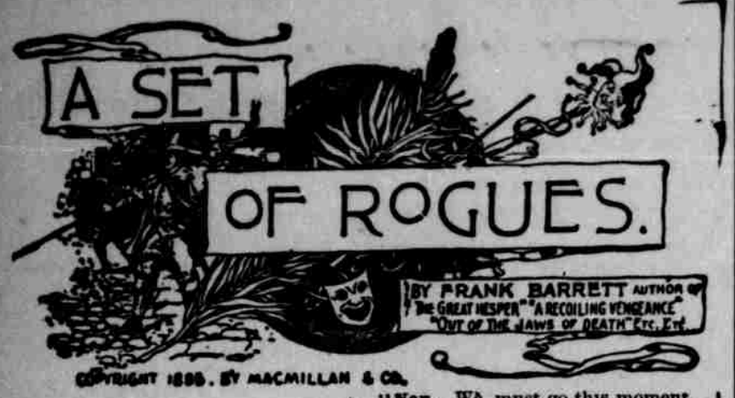


(Continued from last week.)

she, "for 'tis evident he is weary of being here."

"Nay, won't you come in and see his work now 'tis finished?"

"No. I have no desire to see it. If I have lost my taste for Italian art, 'tis through no fault of his."

"You will see him surely before he goes."

"No. I will not give him another opportunity to presume upon my kindness."

"Why, to be sure," says I, like a fool, "you have been a little overfamiliar."

"Indeed," says she, firing up like a cracker. "Then I think 'twould have been kinder of you to give me a hint of it beforehand. However, 'tis a very good excuse for treating him otherwise now."

"Well, he must be paid for his work, at any rate."

"Assuredly. If you have not money enough, I will fetch it from my closet."

"I have it ready, and here is a purse for the purpose. The question is, how much to put in it, and such a perspective as that could not be handsomely paid under 50 guineas."

"Then you will give him 100 and say that I am exceedingly obliged to him."

I put this sum in the purse and went out into the hall where Dario was waiting, with his basket of brushes beside him. In a poor, bungling, stammering fashion I delivered Moll's message and made the best excuse I could for delivering it in her stead.

He waited a moment or two after I had spoken, and then, says he, in a low voice:

"Is that all?"

"Nay," says I, offering the purse, "we do beg you to take this as"—

He stopped me, pushing my hand aside.

"I have taken a purse from Don Sanchez," says he. "There was more in it than I needed. There are still some pieces left. But as I would not affront him by offering to return them so I beg you will equally respect my feelings. I undertook the task in gratitude, and it hath been a work of love all through, well paid for by the happiness that I have found here."

He stood musing a little while, as if he were debating with himself whether he should seek to overcome Moll's resentment or not. Then, raising his head quickly, he says:

"'Tis best so, maybe. Farewell, sir," giving me his hand. "Tell her," adds he as we stand hand in hand at the door, "that I can never forget her kindness and will ever pray for her happiness."

I found the door ajar and Moll pacing the room very white when I returned. She checked me the moment I essayed to deliver Dario's message.

"You can save your breath," says she passionately. "I've heard every word."

"More shame for you," says I in a passion, casting my purse on the table. "'Tis infamous to treat an honest gentleman thus and silly besides. Come, dear," altering my tone, "do let me run and fetch him back."

"You forget whom you are speaking to, Mr. Hopkins," cries she.

I saw 'twas impossible to move her while she was in this mood, for she had something of her father's obstinate, stubborn disposition and did yet hope to bring Dario back to her feet, like a spaniel, by harsh treatment. But he came no more, though a palette he had overlooked could have given him the excuse, and for very vexation with Moll I was glad he did not.

He had not removed the scaffold, but when I went upon it to see what else he had put into his painting the fading light only allowed me to make out a figure that seemed to be leaning over the balcony.

Moll would not go in there, though I warrant she was dying of curiosity, and soon after supper, which she could scarce force herself to touch, she went up to her own chamber, wishing us a very distant, formal good night and keeping her passionate, angry countenance.

But the next morning ere I was dressed she knocked at my door, and opening it I found her with swollen eyes and tears running down her cheeks.

"Come down," says she betwixt her sobs and catching my hand in hers, "come down and see."

So we went down stairs together, I wondering what now had happened, and so into the dining hall. And there I found the scaffold pushed aside and the ceiling open to view. Then, looking up, I perceived that the figure bending over the balcony bore Moll's own face, with a most sweet, compassionate expression in it as she looked down, such as I had observed when she bent over Dario, having brought him back to life. And this it was that he must ever see when he looks heavenward.

CHAPTER XXI.

"Tell me I am wicked. Tell me I'm a fool," says Moll, clinging to my arm.

But I had no feeling now but pity and forgiveness, and so could only try to comfort her, saying we would make amends to Dario when we saw him next.

"I will go to him," says she. "For naught in the world would I have him yield to such a heartless fool as I am. I know where he lodges."

"Well, when we have eaten"—

"Nay. We must go this moment. I cannot be at peace till I have asked him to forgive. Come with me, or I must go alone."

Yielding to her desire without further ado, I fetched my hat and cloak, and she doing likewise we sallied out forthwith. Taking the side path by which Dario came and went habitually, we reached a little wicket gate, opening from the path upon the highway, and here, seeing a man mending the road, we asked him where we should find Anne Fitch, as she was called with whom the painter lodged. Pointing to a neat cottage that stood by the wayside, within a stone's throw, he told us the "wise woman" lived there. We crossed over and knocked at the door, and a voice within bidding us come in we did so.

There was a very sweet, pleasant smell in the room from the herbs that hung in little parcels from the beams, for this Anne Fitch was greatly skilled in the use of simples, and had no equal for curing fevers and the like in all the country road. But besides this it was said she could look into the future and forecast events truer than any Egyptian. There was a chair by the table, on which were an empty bowl and some broken bread, but the wise woman sat in the chimney corner, bending over the hearth, though the fire had burned out, and not an ember glowed. And a strange little elf she looked, being very wizen and small, with one shoulder higher than the other, and a face full of pain.

When I told her our business—for Moll was too greatly moved to speak—the old woman pointed to the adjoining room.

"He is gone!" cries Moll, going to the open door and peering within.

"Yes," answers Anne Fitch. "Alas!"

"When did he go?" asks Moll.

"An hour since," answers the other.

"Whither is he gone?"

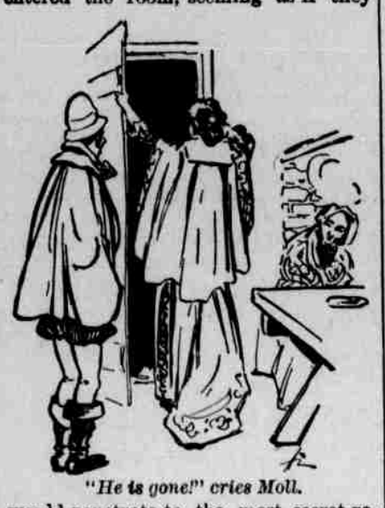
"I am no witch."

"At least you know which way he went."

"I have not stirred from here since I gave him his last meal."

Moll sank into the empty chair and bowed her head in silence.

Anne Fitch, whose keen eyes had never strayed from Moll since she first entered the room, seeming as if they



"He is gone!" cries Moll.

would penetrate to the most secret recesses of her heart, with that shrewd perception which is common to many whose bodily infirmity compels an extraordinary access of their other faculties, rises from her settle in the chimney, and coming to the table beside Moll says:

"I am no witch, I say, yet I could tell you things would make you think I am."

"I want to know nothing further," answers she dolefully, "save where he is."

"Would you know whether you shall ever see him again or not?"

"Oh, if you can tell me that!" cries Moll quickly.

"I may." Then, turning to me, the wise woman asks to look at my hand, and on my demurring she says she must know whether I am a friend or an enemy ere she speaks before me. So on that I give my hand, and she examines it.

"You call yourself James Hopkins," says she.

"Why, every one within a mile knows that," says I.

"Aye," answers she, fixing her piercing eyes on my face, "but every one knows not that some call you Kit."

This fairly staggered me for a moment.

"How do you answer that?" she asks, observing my confusion.

"Why," says I, recovering my presence of mind, "'tis most extraordinary, to be sure, that you should read this, for save one or two families none know that my second name is Christopher."

"A fairly honest hand," says she, looking at my hand again. "Weak in some things, but a faithful friend. You may be trusted."

And so she drops my hand and takes up Moll's.

"'Tis strange," says she. "You call yourself Judith, yet here I see your name writ Moll."

Poor Moll, sick with a night of sorrow and terrified by the wise woman's divining powers, could make no answer, but soon Fitch, taking less heed of her tremble than of mine, regards her hand again.

"How were you called in Barbary?" asks she.

This question, betraying a flaw in the wise woman's perception, gave Moll courage, and she answered readily enough that she was called "Lala Mollah"—which was true, "Lala" being the Moorish for lady, and "Mollah" the name her friends in Elche had called her as being more agreeable to their ear than the shorter English name.

"Mollah—Moll!" says Anne Fitch as if communing with herself. "That may well be." Then, following a line in Moll's hand, she adds, "You will love but once, child."

"What is my sweetheart's name?" whispers Moll, the color springing in her face.

"You have not heard it yet," replies the other, upon which Moll pulls her hand away impatiently. "But you have seen him," continues the wise woman, "and his is the third hand in which I have read another name."

"Tell me now if I shall see him again," cries Moll eagerly, offering her hand again and as quickly as she had before withdrawn it.

"That depends upon yourself," returns the other. "The line is a deep one. Would you give him all you have?"

Moll bends her head low in silence, to conceal her hot face.

"'Tis nothing to be ashamed of," says the old woman in a strangely gentle tone. "'Tis better to love once than often, better to give your whole heart than part. Were I young and handsome and rich I would give body and soul for such a man, for he is good and generous and exceedingly kind. Look you, he hath lived here but a few weeks, and I feel for him, grieve for him, like a mother. Oh, I am no witch," adds she, wiping a tear from her cheek, "only a crooked old woman with the gift of seeing what is open to all who will read and a heart that quickens still at a kind word or a gentle thought." Moll's hand had closed upon hers at that first sight of her grief. "For your names," continues she, recovering her composure, "I learned from one of your maids whocame hither for news of her sweetheart that the sea captain who was with you did sometimes let them slip. I was paid to learn this."

"Not by him," says Moll.

"No; by your steward, Simon."

"He paid for that?" says I, incredulous, knowing Simon's reluctance to spend money.

"Aye, and a good price too. It seems you call heavily upon him for money and do threaten to cut up your estate and sell the land he prizes as his life."

"That is quite true," says I.

"Moreover, he greatly fears that he will be cast from his office when your title to it is made good. For that reason he would move heaven and earth to stay your succession by casting doubts upon your claim, and to this end he has by all the means at his command tried to provoke your cousin to contest your right."

"My cousin?" cries Moll.

"Richard Godwin."

"My cousin Richard. Why, where is he?"

"Gone," says the old woman, pointing to the broken bread upon the table.

CHAPTER XXII.

"What!" cries Moll starting to her feet. "He whom I have treated thus is"— And here she checked herself as if recoiling, and for the first time from false pretense in a matter so near the heart.

"He is your cousin, Richard Godwin," says the wise woman. "Simon knew this from the first, for there were letters showing it in the pocketbook he found after the struggle in the park, but for his own ends he kept that knowledge secret until it fitted his ends to speak. Why your cousin did not reveal himself to you may be more readily concluded by you than 'twas by me."

"Why, 'tis clear enough," says Moll. "Pressed by his necessities, he came hither to claim assistance of his kinsman, but finding he was dead and none here but me his pride did shrink from begging of a mere girl that which he might with justice have demanded from a man. And then, for shame at being handled like a rogue"—

"Surely there is something in the blood of a gentleman that tempers his spirit to a height scarcely to be comprehended by men of meaner birth," thinks I.

"When did Simon urge him to dispute my rights?" asks Moll.

"On Sunday—in the wood out there. I knew by his look he had some treacherous business in hand, and matching my stalk with his I found means to overhear him, creeping from thicket to thicket, as noiseless as a snake, to where they stood, for, be assured, I should not otherwise have learned one word of this."

"How did he receive these hints at my ill doing?" asks Moll.

"Patiently till the tale was told. Then, taking your steward by the throat with sudden passion, he cries: 'Why should I not strangle you, rascal? 'Twould be a service to humanity. What have I done to deserve your love or this lady your hatred? Nothing. You would pit us one against the other merely to keep your hold upon these lands and gratify your insensate love of possession. Go, get you gone, beast!' cries he, flinging him off. 'Tis punishment enough for you to live and know you've failed, for had you proved your case to my conviction I'd not stir a hand against this lady, be she who she may. Nay,' adds he, with greater fury, 'I will not stay where my loyalty and better judgment may be affected by the contagion of a vile suspicion. Away while you may. My fingers itch to be revenged on you for sundering me from one who should have been my closest, dearest friend!'"

Moll clasps her hands together with a cry of joy and pain mingled, even as the smile played upon her lips while tears filled her eyes.

"Sunday," cries she, turning to me and dashing the tears that blinded her from her eyes. "Sunday, and 'twas o' Monday he refused to stay. Oh, the brave heart!" Then, in impetuous haste: "He shall be found. We must overtake him."

"That may be done if you take horse," says Anne Fitch, "for he travels afoot."

"But which way shall we turn?"

"The way that any man would take, seeking to dispel a useless sorrow," answers the wise woman, "the way to London."

"God bless you!" cries Moll, clasping the withered old woman to her heaving breast and kissing her. Then the next moment she would be gone, bidding me get horses for our pursuit.

So, as quickly as I might, I procured a couple of nags, and we set out, leaving a message for Don Sanchez, who was not yet astir. And we should have gone empty but that while the horses were a-preparing, and Moll, despite her mighty haste at this business, too, I took the precaution to put some store of victuals in a saddlebag.

Reckoning that Mr. Godwin, as I must call him, had been set out two hours or thereabouts, I considered that we might overtake him in about three at an easy amble. But Moll was in no mood for ambling, and no sooner were we started than she put her nag to a gallop and kept up this reckless pace up hill and down dale, I sailing behind and expecting every minute to be cut and get my neck broke, until her horse was spent and would answer no more to the whip. Then I begged her for mercy's sake to take the hill we were coming to and walk, and break her fast. "For," says I, "another such half hour as the last on an empty stomach will do my business, and you will have another dead man to bring back to life, which will advance your journey nothing and so more haste, less speed." Therewith I opened my saddlebag, and sharing its contents we ate a rare good meal and very merry, and indeed it was a pleasure now to look at her as great as the pain had been to see her so unhappy a few hours before. For the exercise had brought a flood of rich color into her face, and a lively hope sparkled in her eyes, and the sound of her voice was like any peal of marriage bells for gayety. Yet now and then her tongue would falter, and she would strain a wistful glance along the road before us as fearing she did hope too much. However, coming to an inn, we made inquiry and learned that a man such as we described had surely passed the house barely an hour gone, and one adding that he carried a basket on his stick we felt this must be our painter for certain.

Thence on again at another tear, as if we were flying from our reckoning, until, turning a bend of the road at the foot of a hill, she suddenly drew rein with a shrill cry, and coming up I perceived close by our side Mr. Godwin, seated upon the bridge that crossed a stream, with his wallet beside him.

He sprang to his feet and caught in an instant the rein that had fallen from Moll's hand, for the commotion in her heart at seeing him so suddenly had stopped the current of her veins, and she was deadly pale.

"Take me, take me!" cries she, stretching forth her arms, with a faint voice. "Take me, or I must fall," and slipping from her saddle she sank into his open, ready arms.

"Help!" says Mr. Godwin quickly and in terror.

"Nay," says she, "I am better. 'Tis nothing. But," adds she, smiling at him, "you may hold me yet a little longer."

The fervid look in his eyes as he gazed down at her sweet, pale face seemed to say, "Would I could hold you here forever, sweetheart!"

"Rest her here," says I, pointing to the little wall of the bridge, and he, complying not too willingly, withdrew his arm from her waist, with a sigh.

And now, the color coming back to her cheek, Moll turns to him and says:

"I thought you would have come again. And since one of us must ask to be forgiven, lo, here am I come to ask your pardon!"

"Why, what is there to pardon, madam?" says he.

"Only a girl's folly, which, unforgiven, must seem something worse."

"Your utmost folly," says he, "is to have been overkind to a poor painter, and if that be an offense 'tis my misfortune to be no more offended."

"Have I been overkind?" says Moll, abashed as having unwittingly passed the bounds of maiden modesty.

"As nature will be overbounteous in one season, strewing so many flowers in our path that we do underprize them till they are lost, and all the world seems stricken with wintry desolation."

"Yet, if I have said or done anything unbecoming to my sex"—

"Nothing womanly is unbecoming to a woman," returns he. "And, praised be God, some still live who have not learned to conceal their nature under a mask of fashion. If this be done less to your natural free disposition than to an ignorance of our enlightened modish arts, then could I find it in my heart to rejoice that you have lived a captive in Barbary."

They had been looking into each other's eyes with the delight of reading there the love that filled their hearts, but now Moll bent her head as if she could no longer bear that searching regard, and unable to make response to his pretty speech sat twining her fingers in her lap, silent, with pain and pleasure fluttering over her downcast face. And at this time I do think she was as near as may be on the point of

"Take me, take me!" cries she.

confessing she had been no Barbary slave, rather than deceive the man who loved her, and profit by his faith in her, which had certainly undone us all, but in her passion, a woman considered the welfare of her father and best friends very lightly. Nay, she will not value her own body and soul at two straws, but is ready to yield up everything for one dear smile.

A full minute Mr. Godwin sat gazing at Moll's pretty, blushing, half hid face, as if for his last solace, and then, rising slowly from the little parapet, he says:

"Had I been more generous, I should have spared you this long morning ride. So you have something to forgive, and we may cry quits!" Then, stretching forth his hand, he adds, "Farewell."

"Stay," cries Moll, springing to her feet, as fearing to lose him suddenly again. "I have not eased myself of the burden that lay uppermost. Oh!" cries she passionately, casting off all reserve, "I know all—who you are and why you first came hither, and I am here to offer you the half of all I have."

"Half, sweet cousin?" answers he, taking her two hands in his.

"Aye, for if I had not come to claim it all would have been yours by right, and 'tis no more than fair that, owing so much to fortune, I should offer you the half."

"Suppose that half will not suffice me, dear?" says he.

"Why, then I'll give you all," answers she, "houses, gardens—everything."

"Then what will you do, coz?"

"Go hence, as you were going but just now," answers she, trembling.

"Why, that's as if you took the diamond from its setting and left me nothing but the foil," says he. "Oh, I would order it another way. Give me the gem and let who will take what remains. Unless these little hands are mine to hold forever I will take nothing from them."

"They are thine, dear love," cries she in a transport, flinging them about his neck, "and my heart as well."

At this conjuncture I thought it advisable to steal softly away to the bend of the road, for surely any one coming this way by accident and finding them locked together thus in tender embrace on the king's highway would have fallen to some gross conclusion, not understanding their circumstances, and so might have offended their delicacy by some rude jest. And I had not parted myself here a couple of minutes ere I spied a team of four stout horses coming over the brow of the hill, drawing the stage wagon behind them which plies betwixt Sevenoaks and London. This prompting me to a happy notion, I returned to the happy, smiling pair, who were now seated again upon the bridge, hand in hand, and says I:

"My dear friends—for so, sir, I think I may now count you, sir, as well as my Mistress Judith here—the wagon is coming down the hill, by which I had intended to go to London this morning upon some pressing business, and so, madam, if your cousin will take my horse and conduct you back to the court I will profit by this occasion and bid you farewell for the present."

This proposal was received with evident satisfaction on their part, for there was clearly no further thought of parting. Only Moll, alarmed for the proprieties, did beg her lover to lift her on her horse instantly. Nevertheless when she was in her saddle they must linger yet, he to kiss her hands and she to bend down and yield her cheek to his lips, though the sound of the coming wagon was close at hand.

Scarcely less delighted than they with this surprising strange turn of events, I left 'em there with bright, smiling faces and journey on to London, and then taking a pair of oars at the bridge to Greenwich, all eagerness to give these joyful tidings to my friend Jack Dawson. I found him in his workroom, working a lathe and sprinkled from head to toe with chips, mighty proud of a bedpost he was a-turning, and it did my heart good to see him looking stout and hearty, profitably occupied in this business, instead of soaking in an alehouse, as I feared at one time he would, to dull his care, but he was ever a stout, brave fellow, who would rather fight than give in any day. A better man never lived, nor a more honest, circumstances permitting.

His joy at seeing me was past everything, but his first thought after our hearty greeting was of his daughter.

"My Moll," says he, "my dear girl. You han't brought her to add to my joy? She's not slinking behind a door to fright me with delight, hey?"

"No," says I, "but I've brought you great news of her."

"And good, I'll swear, Kit, for there's not a sad line in your face. Stay, comrade, wait till I've shook these chips off and we are seated in my parlor, for I do love to have a pipe of tobacco and a mug of ale beside me in times of pleasure. You can talk of indifferent things, though, for Lord, I do love to hear the sound of your voice again."

I told him how the ceiling of our dining hall had been painted.

"Aye," says he. "I have heard of that, for my dear girl hath writ about that and naught else in her letters, and though I've no great fancy for such matters, yet I doubt not it is mighty fine by her long winded praises of it. Come, Kit, let us in here and get to something fresher."

So we into his parlor, which was a neat, cheerful room, with a fine view of the river, and there, being duly furnished with a mighty mug of ale and clean pipes, he bids me give him my news, and I tell him how Moll had fallen overhead and ears in love with the painter, and he with her, and how that very morning they had come together and laid open their hearts' desire one to the other, with the result, as I believed, that they would be married as soon as they could get a parson to do their business.

"This is brave news indeed," cries he, "and easeth me beyond comprehension, for I could see clearly enough she was smitten with this painter, by her writing of nothing else, and seeing she could not get at his true name and condition I felt some qualms as to how the matter might end. But do tell me, Kit, is he an honest, wholesome sort of man?"

"As honest as the day," says I, "and a nobler, handsomer man never breathed."

"God be praised for all things," says he devoutly. "Tell me he's an Englishman, Kit—as Moll did seem to think he was spite his foreign name—and my joy's complete."

"As true born an Englishman as you are," says I.

"Lord love him for it!" cries he.

Then, coming down to particulars, I related the events of the past few days pretty much as I have writ them here, showing in the end how Mr. Godwin

(To be Continued.)