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Chapter 10 - Demi Settles

'Mother, can I have a little serious conversation with you?' asked Demi one evening, as they sat together enjoying the first fire of the season, while Daisy wrote letters upstairs and Josie was studying in the little library close by.

'Certainly, dear. No bad news, I hope?' and Mrs Meg looked up from her sewing with a mixture of pleasure and anxiety on her motherly face; for she dearly loved a good talk with her son, and knew that he always had something worth telling.

'It will be good news for you, I think,' answered Demi, smiling as he threw away his paper and went to sit beside her on the little sofa which just held two.

'Let me hear it, then, at once.'

'I know you don't like the reporting, and will be glad to hear that I have given it up.'

'I am very glad! It is too uncertain a business, and there is no prospect of getting on for a long time. I want you settled in some good place where you can stay, and in time make money. I wish you liked a profession; but as you don't, any clean, well-established business will do.'

'What do you say to a railroad office?'

'I don't like it. A noisy, hurried kind of place, I know, with all sorts of rough men about. I hope it isn't that, dear?'

'I could have it; but does book-keeping in a wholesale leather business please you better?'

'No; you'll get round-shouldered writing at a tall desk; and they say, once a book-keeper always a book-keeper.'

'How does a travelling agent suit your views?'

'Not at all; with all those dreadful accidents, and the exposure and bad food as you go from place to place, you are sure to get killed or lose your health.'

'I could be private secretary to a literary man; but the salary is small, and may end any time.'

'That would be better, and more what I want. It isn't that I object to honest work of any kind; but I don't want my son to spend his best years grubbing for a little money in a dark office, or be knocked about in a rough-and-tumble scramble to get on. I want to see you in some business where your tastes and talents can be developed and made useful; where you can go on rising, and in time put in your little fortune and be a partner; so that your years of apprenticeship will not be wasted, but fit you to take your place among the honourable men who make their lives and work useful and respected. I talked it all over with your dear father when you were a child; and if he had lived he would have shown you what I mean, and helped you to be what he was.'

Mrs Meg wiped away a quiet tear as she spoke; for the memory of her husband was a very tender one, and the education of his children had been a sacred task to which she gave all her heart and life, and so far she had done wonderfully well - as her good son and loving daughters tried to prove. Demi's arm was round her now, as he said, in a voice so like his father's that it was the sweetest music to her ear:

'Mother dear, I think I have got just what you want for me; and it shall not be my fault if I don't become the man you hope to see me. Let me tell you all about it. I didn't say anything till it was sure because it would only worry you; but Aunt Jo and I have been on the look-out for it some time, and now it has come. You know her publisher, Mr Tiber, is one of the most successful men in the business; also generous, kind, and the soul of honour - as his treatment of Aunty proves. Well, I've rather hankered for that place; for I love books, and as I can't make them I'd like to publish them. That needs some literary taste and judgement, it brings you in contact with fine people, and is an education in itself. Whenever I go into that large, handsome room to see Mr Tiber for Aunt Jo, I always want to stay; for it's lined with books and pictures, famous men and women come and go, and Mr Tiber sits at his desk like a sort of king, receiving his subjects; for the greatest authors are humble to him, and wait his Yes or No with anxiety. Of course I've nothing to do with all that, and may never have; but I like to see it, and the atmosphere is so different from the dark offices and hurly-burly of many other trades, where nothing but money is talked about, that it seems another world, and I feel at home in it. Yes, I'd rather beat the door-mats and make fires there than be head clerk in the great hide and leather store at a big salary.' Here Demi paused for breath; and Mrs Meg, whose face had been growing brighter and brighter, exclaimed eagerly:

'Just what I should like! Have you got it? Oh, my dear boy! your fortune is made if you go to that well-established and flourishing place, with those good men to help you along!'

'I think I have, but we mustn't be too sure of anything yet. I may not suit; I'm only on trial, and must begin at the beginning and work my way up faithfully. Mr Tiber was very kind, and will push me on as fast as is fair to the other fellows, and as I prove myself fit to go up. I'm to begin the first of next month in the book-room, filling orders; and I'll go round and get orders, and do various other things of the sort. I like it. I am ready to do anything about books, if it's only to dust them,' laughed Demi, well pleased with his prospects, for, after trying various things, he seemed at last to have found the sort of work he liked, and a prospect that was very inviting to him.

'You inherit that love of books from grandpa; he can't live without them. I'm glad of it. Tastes of that kind show a refined nature, and are both a comfort and a help all one's life. I am truly glad and grateful, John, that at last you want to settle, and have got such an entirely satisfactory place. Most boys begin much earlier; but I don't believe in sending them out to face the world so young, just when body and soul need home care and watchfulness. Now you are a man, and must begin your life for yourself. Do your best, and be as honest, useful, and happy as your father, and I won't care about making a fortune.'

'I'll try, mother. Couldn't have a better chance; for Tiber & Co. treat their people like gentlemen, and pay generously for faithful work. Things are done in a businesslike way there, and that suits me. I hate promises that are not kept, and shiftless or tyrannical ways anywhere. Mr Tiber said: "This is only to teach you the ropes, Brooke; I shall

have other work for you by and by." Aunty told him I had done book notices, and had rather a fancy for literature; so though I can't produce any "works of Shakespeare", as she says, I may get up some little things later. If I don't, I think it a very honourable and noble profession to select and give good books to the world; and I'm satisfied to be a humble helper in the work.'

'I'm glad you feel so. It adds so much to one's happiness to love the task one does. I used to hate teaching; but housekeeping for my own family was always sweet, though much harder in many ways. Isn't Aunt Jo pleased about all this?' asked Mrs Meg, already seeing in her mind's eye a splendid sign with 'Tiber, Brooke & Co.' over the door of a famous publishing house.

'So pleased that I could hardly keep her from letting the cat out of the bag too soon. I've had so many plans, and disappointed you so often, I wanted to be very sure this time. I had to bribe Rob and Ted to keep her at home tonight till I'd told my news, she was eager to rush down and tell you herself. The castles that dear woman has built for me would fill all Spain, and have kept us jolly while we waited to know our fate. Mr Tiber doesn't do things in a hurry; but when he makes up his mind, you are all right; and I feel that I am fairly launched.'

'Bless you, dear, I hope so! It is a happy day for me, because I've been so anxious lest, with all my care, I have been too easy and indulgent, and my boy, with his many good gifts, might fritter his time away in harmless but unsatisfactory things. Now I am at ease about you. If only Daisy can be happy, and Josie give up her dream, I shall be quite contented.'

Demi let his mother enjoy herself for a few minutes, while he smiled over a certain little dream of his own, not ready yet for the telling; then he said, in the paternal tone which he unconsciously used when speaking of his sisters:

'I'll see to the girls; but I begin to think grandpa is right in saying we must each be what God and nature makes us. We can't change it much - only help to develop the good and control the bad elements in us. I have fumbled my way into my right place at last, I hope. Let Daisy be happy in her way, since it is a good and womanly one. If Nat comes home all right, I'd say: "Bless you, my children," and give them a nest of their own. Then you and I will help little Jo to find out if it is to be "All the world's a stage" or "Home, sweet home", for her.'

'I suppose we must, John; but I can't help making plans, and hoping they will come to pass. I see that Daisy is bound up in Nat; and if he is worthy of her I shall let them be happy in their own way, as my parents let me. But Josie will be a trial, I foresee; and much as I love the stage, and always did, I don't see how I can ever let my little girl be an actress, though she certainly has great talent for it.'

'Whose fault is that?' asked Demi, smiling, as he remembered his mother's early triumphs and unquenchable interest in the dramatic efforts of the young people round her.

'Mine, I know. How could it be otherwise when I acted Babes in the Wood with you and Daisy before you could speak, and taught Josie to declaim Mother Goose in her cradle. Ah, me! the tastes of the mother come out in her children, and she must atone for them by letting them have their own way, I suppose.' And Mrs Meg laughed, even while she shook her head over the undeniable fact that the Marches were a theatrical family.

'Why not have a great actress of our name, as well as an authoress, a minister, and an eminent publisher? We don't choose our talents, but we needn't hide them in a napkin because they are not just what we want. I say, let Jo have her way, and do what she can. Here am I to take care of her; and you can't deny you'd enjoy fixing her furbelows, and seeing her shine before the footlights, where you used to long to be. Come, mother, better face the music and march gaily, since your wilful children will "gang their ain gait".'

'I don't see but I must, and "leave the consequences to the Lord", as Marmee used to say when she had to decide, and only saw a step of the road. I should enjoy it immensely, if I could only feel that the life would not hurt my girl, and leave her unsatisfied when it was too late to change; for nothing is harder to give up than the excitements of that profession. I know something of it; and if your blessed father had not come along, I'm afraid I should have been an actress in spite of Aunt March and all our honoured ancestors.'

'Let Josie add new honour to the name, and work out the family talent in its proper place. I'll play dragon to her, and you play nurse, and no harm can come to our little Juliet, no matter how many Romeos spoon under her balcony. Really, ma'am, opposition comes badly from an old lady who is going to wring the hearts of our audience in the heroine's part in Aunty's play next Christmas. It's the most pathetic thing I ever saw, mother; and I'm sorry you didn't become an actress, though we should be nowhere if you had.'

Demi was on his legs now, with his back to the fire, in the lordly attitude men like to assume when things go well with them, or they want to lay down the law on any subject.

Mrs Meg actually blushed at her son's hearty praise, and could not deny that the sound of applause was as sweet now as when she played the Witch's Curse and the Moorish Maiden's Vow long years ago.

'It's perfectly absurd for me to do it, but I couldn't resist when Jo and Laurie made the part for me, and you children were to act in it. The minute I get on the old mother's dress I forget myself and feel the same thrill at the sound of the bell that I used to feel when we got up plays in the garret. If Daisy would only take the daughter's part it would be so complete; for with you and Josie I am hardly acting, it is all so real.'

'Especially the hospital scene, where you find the wounded son. Why, mother, do you know when we did that at last rehearsal my face was wet with real tears as you cried over me. It will bring down the house; but don't forget to wipe 'em off, or I shall sneeze,' said Demi, laughing at the recollection of his mother's hit.

'I won't; but it almost broke my heart to see you so pale and dreadful. I hope there will never be another war in my time, for I should have to let you go; and I never want to live through the same experience we had with father.'

'Don't you think Alice does the part better than Daisy would? Daisy hasn't a bit of the actress in her, and Alice puts life into the dullest words she speaks. I think the Marquise is just perfect in our piece,' said Demi, strolling about the room as if the warmth of the fire sent a sudden colour to his face.

'So do I. She is a dear girl, and I'm proud and fond of her. Where is she tonight?'

'Pegging away at her Greek, I suppose. She usually is in the evening. More's the pity,' added Demi, in a low tone, as he stared intently at the book-case, though he couldn't read a title.

'Now, there is a girl after my own heart. Pretty, well-bred, well-educated, and yet domestic, a real companion as well as help-meet for some good and intelligent man. I hope she will find one.'

'So do I,' muttered Demi.

Mrs Meg had taken up her work again, and was surveying a half-finished buttonhole with so much interest that her son's face escaped her eye. He shed a beaming smile upon the rows of poets, as if even in their glass prison they could sympathize and rejoice with him at the first rosy dawn of the great passion which they knew so well. But Demi was a wise youth, and never leaped before looking carefully. He hardly knew his own heart yet, and was contented to wait till the sentiment, the fluttering of those folded wings he began to feel, should escape from the chrysalis and be ready to soar away in the sunshine to seek and claim its lovely mate. He had said nothing; but the brown eyes were eloquent, and there was an unconscious underplot to all the little plays he and Alice Heath acted so well together. She was busy with her books, bound to graduate with high honours, and he was trying to do the same in that larger college open to all, and where each man has his own prize to win or lose. Demi had nothing but himself to offer and, being a modest youth, considered that a poor gift till he had proved his power to earn his living, and the right to take a woman's happiness into his keeping.

No one guessed that he had caught the fever except sharp-eyed Josie, and she, having a wholesome fear of her brother - who could be rather awful when she went too far - wisely contented herself with watching him like a little cat, ready to pounce on the first visible sign of weakness. Demi had taken to playing pensively upon his flute after he was in his room for the night, making this melodious friend his confidante, and breathing into it all the tender hopes and fears that filled his heart. Mrs Meg, absorbed in domestic affairs, and Daisy, who cared for no music but Nat's violin, paid no heed to these chamber concerts, but Josie always murmured to herself, with a naughty chuckle, 'Dick Swiveller is thinking of his Sophy Wackles,' and bided her time to revenge certain wrongs inflicted upon her by Demi, who always took Daisy's side when she tried to curb the spirits of her unruly little sister.

This evening she got her chance, and made the most of it. Mrs Meg was just rounding off her buttonhole, and Demi still strolling restlessly about the room, when a book was heard to slam in the study, followed by an audible yawn and the appearance of the student looking as if sleep and a desire for mischief were struggling which should be master.

'I heard my name; have you been saying anything bad about me?' she demanded, perching on the arm of an easychair.

Her mother told the good news, over which Josie duly rejoiced, and Demi received her congratulations with a benignant air which made her feel that too much satisfaction was not good for him, and incited her to put a thorn into his bed of roses at once.

'I caught something about the play just now, and I want to tell you that I'm going to introduce a song into my part to liven it up a bit. How would this do?' and seating herself at the piano she began to sing to these words the air of 'Kathleen Mavourneen':

'Sweetest of maidens, oh, how can I tell
The love that transfigures the whole earth to me?
The longing that causes my bosom to swell,
When I dream of a life all devoted to thee?'

She got no further, for Demi, red with wrath, made a rush at her, and the next moment a very agile young person was seen dodging round tables and chairs with the future partner of Tiber & Co. in hot pursuit. 'You monkey, how dare you meddle with my papers?' cried the irate poet, making futile grabs at the saucy girl, who skipped to and fro, waving a bit of paper tantalizingly before him.

'Didn't; found it in the big "Dic". Serves you right if you leave your rubbish about. Don't you like my song? It's very pretty.'

'I'll teach you one that you won't like if you don't give me my property.'

'Come and get it if you can'; and Josie vanished into the study to have out her squabble in peace, for Mrs Meg was already saying:

'Children, children! don't quarrel.'

The paper was in the fire by the time Demi arrived and he at once calmed down, seeing that the bone of contention was out of the way.

'I'm glad it's burnt; I don't care for it, only some verse I was trying to set to music for one of the girls. But I'll trouble you to let my papers alone, or I shall take back the advice I gave mother tonight about allowing you to act as much as you like.'

Josie was sobered at once by this dire threat, and in her most wheedling tone begged to know what he had said. By way of heaping coals of fire on her head he told her, and this diplomatic performance secured him an ally on the spot.

'You dear old boy! I'll never tease you again though you moon and spoon both day and night. If you stand by me, I'll stand by you and never say a word. See here! I've got a note for you from Alice. Won't that be a peace-offering and soothe your little feelings?'

Demi's eyes sparkled as Josie held up a paper cocked hat, but as he knew what was probably in it, he took the wind out of Josie's sails, and filled her with blank astonishment by saying carelessly:

'That's nothing; it's only to say whether she will go to the concert with us tomorrow night. You can read it if you like.'

With the natural perversity of her sex Josie ceased to be curious the moment she was told to read it, and meekly handed it over; but she watched Demi as he calmly read the two lines it contained and then threw it into the fire. 'Why, Jack, I thought you'd treasure every scrap the "sweetest maid" touched. Don't you care for her?'

'Very much; we all do; but "mooning and spooning", as you elegantly express it, is not in my line. My dear little girl, your plays make you romantic, and because Alice and I act lovers sometimes you take it into your silly head that we are really so. Don't waste time hunting mares' nests, but attend to your own affairs and leave me to mine. I forgive you, but don't do it again; it's bad taste, and tragedy queens don't romp.'

The last cut finished Josie; she humbly begged pardon and went off to bed, while Demi soon followed, feeling that he had not only settled himself but his too inquisitive little sister also. But if he had seen her face as she listened to the soft wailing of his flute he would not have been so sure, for she looked as cunning as a magpie as she said, with a scornful sniff: 'Pooh, you can't deceive me; I know Dick is serenading Sophy Wackles.'