Ririro
READ ANYWHERE, ANYTIME

Water-lilies

Louise M. Alcott

A PARTY of people, young and old, sat on the piazza of a seaside hotel one summer morning, discussing plans for the day as they waited for the mail.

“Hullo! here comes Christie Johnstone,” exclaimed one of the young men perched on the railing, who was poisoning the fresh air with the sickly scent of a cigarette.

“So 'tis, with 'Flucker, the baddish boy,' in tow, as large as life,” added another, with a pleasant laugh as he turned to look.

The new-comers certainly looked somewhat like Charles Reade's picturesque pair, and every one watched them with idle interest as they drew nearer. A tall, robust girl of seventeen, with dark eyes and hair, a fine color on her brown cheek, and vigor in every movement, came up the rocky path from the beach with a basket of lobsters on one arm, of fish on the other, and a wicker tray of water-lilies on her head. The scarlet and silver of the fish contrasted prettily with the dark blue of her rough dress, and the pile of water flowers made a fitting crown for this bonny young fish-wife. A sturdy lad of twelve came lurching after her in a pair of very large rubber boots, with a dilapidated straw hat on the back of his head and a pail on either arm.

Straight on went the girl, never turning head or eyes as she passed the group on the piazza and vanished round the corner, though it was evident that she heard the laugh the last speech produced, for the color deepened in her cheeks and her step quickened. The boy, however, returned the glances bent upon him, and answered the smiles with such a cheerful grin that the youth with the cigarette called out,—

“Good-morning, Skipper! Where do you hail from?”

“Island, yender,” answered the boy, with a gesture of his thumb over his shoulder.

“Oh, you are the lighthouse-keeper, are you?”

“No, I ain't; me and Gramper's fishermen now.”

“Your name is Flucker Johnstone, and your sister's Christie, I think?” added the youth, enjoying the amusement of the young ladies about him.

“It's Sammy Bowen, and hern's Ruth.”

“Have you got a Boaz over there for her?”

“No, we've got a devil-fish, a real whacker.”

This unexpected reply produced a roar from the gentlemen, while the boy grinned good-naturedly, though without the least idea what the joke was. Pretty Miss Ellery, who had been told that she had “a rippling laugh,” rippled sweetly as she leaned over the railing to ask,

“Are those lilies in your pails? I want some if they are for sale.”

“Sister'll fetch 'em round when she's left the lobs. I ain't got none; this is bait for them fellers.” And, as if reminded of business by the yells of several boys who had just caught sight of him, Sammy abruptly weighed anchor and ran before the wind toward the stable.

“Funny lot, these natives! Act as if they owned the place and are as stupid as their own fish,” said the youth in the white yachting suit, as he flung away his cigarette end.

“Don't agree with you, Fred. I've known people of this sort all my life and a finer set of honest, hardworking, independent men I never met,—brave as lions and tender as women in spite of their rough ways,” answered the other young man, who wore blue flannel and had a gold band on his cap.

“Sailors and soldiers always stand by one another; so of course you see the best side of these fellows, Captain. The girls are fine creatures, I grant you; but their good looks don't last long, more's the pity!”

“Few women's would with the life they lead, so full of hard work, suspense, and sorrow. No one knows till one is tried, how much courage and faith it takes to keep young and happy when the men one loves are on the great sea,” said a quiet, gray-haired lady, as she laid her hand on the knee of the young man in blue with a look that made him smile affectionately at her, with his own brown hand on hers.

“Shouldn't wonder if Ben Bowen was laid up, since the girl brings the fish. He's a fine old fellow. I've been to No Man's Land many a time blue-fishing with him; must ask after him,” said an elderly gentleman who was pacing to and fro yearning for the morning papers.

“We might go over to the island and have a chowder-party or a fish-fry some moonlight night. I haven't been here for several years, but it used to be great fun, and I suppose we can do it now,” suggested Miss Ellery with the laugh.

“By Jove, we will! And look up Christie; ask her when she comes round,” said Mr.

Fred, the youthful dude, untwining his languid legs as if the prospect put a little life into him.

“Of course we pay for any trouble we give; these people will do anything for money,” began Miss Ellery; but Captain John, as they called the sailor, held up his hand with a warning, “Hush! she's coming,” as Ruth's weather-beaten brown hat turned the corner.

She paused a moment to drop the empty baskets, shake her skirts, and put up a black braid that had fallen down; then, with the air of one resolved to do a distasteful task as quickly as possible, she came up the steps, held out the rough basket cover, and said in a clear voice,—

“Would any of the ladies like some fresh lilies? Ten cents a bunch.”

A murmur from the ladies expressed their admiration of the beautiful flowers, and the gentlemen pressed forward to buy and present every bunch with gallant haste. Ruth's eyes shone as the money fell into her hand, and several voices begged her to bring more lilies while they lasted.

“I didn't know the darlings would grow in salt water,” said Miss Ellery, as she fondly gazed upon the cluster Mr. Fred had just offered her.

“They don't. There's a little fresh-water pond on our island, and they grow there,—only place for miles round;” and Ruth looked at the delicate girl in ruffled white lawn and a mull hat, with a glance of mingled pity for her ignorance and admiration for her beauty.

“How silly of me! I am SUCH a goose;” and Miss Ellery gurgled as she hid her face behind her red parasol.

“Ask about the fish-fry,” whispered Mr. Fred, putting his head behind the rosy screen to assure the pretty creature that he didn't know any better himself.

“Oh yes, I will!” and, quite consoled, Miss Ellery called out, “Girl, will you tell me if we can have chowder-parties on your rocks as we used to a few seasons ago?”

“If you bring your own fish. Grandpa is sick and can't get 'em for you.”

“We will provide them, but who will cook them for us? It's such horrid work.”

“Any one can fry fish! I will if you want me to;” and Ruth half smiled, remembering that this girl who shuddered at the idea of pork and a hot frying-pan, used to eat as heartily as any one when the crisp brown cunners were served up.

“Very good; then we'll engage you as cook, and come over to-night if it's clear and our fishing prospers. Don't forget a dozen of the finest lilies for this lady to-morrow morning. Pay you now, may not be up;” and Mr. Fred dropped a bright

silver dollar into the basket with a patronizing air, intended to impress this rather too independent young person with a proper sense of inferiority.

Ruth quietly shook the money out upon the door-mat, and said with a sudden sparkle in her black eyes,—

“It's doubtful if I bring any more. Better wait till I do.”

“I'm sorry your grandfather is sick. I'll come over and see him by-and-by, and bring the papers if he would like some,” said the elderly gentleman as he came up with a friendly nod and real interest in his face.

“Very much, thank you, sir. He is very feeble now;” and Ruth turned with a bright smile to welcome kind Mr. Wallace, who had not forgotten the old man.

“Christie has got a nice little temper of her own, and don't know how to treat a fellow when he wants to do her a favor,” growled Mr. Fred, pocketing his dollar with a disgusted air.

“She appears to know how to treat a gentleman when HE offers one,” answered Blue Jacket, with a twinkle of the eye as if he enjoyed the other's discomfiture.

“Girls of that class always put on airs if they are the least bit pretty,—so absurd!” said Miss Ellery, pulling up her long gloves as she glanced at the brown arms of the fisher maiden.

“Girls of any class like to be treated with respect. Modesty in linsey-woolsey is as sweet as in muslin, my dear, and should be even more admired, according to my old-fashioned way of thinking,” said the gray-haired lady.

“Hear! hear!” murmured her sailor nephew with an approving nod.

It was evident that Ruth had heard also, as she turned to go, for with a quick gesture she pulled three great lilies from her hat and laid them on the old lady's lap, saying with a grateful look, “Thank you, ma'am.”

She had seen Miss Scott hand her bunch to a meek little governess who had been forgotten, and this was all she had to offer in return for the kindness which is so sweet to poor girls whose sensitive pride gets often wounded by trifles like these.

She was going without her baskets when Captain John swung himself over the railing, and ran after her with them. He touched his cap as he met her, and was thanked with as bright a smile as that the elder gentleman had received; for his respectful “Miss Bowen” pleased her much after the rude “Girl!” and the money tossed to her as if she were a beggar. When he came back the mail had arrived, and all scattered at once,—Mr. Fred to spend the dollar in more cigarettes, and Captain John to settle carefully in his button-hole the water-lily Aunt Mary gave

him, before both young men went off to play tennis as if their bread depended on it.

As it bid fair to be a moonlight night, the party of a dozen young people, with Miss Scott and Mr. Wallace to act as matron and admiral of the fleet, set off to the Island about sunset. Fish in abundance had been caught, and a picnic supper provided to be eaten on the rocks when the proper time arrived. They found Sammy, in a clean blue shirt and a hat less like a Feejee headpiece, willing to do the honors of the Island, beaming like a freckled young merman as he paddled out to pull up the boats.

“Fire's all ready for kindlin', and Ruth's slicin' the pertaters. Hope them fish is cleaned?” he added with a face of deep anxiety; for that weary task would fall to him if not already done, and the thought desolated his boyish soul.

“All ready, Sam! Lend a hand with these baskets, and then steer for the lighthouse; the ladies want to see that first,” answered Captain John, as he tossed a stray cookie into Sammy's mouth with a smile that caused that youth to cleave to him like a burr all the evening.

The young people scattered over the rocks, and hastened to visit the points of interest before dark. They climbed the lighthouse tower, and paid Aunt Nabby and Grandpa a call at the weather-beaten little house, where the old woman lent them a mammoth coffee-pot, and promised that Ruth would “dish up them fish in good shape at eight punctooal.” Then they strolled away to see the fresh-water pond where the lilies grew.

“How curious that such a thing should be here right in the middle of the salt sea!” said one of the girls, as they stood looking at the quiet pool while the tide dashed high upon the rocks all about them.

“Not more curious than how it is possible for anything so beautiful and pure as one of those lilies to grow from the mud at the bottom of the pond. The ugly yellow ones are not so out of place; but no one cares for them, and they smell horridly,” added another girl in a reflective tone.

“Instinct sends the white lily straight up to the sun and air, and the strong slender stem anchors it to the rich earth below, out of which it has power to draw the nourishment that makes it so lovely and keeps it spotless—unless slugs and flies and boys spoil it,” added Miss Scott as she watched Mr. Fred poke and splash with his cane after a half-closed flower.

“The naughty things have all shut up and spoilt the pretty sight; I'm so disappointed,” sighed Miss Ellery, surveying the green buds with great disfavor as she had planned to wear some in her hair and act Undine.

“You must come early in the morning if you want to see them at their best. I've

read somewhere that when the sun first strikes them they open rapidly, and it is a lovely sight. I shall try to see it some day if I can get here in time," said Miss Scott.

"How romantic old maids are!" whispered one girl to another.

"So are young ones; hear what Floss Ellery is saying," answered the other; and both giggled under their big hats as they caught these words followed by the rippling laugh,—

"All flowers open and show their hearts when the sun shines on them at the right moment."

"I wish human flowers would," murmured Mr. Fred; and then, as if rather alarmed at his own remark, he added hastily, "I'll get that big lily out there and MAKE it bloom for you."

Trusting to an old log that lay in the pond, he went to the end and bent to pull in the half-shut flower; but this too ardent sun was not to make it blossom, for his foot slipped and down he went up to his knees in mud and water.

"Save him! oh, save him!" shrieked Miss Ellery, clutching Captain John, who was laughing like a boy, while the other lads shouted and the girls added their shrill merriment as poor Fred scrambled to the shore a wreck of the gallant craft that had set sail in spotless white.

"What the deuce shall I do?" he asked in a tone of despair as they flocked about him to condole even while they laughed.

"Roll up your trousers and borrow Sam's boots. The old lady will dry your shoes and socks while you are at supper, and have them ready to wear home," suggested Captain John, who was used to duckings and made light of them.

The word "supper" made one carnal-minded youth sniff the air and announce that he smelt "something good;" and at once every one turned toward the picnic ground, like chickens hurrying to the barn at feeding-time. Fred vanished into the cottage, and the rest gathered about the great fire of driftwood fast turning to clear coals, over which Ruth was beginning her long hot task. She wore a big apron, a red handkerchief over her head, had her sleeves rolled up, and was so intent on her work that she merely nodded and smiled as the new-comers greeted her with varying degrees of courtesy.

"She looks like a handsome gypsy, with her dark face and that red thing in the firelight. I wish I could paint her," said Miss Scott, who was very young at heart in spite of her fifty years and gray head.

"So do I, but we can remember it. I do like to see a girl work with a will, even at frying fish. Most of 'em dawdle so at the few things they try to do. There's a

piece of energy for you!” and Captain John leaned forward from his rocky seat to watch Ruth, who just then caught up the coffee-pot about to boil over, and with the other hand saved her frying-pan from capsizing on its unsteady bed of coals.

“She is a nice girl, and I'm much interested in her. Mr. Wallace says he will tell us her story by-and-by if we care to hear it. He has known the old man a long time.”

“Don't forget to remind him, Aunty. I like a yarn after mess;” and Captain John went off to bring the first plate of fish to the dear old lady who had been a mother to him for many years.

It was a merry supper, and the moon was up before it ended; for everything “tasted so good” the hearty young appetites sharpened by sea air were hard to satisfy. When the last cunner had vanished and nothing but olives and oyster crackers remained, the party settled on a sloping rock out of range of the fire, and reposed for a brief period to recover from the exertions of the feast, having, like the heroes in the old story, “eaten mightily for the space of an hour.”

Mr. Fred in the capacious boots was a never-failing source of amusement, and consequently somewhat subdued. But Miss Ellery consoled him, and much food sustained him till his shoes were dry. Ruth remained to clear up, and Sammy to gorge himself on the remnants of “sweet cake” which he could not bear to see wasted. So, when some one proposed telling stories till they were ready to sing, Mr. Wallace was begged to begin.

“It is only something about this island, but you may like to hear it just now,” said the genial old gentleman, settling his handkerchief over his bald head for fear of cold, and glancing at the attentive young faces grouped about him in the moonlight.

“Some twenty years ago there was a wreck over there on those great rocks; you fellows have heard about it, so I'll only say that a very brave sailor, a native of the Port here, swam out with a rope and saved a dozen men and women. I'll call him Sam. Well, one of the women was an English governess, and when the lady she was with went on her way after the wreck, this pretty girl (who by the way was a good deal hurt trying to save the child she had in charge) was left behind to recover, and—”

“Marry the brave sailor of course,” cried one of the girls.

“Exactly! and a very happy pair they were. She had no family who wanted her at home; her father had been a clergyman, I believe, and she was well born, but Sam was a fine fellow and earned his living honestly, fishing off the Banks, as half the men do here. Well, they were very happy, had two children, and were saving up a bit, when poor Sam and two brothers were lost in one of the great storms which now and then make widows and orphans by the dozen. It killed the

wife; but Sam's father, who kept the lighthouse here then, took the poor children and supported them for ten years. The boy was a mere baby; the girl a fine creature, brave like her father, handsome like her mother, and with a good deal of the lady about her, though every one didn't find it out."

"Ahem!" cried the sharp girl, who began to understand the point of the story now, but would not spoil it, as the others seemed still in the dark, though Miss Scott was smiling, and Captain John staring hard at the old gentleman in the blue silk nightcap.

"Got a fly in your throat?" asked a neighbor; but Kate only laughed and begged pardon for interrupting.

"There's not much more; only that affair was rather romantic, and one can't help wondering how the children turned out. Storms seem to have been their doom, for in the terrible one we had two winters ago, the old lighthouse keeper had a bad fall on the icy rocks, and if it had not been for the girl, the light would have gone out and more ships been lost on this dangerous point. The keeper's mate had gone ashore and couldn't get back for two days, the gale raged so fiercely; but he knew Ben could get on without him, as he had the girl and boy over for a visit. In winter they lived with a friend and went to school at the Port. It would have been all right if Ben hadn't broken his ribs. But he was a stout old salt; so he told the girl what to do, and she did it, while the boy waited on the sick man. For two days and nights that brave creature lived in the tower, that often rocked as if it would come down, while the sleet and snow dimmed the lantern, and sea-birds were beaten to death against the glass. But the light burned steadily, and people said, 'All is well,' as ships steered away in time, when the clear light warned them of danger, and grateful sailors blessed the hands that kept it burning faithfully."

"I hope she got rewarded," cried an eager voice, as the story-teller paused for breath.

"'I only did my duty; that is reward enough,' she said, when some of the rich men at the Port heard of it and sent her money and thanks. She took the money, however, for Ben had to give up the place, being too lame to do the work. He earns his living by fishing now, and puts away most of his pension for the children. He won't last long, and then they must take care of themselves; for the old woman is no relation, and the girl is too proud to hunt up the forgetful English friends, if they have any. But I don't fear for her; a brave lass like that will make her own way anywhere."

"Is that all?" asked several voices, as Mr. Wallace leaned back and fanned himself with his hat.

"That's all of the first and second parts; the third is yet to come. When I know it,

I'll tell you; perhaps next summer, if we meet here again.”

“Then you know the girl? What is she doing now?” asked Miss Ellery, who had lost a part of the story as she sat in a shadowy nook with the pensive Fred.

“We all know her. She is washing a coffee-pot at this moment, I believe;” and Mr. Wallace pointed to a figure on the beach, energetically shaking a large tin article that shone in the moonlight.

“Ruth? Really? How romantic and interesting!” exclaimed Miss Ellery, who was just of the age, as were most of the other girls, to enjoy tales of this sort and imagine sensational denouements.

“There is a great deal of untold romance in the lives of these toilers of the sea, and I am sure this good girl will find her reward for the care she takes of the old man and the boy. It costs her something, I've discovered, for she wants an education, and could get it if she left this poor place and lived for herself; but she won't go, and works hard to get money for Grandpa's comfort, instead of buying the books she longs for. I think, young ladies, that there is real heroism in cheerfully selling lilies and frying fish for duty's sake when one longs to be studying, and enjoying a little of the youth that comes but once,” said Mr. Wallace.

“Oh dear, yes, so nice of her! We might take up a contribution for her when we get home. I'll head the paper with pleasure and give all I can afford, for it must be so horrid to be ignorant at her age. I dare say the poor thing can't even read; just fancy!” and Miss Ellery clasped her hands with a sigh of pity.

“Very few girls can read fit to be heard now-a-days,” murmured Miss Scott.

“Don't let them affront her with their money; she will fling it in their faces as she did that donkey's dollar. You see to her in your nice, delicate way, Aunty, and give her a lift if she will let you,” whispered Captain John in the old lady's ear.

“Don't waste your pity, Miss Florence. Ruth reads a newspaper better than any woman I ever knew. I've heard her doing it to the old man, getting through shipping news, money-market, and politics in fine style. I wouldn't offer her money if I were you, though it is a kind thought. These people have an honest pride in earning things for themselves, and I respect them for it,” added Mr. Wallace.

“Dear me! I should as soon think of a sand skipper having pride as one of these fishy folks in this stupid little place,” observed Mr. Fred, moving his legs into the shadow as the creeping moonlight began to reveal the hideous boots.

“Why not? I think they have more to be proud of, these brave, honest, independent people, than many who never earn a cent and swell round on the

money their fathers made out of pork, rum, or—any other rather unpleasant or disreputable business," said Captain John, with the twinkle in his eye, as he changed the end of his sentence, for the word "pickles" was on his lips when Aunt Mary's quick touch checked it. Some saucy girl laughed, and Mr. Fred squirmed, for it was well known that his respectable grandfather whom he never mentioned had made his large fortune in a pickle-factory.

"We all rise from the mud in one sense, and all may be handsome flowers if we choose before we go back, after blooming, to ripen our seeds at the bottom of the water where we began," said Miss Scott's refined voice, sounding softly after the masculine ones.

"I like that idea! Thank you, Aunt Mary, for giving me such a pretty fancy to add to my love for water-lilies. I shall remember it, and try to be a lovely one, not a bit ashamed to own that I came from honest farmer stock," exclaimed the thoughtful girl who had learned to know and love the sweet, wise woman who was so motherly to all girls.

"Hear! hear!" cried Captain John, heartily; for he was very proud of his own brave name kept clean and bright through a long line of sailor kin.

"Now let us sing or we shall have no time," suggested Miss Ellery, who warbled as well as rippled, and did not wish to lose this opportunity of singing certain sentimental songs appropriate to the hour.

So they tuned their pipes and made "music in the air" for an hour, to the great delight of Sammy, who joined in every song, and was easily persuaded to give sundry nautical melodies in a shrill small voice which convulsed his hearers with merriment.

"Ruth sings awful well, but she won't afore folks," he said, as he paused after a roaring ditty.

"She will for me;" and Mr. Wallace went slowly up to the rock not far away, where Ruth sat alone listening to the music as she rested after her long day's work.

"Such airs!" said Miss Ellery, in a sharp tone; for her "Wind of the Summer Night" had not gone well, owing to a too copious supper. "Posing for Lorelei," she added, as Ruth began to sing, glad to oblige the kind old gentleman. They expected some queer ballad or droning hymn, and were surprised when a clear sweet voice gave them "The Three Fishers" and "Mary on the Sands of Dee" with a simple pathos that made real music-lovers thrill with pleasure, and filled several pairs of eyes with tears.

"More, please, more!" called Captain John, as she paused; and as if encouraged by the hearty applause her one gift excited, she sang on as easily as a bird till

her small store was exhausted.

“I call THAT music,” said Miss Scott, as she wiped her eyes with a sigh of satisfaction. “It comes from the heart and goes to the heart, as it should. Now we don't want anything else, and had better go home while the spell lasts.”

Most of the party followed her example, and went to thank and say good-night to Ruth, who felt as rich and happy as a queen with the money Mr. Wallace had slipped into her pocket, and the pleasure which even this short glimpse of a higher, happier life had brought her hungry nature.

As the boats floated away, leaving her alone on the shore, she sent her farewell ringing over the water in the words of the old song, “A Life on the Ocean Wave;” and every one joined in it with a will, especially Mr. Wallace and Captain John; and so the evening picnic ended tunefully and pleasantly for all, and was long remembered by several.

After that day many “good times” came to Ruth and Sammy; and even poor old Grandpa had his share, finding the last summer of his life very smooth sailing as he slowly drifted into port. It seemed quite natural that Captain John, being a sailor, should like to go and read and “yarn” with the old fisherman; so no one wondered when he fell into the way of rowing over to the Island very often with his pocket full of newspapers, and whiling away the long hours in the little house as full of sea smells and salt breezes as a shell on the shore.

Miss Scott also took a fancy to go with her nephew; for, being an ardent botanist, she discovered that the Island possessed many plants which she could not find on the rocky point of land where the hotel and cottages stood. The fresh-water pond was her especial delight, and it became a sort of joke to ask, when she came home brown and beaming with her treasures in tin boxes, bottles, and bunches,—

“Well, Aunt Mary, have you seen the water-lilies bloom yet?” and she always answered with that wise smile of hers,—

“Not yet, but I'm biding my time, and am watching a very fine one with especial interest. When the right moment comes, it will bloom and show its golden heart to me, I hope.”

Ruth never quite knew how it came about, but books seemed to find their way to the Island and stay there, to her great delight. A demand for lilies sprang up, and when their day was over marsh-rosemary became the rage. Sammy found a market for all the shells and gulls' wings he could furnish, and certain old curiosities brought from many voyages were sold for sums which added many comforts to the old sailor's last cruise.

Now the daily row to the Point was a pleasure, not a trial, to Ruth,—for Mr.

Wallace was always ready with a kind word or gift, the ladies nodded as she passed, and asked how the old Skipper was to-day; Miss Scott often told her to stop at the cottage for some new book or a moment's chat on her way to the boat, and Captain John helped Sammy with his fishing so much that the baskets were always full when they came home.

All this help and friendliness put a wonderful energy and sweetness into Ruth's hard life, and made her work seem light, her patient waiting for freedom easier to bear cheerfully. She sang as she stood over her wash-tub, cheered the long nights of watching with the precious books, and found the few moments of rest that came to her when the day's work was done very pleasant, as she sat on her rock, watching the lights from the Point, catching the sound of gay music as the young people danced, and thinking over the delightful talks she had with Miss Scott. Perhaps the presence of a blue jacket in Grandpa's little bedroom, the sight of a friendly brown face smiling when she came in, and the sonorous murmur of a man's voice reading aloud, added a charm to the girl's humdrum life. She was too innocent and frank to deny that she enjoyed these new friends, and welcomed both with the same eagerness, saw both go with the same regret, and often wondered how she ever had got on without them.

But the modest fisher-maiden never dreamed of any warmer feeling than kindness on the one side and gratitude on the other; and this unconsciousness was her greatest charm, especially to Captain John, who hated coquettes, and shunned the silly girls who wasted time in idle flirtation when they had far better and wholesomer pastimes to enjoy. The handsome sailor was a favorite, being handy at all sorts of fun, and the oldest of the young men at the Point. He was very courteous in his hearty way to every woman he met, from the stateliest dowager to the dowdiest waiter-girl, but devoted himself entirely to Aunt Mary, and seemed to have no eyes for younger fairer faces.

“He must have a sweetheart over the sea somewhere,” the damsels said among themselves, as they watched him pace the long piazzas alone, or saw him swinging in his hammock with eyes dreamily fixed on the blue bay before him.

Miss Scott only smiled when curious questions were asked her, and said she hoped John would find his mate some time, for he deserved the best wife in the world, having been a good son and an honest boy for six-and-twenty years.

“What is it, Captain,—a steamer?” asked Mr. Fred, as he came by the cottage one August afternoon, with his usual escort of girls, all talking at once about some very interesting affair.

“Only a sail-boat; no steamers to-day,” answered Captain John, dropping the glass from his eye with a start.

“Can you see people on the Island with that thing? We want to know if Ruth is at

home, because if she isn't we can't waste time going over," said Miss Ellery, with her sweetest smile.

"I think not. That boat is Sammy's, and as there is a speck of red aboard, I fancy Miss Ruth is with him. They are coming this way, so you can hail them if you like," answered the sailor, with "a speck of red" on his own sunburnt cheek if any one had cared to look.

"Then we'll wait here if we may. We ordered her to bring us a quantity of bulrushes and flowers for our tableaux to-night, and we want her to be Rebecca at the well. She is so dark, and with her hair down, and gold bangles and scarlet shawls, I think she would do nicely. It takes so long to arrange the 'Lily Maid of Astolat' we MUST have an easy one to come just before that, and the boys are wild to make a camel of themselves, so we planned this. Won't you be Jacob or Abraham or whoever the man with the bracelets was?" asked Miss Ellery, as they all settled on the steps in the free-and-easy way which prevailed at the Point.

"No, thank you, I don't act. Used to dance hornpipes in my young days, but gave up that sort of thing some time ago."

"How unfortunate! Every one acts; it's all the fashion," began Miss Ellery, rolling up her blue eyes imploringly.

"So I see; but I never cared much for theatricals, I like natural things better."

"How unkind you are! I quite depended on you for that, since you wouldn't be a corsair."

"Fred's the man for such fun. He's going to startle the crowd with a regular Captain Kidd rig, pistols and cutlasses enough for a whole crew, and a terrific beard."

"I know Ruth won't do it, Floss, for she looked amazed when I showed her my Undine costume, and told her what I wanted the sea-weed for. 'Why, you won't stand before all those folks dressed that way, will you?' she said, as much scandalized as if she'd never seen a low-necked dress and silk stockings before;" and Miss Perry tossed her head with an air of pity for a girl who could be surprised at the display of a pretty neck and arms and ankles.

"We'll HIRE her, then; she's a mercenary wretch and will do anything for money. I won't be scrambled into my boat in a hurry, and we MUST have Rebecca because I've borrowed a fine pitcher and promised the boys their camel," said Miss Ellery, who considered herself the queen of the place and ruled like one, in virtue of being the prettiest girl there and the richest.

"She has landed, I think, for the boat is off again to the wharf. Better run down and help her with the bulrushes, Fred, and the rest of the stuff you ordered,"

suggested Captain John, longing to go himself but kept by his duty as host, Aunt Mary being asleep upstairs.

“Too tired. Won't hurt her; she's used to work, and we mustn't pamper her up, as old ladies say,” answered Mr. Fred, enjoying his favorite lounge on the grass.

“I wouldn't ask her to act, if you'll allow me to say so,” said Captain John, in his quiet way. “That sort of thing might unsettle her and make her discontented. She steers that little craft over there and is happy now; let her shape her own course, and remember it isn't well to talk to the man at the wheel.”

Miss Perry stared; Miss Ray, the sharp girl, nodded, and Miss Ellery said petulantly,—

“As if it mattered what SHE thought or said or did! It's her place to be useful if we want her, and we needn't worry about spoiling a girl like that. She can't be any prouder or more saucy than she is, and I shall ask her if only to see the airs she will put on.”

As she spoke Ruth came up the sandy path from the beach laden with rushes and weeds, sun-flowers and shells, looking warm and tired but more picturesque than ever, in her blue gown and the red handkerchief she wore since her old hat blew away. Seeing the party on the cottage steps, she stopped to ask if the things were right, and Miss Ellery at once made her request in a commanding tone which caused Ruth to grow very straight and cool and sober all at once, and answer decidedly,—

“I couldn't anyway.”

“Why not?”

“Well, one reason is I don't think it's right to act things out of the Bible just to show off and amuse folks.”

“The idea of minding!” and Miss Ellery frowned, adding angrily, “We will pay you for it. I find people will do anything for money down here.”

“We are poor and need it, and this is our best time to make it. I'd do most anything to earn a little, but not that;” and Ruth looked as proud as the young lady herself.

“Then we'll say no more if you are too elegant to do what WE don't mind at all. I'll pay you for this stuff now, as I ordered it, and you needn't bring me any more. How much do I owe you?” asked the offended beauty, taking out her purse in a pet.

“Nothing. I'm glad to oblige the ladies if I can, for they have been very kind to me. Perhaps if you knew why I want to earn money, you'd understand me better.

Grandpa can't last long, and I don't want the town to bury him. I'm working and saving so he can be buried decently, as he wants to be, not like a pauper.”

There was something in Ruth's face and voice as she said this, standing there shabby, tired, and heavy-laden, yet honest, dutiful and patient for love's sake, that touched the hearts of those who looked and listened; but she left no time for any answer, for with the last word she went on quickly, as if to hide the tears that dimmed her clear eyes and the quiver of her lips.

“Floss, how could you!” cried Miss Ray, and ran to take the sheaf of bulrushes from Ruth's arms, followed by the rest, all ashamed and repentant now that a word had shown them the hard life going on beside their idle, care-free ones.

Captain John longed to follow, but walked into the house, growling to himself with a grim look,—

“That girl has no more heart than a butterfly, and I'd like to see her squirm on a pin! Poor Ruth! we'll settle that matter, and bury old Ben like an admiral, hang me if we don't!”

He was so busy talking the affair over with Aunt Mary that he did not see the girl flit by to wait for her boat on the beach, having steadily refused the money offered her, though she accepted the apologies in the kindest spirit.

The beach at this hour of the day was left to the nurses and maids who bathed and gossiped while the little people played in the sand or paddled in the sea. Several were splashing about, and one German governess was scolding violently because while she was in the bath-house her charge, a little girl of six, had rashly ventured out in a flat-bottomed tub, as they called the small boats used by the gentlemen to reach the yachts anchored in deep water.

Ruth saw the child's danger at a glance, for the tide was going out, carrying the frail cockleshell rapidly away, while the child risked an upset every moment by stretching her arms to the women on the shore and calling them to help her.

None dared to try, but all stood and wrung their hands, screaming like sea-gulls, till the girl, throwing off shoes and heavy skirt plunged in, calling cheerily, “Sit still! I'll come and get you, Milly!”

She could swim like a fish, but encumbered with her clothes and weary with an unusually hard day's work, she soon found that she did not gain as rapidly as she expected upon the receding boat. She did not lose courage, but a thrill of anxiety shot through her as she felt her breath grow short, her limbs heavy, and the tide sweep her farther and farther from the shore.

“If they would only stop screaming and go for help, I could keep up and push the boat in; but the child will be out presently and then we are lost, for I can't get

back with her, I'm afraid.”

As these thoughts passed through her mind Ruth was swimming stoutly, and trying by cheerful words to keep the frightened child from risking their main chance of safety. A few more strokes and she would reach the boat, rest a moment, then, clinging to it, push it leisurely to shore. Feeling that the danger was over, she hurried on and was just putting up her hands to seize the frail raft and get her breath when Milly, thinking she was to be taken in her arms, leaned forward. In rushed the water, down went the boat, and out splashed the screaming child to cling to Ruth with the desperate clutch she dreaded.

Both went under for a moment, but rose again; and with all her wits sharpened by the peril of the moment, Ruth cried, as she kept herself afloat,—

“On my back, quick! quick! Don't touch my arms; hold tight to my hair, and keep still.”

Not realizing all the danger, and full of faith in Ruth's power to do anything, after the feats of diving and floating she had seen her perform, Milly scrambled up as often before, and clung spluttering and gasping to Ruth's strong shoulders. So burdened, and conscious of fast-failing strength, Ruth turned toward the shore, and bent every power of mind and body to her task. How far away it seemed! how still the women were,—not one even venturing out a little way to help her, and no man in sight! Her heart seemed to stop beating, her temples throbbed, her breath was checked by the clinging arms, and the child, seemed to grow heavier every moment.

“I'll do what I can, but, oh, why don't some one come?”

That was the last thought Ruth was conscious of, as she panted and ploughed slowly back, with such a set white face and wide eyes fixed on the flag that fluttered from the nearest cottage, that it was no wonder the women grew still as they watched her. One good Catholic nurse fell on her knees to pray; the maids cried, the governess murmured, “Mein Gott, I am lost if the child go drowned!” and clear and sweet came the sound of Captain John's whistle as he stood on his piazza waiting to row Ruth home.

They were nearly in, a few more strokes and she could touch the bottom, when suddenly all grew black before her eyes, and whispering, “I'll float. Call, Milly, and don't mind me,” Ruth turned over, still holding the child fast, and with nothing but her face out of water, feebly struggled on.

“Come and get me! She's going down! Oh, come, quick!” called the child in a tone of such distress that the selfish German bestirred herself at last, and began to wade cautiously in. Seeing help at hand, brave little Milly soon let go, and struck out like an energetic young frog, while Ruth, quite spent, sank quietly

down, with a dim sense that her last duty was done and rest had come.

The shrill cries of the women when they saw the steady white face disappear and rise no more, reached Captain John's ear, and sent him flying down the path, sure that some one was in danger.

“Ruth—gone down—out there!” was all he caught, as many voices tried to tell the tale; and waiting for no more, he threw off hat and coat, and dashed into the sea as if ready to search the Atlantic till he found her.

She was safe in a moment, and pausing only to send one girl flying for the doctor, he carried his streaming burden straight home to Aunt Mary, who had her between blankets before a soul arrived, and was rubbing for dear life while John fired up the spirit lamp for hot brandy and water, with hands that trembled as he splashed about like an agitated Newfoundland fresh from a swim.

Ruth was soon conscious, but too much exhausted to do or say anything, and lay quietly suffering the discomforts of resuscitation till she fell asleep.

“Is Milly safe?” was all she asked, and being assured that the child was in her mother's arms, and Sammy had gone to tell Grandpa all about it, she smiled and shut her eyes with a whispered, “Then it's all right, thank God!”

All that evening Captain John paced the piazza, and warned away the eager callers, who flocked down to ask about the heroine of the hour; for she was more interesting than Undine, the Lily Maid, or any of the pretty creatures attitudinizing behind the red curtains in the hot hotel parlor. All that night Aunt Mary watched the deep sleep that restored the girl, and now and then crept out to tell her nephew there was nothing to fear for one so strong and healthful. And all night Ruth dreamed strange dreams, some weird and dim, some full of pain and fear; but as the fever of reaction passed away, lovely visions of a happy place came to her, where faces she loved were near, and rest, and all she longed for was hers at last. So clear and beautiful was this dream that she waked in the early dawn to lie and think of it, with such a look of peace upon her face that Aunt Mary could not but kiss it tenderly when she came in to see if all was well.

“How are you, dear? Has this nice long sleep set you up again as I hoped?”

“Oh yes, I'm quite well, thank you, and I must go home. Grandpa will worry so till he sees me,” answered Ruth, sitting up with her wet hair on her shoulders, and a little shiver of pain as she stretched her tired arms.

“Not yet, my dear; rest another hour or two and have some breakfast. Then, if you like, John shall take you home before any one comes to plague you with idle questions. I'm not going to say a word, except that I'm proud of my brave girl, and mean to take care of her if she will let me.”

With that and a motherly embrace, the old lady bustled away to stir up her maid and wake John from his first nap with the smell of coffee, a most unromantic but satisfying perfume to all the weary watchers in the house.

An hour later, dressed in Miss Scott's gray wrapper and rose-colored shawl, Ruth came slowly to the beach leaning on Captain John's arm, while Aunt Mary waved her napkin from the rocks above, and sent kind messages after them as they pushed off.



It was the loveliest hour of all the day. The sun had not yet risen, but sea and sky were rosy with the flush of dawn; the small waves rippled up the sand, the wind blew fresh and fragrant from hayfields far away, and in the grove the birds were singing, as they only sing at peep of day. A still, soft, happy time before the work and worry of the world began, the peaceful moment which is so precious to those who have learned to love its balm and consecrate its beauty with their prayers.

Ruth sat silent, looking about her as if she saw a new heaven and earth, and had no words in which to tell the feeling that made her eyes so soft, sent the fresh color back into her cheeks, and touched her lips with something sweeter than a smile.

Captain John rowed very slowly, watching her with a new expression in his face; and when she drew a long breath, a happy sort of sigh, he leaned forward to ask, as if he knew what brought it,—

“You are glad to be alive, Ruth?”

“Oh, so glad! I didn't want to die; life's very pleasant now,” she answered, with her frank eyes meeting his so gratefully.

“Even though it's hard?”

“It's easier lately; you and dear Miss Mary have helped so much, I see my way clear, and mean to go right on, real brave and cheerful, sure I'll get my wish at last.”

“So do I!” and Captain John laughed a queer, happy laugh, as he bent to his oars again, with the look of a man who knew where he was going and longed to get there as soon as possible.

“I hope you will. I wish I could help anyway to pay for all you've done for me. I know you don't want to be thanked for fishing me up, but I mean to do it all the

same, if I can, some time;” and Ruth's voice was full of tender energy as she looked down into the deep green water where her life would have ended but for him.

“What did you think of when you went down so quietly? Those women said you never called for help once.”

“I had no breath to call. I knew you were near, I hoped you'd come, and I thought of poor Grandpa and Sammy as I gave up and seemed to go to sleep.”

A very simple answer, but it made Captain John beam with delight; and the morning red seemed to glow all over his brown face as he rowed across the quiet bay, looking at Ruth sitting opposite, so changed by the soft becoming colors of her dress, the late danger, and the dreams that still lingered in her mind, making it hard to feel that she was the same girl who went that way only a day ago.

Presently the Captain spoke again in a tone that was both eager and anxious,—

“I'm glad my idle summer hasn't been quite wasted. It's over now, and I'm off in a few days for a year's cruise, you know.”

“Yes, Miss Mary told me you were going soon. I'll miss you both, but maybe you'll come next year?”

“I will, please God!”

“So will I; for even if I get away this fall, I'd love to come again in summer and rest a little while, no matter what I find to do.”

“Come and stay with Aunt Mary if this home is gone. I shall want Sammy next time. I've settled that with the Skipper, you know, and I'll take good care of the little chap. He's not much younger than I was when I shipped for my first voyage. You'll let him go?”

“Anywhere with you. He's set his heart on being a sailor, and Grandpa likes it. All our men are, and I'd be one if I were a boy. I love the sea so, I couldn't be happy long away from it.”

“Even though it nearly drowned you?”

“Yes, I'd rather die that way than any other. But it was my fault; I shouldn't have failed if I hadn't been so tired. I've often swum farther; but I'd been three hours in the marsh getting those things for the girls, and it was washing-day, and I'd been up nearly all night with Grandpa; so don't blame the sea, please, Captain John.”

“You should have called me; I was waiting for you, Ruth.”

“I didn't know it. I'm used to doing things myself. It might have been too late for

Milly if I'd waited.”

“Thank God, I wasn't too late for you.”

The boat was at the shore now; and as he spoke Captain John held out his hands to help Ruth down, for, encumbered with her long dress, and still weak from past suffering, she could not spring to land as she used to do in her short gown. For the first time the color deepened in her cheek as she looked into the face before her and read the meaning of the eyes that found her beautiful and dear, and the lips that thanked God for her salvation so fervently.

She did not speak, but let him lift her down, draw her hand through his arm, and lead her up the rocky slope to the little pool that lay waiting for the sun's first rays to wake from its sleep. He paused there, and with his hand on hers said quietly,—

“Ruth, before I go I want to tell you something, and this is a good time and place. While Aunt Mary watched the flowers, I've watched you, and found the girl I've always wanted for my wife. Modest and brave, dutiful and true, that's what I love; could you give me all this, dear, for the little I can offer, and next year sail with Sammy and a very happy man if you say yes?”

“I'm not half good and wise enough for that! Remember what I am,” began Ruth, bending her head as if the thought were more than she could bear.

“I do remember, and I'm proud of it! Why, dear heart, I've worked my way up from a common sailor, and am the better for it. Now I've got my ship, and I want a mate to make a home for me aboard and ashore. Look up and tell me that I didn't read those true eyes wrong.”

Then Ruth lifted up her face, and the sunshine showed him all he asked to know, as she answered with her heart in her voice and the “true eyes” fixed on his,—

“I tried not to love you, knowing what a poor ignorant girl I am; but you were so kind to me, how could I help it, John?”

That satisfied him, and he sealed his happy thanks on the innocent lips none had kissed but the little brother, the old man, and the fresh winds of the sea.

One can imagine the welcome they met at the small brown house, and what went on inside as Grandpa blessed the lovers, and Sammy so overflowed with joy at his enchanting prospects, that he was obliged to vent his feelings in ecstatic jigs upon the beach, to the great amazement of the gulls and sandpipers at breakfast there.

No one at the Point, except a certain dear old lady, knew the pleasant secret, though many curious or friendly visitors went to the Island that day to see the heroine and express their wonder, thanks, and admiration. All agreed that partial

drowning seemed to suit the girl, for a new Ruth had risen like Venus from the sea. A softer beauty was in her fresh face now, a gentler sort of pride possessed her, and a still more modest shrinking from praise and publicity became her well. No one guessed the cause, and she was soon forgotten; for the season was over, the summer guests departed, and the Point was left to the few cottagers who loved to linger into golden September.

Miss Mary was one of these, and Captain John another; for he remained as long as he dared, to make things comfortable for the old man, and to sit among the rocks with Ruth when her day's work was done, listening while his “Mermaid,” as he called her, sang as she had never sung before, and let him read the heart he had made his own, for the lily was wide open now, and its gold all his.

With the first frosts Grandpa died, and was carried to his grave by his old comrades, owing no man a cent, thanks to his dutiful granddaughter and the new son she had given him. Then the little house was deserted, and all winter Ruth was happy with Aunt Mary, while Sammy studied bravely, and lived on dreams of the joys in store for him when the Captain came sailing home again.

Another summer brought the happy day when the little brown house was set in order for a sailor's honeymoon, when the flag floated gayly over Miss Mary's cottage, and Ruth in a white gown with her chosen flowers in her hair and bosom, shipped with her dear Captain for the long cruise which had its storms and calms, but never any shipwreck of the love that grew and blossomed with the water-lilies by the sea.

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