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Chapter 19 - White Roses

While the travellers refreshed, and Mrs President struggled into her best gown, Josie ran into the garden to gather flowers for the brides. The sudden arrival of these interesting beings had quite enchanted the romantic girl, and her head was full of heroic rescues, tender admiration, dramatic situations, and feminine wonder as to whether the lovely creatures would wear their veils or not. She was standing before a great bush of white roses, culling the most perfect for the bouquets which she meant to tie with the ribbon festooned over her arm, and lay on the toilette tables of the new cousins, as a delicate attention. A step startled her, and looking up she saw her brother coming down the path with folded arms, bent head, and the absent air of one absorbed in deep thought.

'Sophy Wackles,' said the sharp child, with a superior smile, as she sucked her thumb just pricked by a too eager pull at the thorny branches.

'What are you at here, Mischief?' asked Demi, with an Irvingesque start, as he felt rather than saw a disturbing influence in his day-dream.

'Getting flowers for "our brides". Don't you wish you had one?' answered Josie, to whom the word 'mischief' suggested her favourite amusement.

'A bride or a flower?' asked Demi calmly, though he eyed the blooming bush as if it had a sudden and unusual interest for him.

'Both; you get the one, and I'll give you the other.'

'Wish I could!' and Demi picked a little bud, with a sigh that went to Josie's warm heart.

'Why don't you, then? It's lovely to see people so happy. Now's a good time to do it if you ever mean to. She will be going away for ever soon.'

'Who?' and Demi pulled a half-opened bud, with a sudden colour in his own face; which sign of confusion delighted little Jo.

'Don't be a hypocrite. You know I mean Alice. Now, Jack, I'm fond of you, and want to help; it's so interesting - all these lovers and weddings and things, and we ought to have our share. So you take my advice and speak up like a man, and make sure of Alice before she goes.'

Demi laughed at the seriousness of the small girl's advice; but he liked it, and showed that it suited him by saying blandly, instead of snubbing her as usual:

'You are very kind, child. Since you are so wise, could you give me a hint how I'd better 'speak up', as you elegantly express it?'

'Oh, well, there are various ways, you know. In plays the lovers go down on their knees; but that's awkward when they have long legs. Ted never does it well, though I drilled him for hours. You could say, "Be mine, be mine!" like the old man who threw cucumbers over the wall to Mrs Nickleby, if you want to be gay and easy; or you could write a poetical pop. You've tried it, I dare say.'

'But seriously, Jo, I do love Alice, and I think she knows it. I want to tell her so; but I lose my head when I try, and don't care to make a fool of myself. Thought you might suggest some pretty way; you read so much poetry and are so romantic.'

Demi tried to express himself clearly, but forgot his dignity and his usual reserve in the sweet perplexity of his love, and asked his little sister to teach him how to put the question which a single word can answer. The arrival of his happy cousins had scattered all his wise plans and brave resolutions to wait still longer. The Christmas play had given him courage to hope, and the oration today had filled him with tender pride; but the sight of those blooming brides and beaming grooms was too much for him, and he panted to secure his Alice without an hour's delay. Daisy was his confidante in all things but this; a brotherly feeling of sympathy had kept him from telling her his hopes, because her own were forbidden. His mother was rather jealous of any girl he admired; but knowing that she liked Alice, he loved on and enjoyed his secret alone, meaning soon to tell her all about it.

Now suddenly Josie and the rose-bush seemed to suggest a speedy end to his tender perplexities; and he was moved to accept her aid as the netted lion did that of the mouse.

'I think I'll write,' he was slowly beginning, after a pause during which both were trying to strike out a new and brilliant idea.

'I've got it! perfectly lovely! just suit her, and you too, being a poet!' cried Josie, with a skip.

'What is it? Don't be ridiculous, please,' begged the bashful lover, eager, but afraid of this sharp-tongued bit of womanhood.

'I read in one of Miss Edgeworth's stories about a man who offers three roses to his lady - a bud, a half-blown, and a full-blown rose. I don't remember which she took; but it's a pretty way; and Alice knows about it because she was there when we read it. Here are all kinds; you've got the two buds, pick the sweetest rose you can find, and I'll tie them up and put them in her room. She is coming to dress with Daisy, so I can do it nicely.'

Demi mused a moment with his eyes on the bridal bush, and a smile came over his face so unlike any it had ever worn before, that Josie was touched, and looked away as if she had no right to see the dawn of the great passion which, while it lasts, makes a young man as happy as a god.

'Do it,' was all he said, and gathered a full-blown rose to finish his floral love-message.

Charmed to have a finger in this romantic pie, Josie tied a graceful bow of ribbon about the stems, and finished her last nosegay with much content, while Demi wrote upon a card:

DEAR ALICE, You know what the flowers mean. Will you wear one, or all tonight, and make me still prouder, fonder, and happier than I am?

Yours entirely,

JOHN

Offering this to his sister, he said in a tone that made her feel the deep importance of her mission:

'I trust you, Jo. This means everything to me. No jokes, dear, if you love me.'

Josie's answer was a kiss that promised all things; and then she ran away to do her 'gentle spiriting', like Ariel, leaving Demi to dream among the roses like Ferdinand.

Mary and Ludmilla were charmed with their bouquets; and the giver had the delight of putting some of the flowers into the dark hair and the light as she played maid at the toilettes of 'our brides', which consoled her for a disappointment in the matter of veils.

No one helped Alice dress; for Daisy was in the next room with her mother; and not even their loving eyes saw the welcome which the little posy received, nor the tears and smiles and blushes that came and went as she read the note and pondered what answer she should give. There was no doubt about the one she wished to give; but duty held her back; for at home there was an invalid mother and an old father. She was needed there, with all the help she could now bring by the acquirements four years of faithful study had given her. Love looked very sweet, and a home of her own with John a little heaven on earth; but not yet. And she slowly laid away the full-blown rose as she sat before the mirror, thinking over the great question of her life.

Was it wise and kind to ask him to wait, to bind him by any promise, or even to put into words the love and honour she felt for him? No; it would be more generous to make the sacrifice alone, and spare him the pain of hope deferred. He was young; he would forget; and she would do her duty better, perhaps, if no impatient lover waited for her. With eyes that saw but dimly, and a hand that lingered on the stem he had stripped of thorns, she laid the half-blown flower by the rose, and asked herself if even the little bud might be worn. It looked very poor and pale beside the others; yet being in the self-sacrificing mood which real love brings, she felt that even a small hope was too much to give, if she could not follow it up with more.

As she sat looking sadly down on the symbols of an affection that grew dearer every moment, she listened half unconsciously to the murmur of voices in the adjoining room. Open windows, thin partitions, and the stillness of summer twilight made it impossible to help hearing, and in a few moments more she could not refrain; for they were talking of John.

'So nice of Ludmilla to bring us all bottles of real German cologne! Just what we need after this tiring day! Be sure John has his! He likes it so!'

'Yes, mother. Did you see him jump up when Alice ended her oration? He'd have gone to her if I hadn't held him back. I don't wonder he was pleased and proud. I spoilt my gloves clapping, and quite forgot my dislike of seeing women on platforms, she was so earnest and unconscious and sweet after the first moment.'

'Has he said anything to you, dear?'

'No; and I guess why. The kind boy thinks it would make me unhappy. It wouldn't. But I know his ways; so I wait, and hope all will go well with him.'

'It must. No girl in her senses would refuse our John, though he isn't rich, and never will be. Daisy, I've been longing to tell you what he did with his money. He told me last night, and I've had no time since to tell you. He sent poor young Barton to the hospital, and kept him there till his eyes were saved - a costly thing to do. But the man can work now and care for his old parents. He was in despair, sick and poor, and too proud to beg; and our dear boy found it out, and took every penny he had, and never told even his mother till she made him.'

Alice did not hear what Daisy answered, for she was busy with her own emotions - happy ones now, to judge from the smile that shone in her eyes and the decided gesture with which she put the little bud in her bosom, as if she said: 'He deserves some reward for that good deed, and he shall have it.'

Mrs Meg was speaking, and still of John, when she could hear again:

'Some people would call it unwise and reckless, when John has so little; but I think his first investment a safe and good one, for "he who giveth to the poor lendeth to the Lord"; and I was so pleased and proud, I wouldn't spoil it by offering him a penny.'

'It is his having nothing to offer that keeps him silent, I think. He is so honest, he won't ask till he has much to give. But he forgets that love is everything. I know he's rich in that; I see and feel it; and any woman should be glad to get it.'

'Right, dear. I felt just so, and was willing to work and wait with and for my John.'

'So she will be, and I hope they will find it out. But she is so dutiful and good, I'm afraid she won't let herself be happy. You would like it, mother?'

'Heartily; for a better, nobler girl doesn't live. She is all I want for my son; and I don't mean to lose the dear, brave creature if I can help it. Her heart is big enough for both love and duty; and they can wait more happily if they do it together - for wait they must, of course.'

'I'm so glad his choice suits you, mother, and he is spared the saddest sort of disappointment.'

Daisy's voice broke there; and a sudden rustle, followed by a soft murmur, seemed to tell that she was in her mother's arms, seeking and finding comfort there.

Alice heard no more, and shut her window with a guilty feeling but a shining face; for the proverb about listeners failed here, and she had learned more than she dared to hope. Things seemed to change suddenly; she felt that her heart was large enough for both love and duty; she knew now that she would be welcomed by mother and sister; and the memory of Daisy's less happy fate, Nat's weary probation, the long delay, and possible separation for ever - all came before her so vividly that prudence seemed cruelty; self-sacrifice, sentimental folly; and anything but the whole truth, disloyalty to her lover. As she thought thus, the half-blown rose went to join the bud; and then, after a pause, she slowly kissed the perfect rose, and added it to the tell-tale group, saying to herself with a sort of sweet solemnity, as if the words were a vow:

'I'll love and work and wait with and for my John.'

It was well for her that Demi was absent when she stole down to join the guests who soon began to flow through the house in a steady stream. The new brightness which touched her usually thoughtful face was easily explained by the congratulations she received as orator, and the slight agitation observable, when a fresh batch of gentlemen approached soon passed, as none of them noticed the flowers she wore over a very happy heart. Demi meantime was escorting certain venerable personages

about the college, and helping his grandfather entertain them with discussion of the Socratic method of instruction, Pythagoras, Pestalozzi, Froebel, and the rest, whom he devoutly wished at the bottom of the Red Sea, and no wonder, for his head and his heart were full of love and roses, hopes and fears. He piloted the 'potent, grave, and reverend seigniors' safely down to Plumfield at last, and landed them before his uncle and aunt Bhaer, who were receiving in state, the one full of genuine delight in all men and things, the other suffering martyrdom with a smile, as she stood shaking hand after hand, and affecting utter unconsciousness of the sad fact that ponderous Professor Plock had camped upon the train of her state and festival velvet gown.

With a long sigh of relief Demi glanced about him for the beloved girl. Most persons would have looked some time before any particular angel could be discovered among the white-robed throng in parlours, hall, and study; but his eye went - like the needle to the pole - to the corner where a smooth dark head, with its braided crown, rose like a queen's, he thought, above the crowd which surrounded her. Yes, she has a flower at her throat; one, two, oh, blessed sight! he saw it all across the room, and gave a rapturous sigh which caused Miss Perry's frizzled crop to wave with a sudden gust. He did not see the rose, for it was hidden by a fold of lace; and it was well, perhaps, that bliss came by instalments, or he might have electrified the assembled multitude by flying to his idol, there being no Daisy to clutch him by the coat-tail. A stout lady, thirsting for information, seized him at that thrilling moment, and he was forced to point out celebrities with a saintly patience which deserved a better reward than it received; for a certain absence of mind and incoherence of speech at times caused the ungrateful dowager to whisper to the first friend she met after he had escaped:

'I saw no wine at any of the spreads; but it is plain that young Brooke has had too much. Quite gentlemanly, but evidently a trifle intoxicated, my dear.'

Ah, so he was! but with a diviner wine than any that ever sparkled at a class-day lunch, though many collegians know the taste of it; and when the old lady was disposed of, he gladly turned to find the young one, bent on having a single word. He saw her standing by the piano now, idly turning over music as she talked with several gentlemen. Hiding his impatience under an air of scholastic repose, Demi hovered near, ready to advance when the happy moment came, wondering meantime why elderly persons persisted in absorbing young ones instead of sensibly sitting in corners with their contemporaries. The elderly persons in question retired at length, but only to be replaced by two impetuous youths who begged Miss Heath to accompany them to Parnassus and join the dance. Demi thirsted for their blood, but was appeased by hearing George and Dolly say, as they lingered a moment after her refusal:

'Really, you know, I'm quite converted to co-education and almost wish I'd remained here. It gives a grace to study, a sort of relish even to Greek to see charming girls at it, said Stuffy, who found the feast of learning so dry, any sauce was welcome; and he felt as if he had discovered a new one.

'Yes, by Jove! we fellows will have to look out or you'll carry off all the honours. You were superb today, and held us all like magic, though it was so hot there, I really think I couldn't have stood it for anyone else,' added Dolly, labouring to be gallant and really offering a touching proof of devotion; for the heat melted his collar, took the curl out of his hair, and ruined his gloves.

'There is room for all; and if you will leave us the books, we will cheerfully yield the baseball, boating, dancing, and flirting, which seem to be the branches you prefer,' answered Alice sweetly.

'Ah, now you are too hard upon us! We can't grind all the time and you ladies don't seem to mind taking a turn at the two latter "branches" you mention,' returned Dolly, with a glance at George which plainly said, 'I had her there.'

'Some of us do in our first years. Later we give up childish things, you see. Don't let me keep you from Parnassus'; and a smiling nod dismissed them, smarting under the bitter consciousness of youth.

'You got it there, Doll. Better not try to fence with these superior girls. Sure to be routed, horse, foot, and dragoons,' said Stuffy, lumbering away, somewhat cross with too many spreads.

'So deuced sarcastic! Don't believe she's much older than we are. Girls grow up quicker, so she needn't put on airs and talk like a grandmother,' muttered Dolly, feeling that he had sacrificed his kids upon the altar of an ungrateful Pallas.

'Come along and let's find something to eat. I'm faint with so much talking. Old Plock cornered me and made my head spin with Kant and Hegel and that lot.'

'I promised Dora West I'd give her a turn. Must look her up; she's a jolly little thing, and doesn't bother about anything but keeping in step.'

And arm in arm the boys strolled away, leaving Alice to read music as diligently as if society had indeed no charms for her. As she bent to turn a page, the eager young man behind the piano saw the rose and was struck speechless with delight. A moment he gazed, then hastened to seize the coveted place before a new detachment of bores arrived.

'Alice, I can't believe it - did you understand - how shall I ever thank you?' murmured Demi, bending as if he, too, read the song, not a note or word of which did he see, however.

'Hush! not now. I understood - I don't deserve it - we are too young, we must wait, but - I'm very proud and happy, John!'

What would have happened after that tender whisper I tremble to think, if Tom Bangs had not come bustling up, with the cheerful remark:

'Music? just the thing. People are thinning out, and we all want a little refreshment. My brain fairly reels with the 'ologies and 'isms I've heard discussed tonight. Yes, give us this; sweet thing! Scotch songs are always charming.'

Demi glowered; but the obtuse boy never saw it, and Alice, feeling that this would be a safe vent for sundry unruly emotions, sat down at once, and sang the song which gave her answer better than she could have done:

BIDE A WEE

'The puir auld folk at home, ye mind,
Are frail and failing sair;
And weel I ken they'd miss me, lad,
Gin I come hame nae mair.
The grist is out, the times are hard,
The kine are only three;
I canna leave the auld folk now,
We'd better bide a wee.

'I fear me sair they're failing baith;
For when I sit apart,
They talk o' Heaven so earnestly,
It well nigh breaks my heart.

So, laddie, dinna urge me now,
It surely winna be;
I canna leave the auld folk yet.
We'd better bide a wee.'

The room was very still before the first verse ended; and Alice skipped the next, fearing she could not get through; for John's eyes were on her, showing that he knew she sang for him and let the plaintive little ballad tell what her reply must be. He took it as she meant it, and smiled at her so happily that her heart got the better of her voice, and she rose abruptly, saying something about the heat.

'Yes, you are tired; come out and rest, my dearest'; and with a masterful air Demi took her into the starlight, leaving Tom to stare after them winking as if a sky-rocket had suddenly gone off under his nose.

'Bless my soul! the Deacon really meant business last summer and never told me. Won't Dora laugh?' And Tom departed in hot haste to impart and exult over his discovery.

What was said in the garden was never exactly known; but the Brooke family sat up very late that night, and any curious eye at the window would have seen Demi receiving the homage of his womankind as he told his little romance. Josie took great credit to herself in the matter, insisting that she had made the match; Daisy was full of the sweetest sympathy and joy, and Mrs Meg so happy that when Jo had gone to dream of bridal veils, and Demi sat in his room blissfully playing the air of 'Bide a Wee', she had her talk about Nat, ending with her arms round her dutiful daughter and these welcome words as her reward:

'Wait till Nat comes home, and then my good girl shall wear white roses too.'