

Debby's Debut

Louisa May Alcott

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On a cheery June day Mrs. Penelope Carroll and her niece Debby Wilder were whizzing along on their way to a certain gay watering-place, both in the best of humors with each other and all the world beside. Aunt Pen was concocting sundry mild romances, and laying harmless plots for the pursuance of her favorite pastime, match-making; for she had invited her pretty relative to join her summer jaunt, ostensibly that the girl might see a little of fashionable life, but the good lady secretly proposed to herself to take her to the beach and get her a rich husband, very much as she would have proposed to take her to Broadway and get her a new bonnet, for both articles she considered necessary, but somewhat difficult for a poor girl to obtain.

Debby was slowly getting her poise, after the excitement of a first visit to New York; for ten days of bustle had introduced the young philosopher to a new existence, and the working-day world seemed to have vanished when she made her last pat of butter in the dairy at home. For an hour she sat thinking over the good-fortune which had befallen her, and the comforts of this life which she had suddenly acquired. Debby was a true girl, with all a girl's love of ease and pleasure; and it must not be set down against her that she surveyed her pretty travelling-suit with much complacency, rejoicing inwardly that she could use her hands without exposing fractured gloves, that her bonnet was of the newest mode, needing no veil to hide a faded ribbon or a last year's shape, that her dress swept the ground with fashionable untidiness, and her boots were guiltless of a patch, that she was the possessor of a mine of wealth in two of the eight trunks belonging to her aunt, that she was travelling like any lady of the land with man-and maid-servant at her command, and that she was leaving work and care behind her for a month or two of novelty and rest.

When these agreeable facts were fully realized, and Aunt Pen had fallen asleep behind her veil, Debby took out a book, and indulged in her favorite luxury, soon forgetting past, present, and future in the inimitable history of Martin Chuzzlewit. The sun blazed, the cars rattled, children cried, ladies nodded, gentlemen longed for the solace of prohibited cigars, and newspapers were converted into sun-shades, nightcaps, and fans; but Debby read on, unconscious of all about her, even of the pair of eyes that watched her from the opposite corner of the car. A gentleman with a frank, strong-featured face sat therein, and amused himself by scanning with thoughtful gaze the countenances of his fellow-travellers. Stout Aunt Pen, dignified even in her sleep, was a "model of deportment" to the rising generation; but the student of human nature found a more attractive subject in her companion, the girl with an apple-blossom face and merry brown eyes, who sat smiling into her book, never heeding that her bonnet was awry, and the wind taking unwarrantable liberties with her ribbons and her hair.

Innocent Debby turned her pages, unaware that her fate sat opposite in the likeness of a serious, black-bearded gentleman, who watched the smiles rippling from her lips to her eyes with an interest that deepened as the minutes passed. If his paper had been full of anything but "Bronchial Troches" and "Spalding's Prepared Glue," he would have found more profitable employment; but it wasn't, and with the usual readiness of idle souls he fell into evil ways, and permitted curiosity, that feminine sin, to enter in and take possession of his manly mind. A great desire seized him to discover what book so interested his pretty neighbor; but a cover hid the name, and he was too distant to catch it on the fluttering leaves. Presently a stout Emerald-Islander, with her wardrobe oozing out of sundry paper parcels, vacated the seat behind the two ladies; and it was soon quietly occupied by the individual for whom Satan was finding such indecorous employment. Peeping round the little gray bonnet, past a brown braid and a fresh cheek, the young man's eye

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fell upon the words the girl was reading, and forgot to look away again. Books were the desire of his life; but an honorable purpose and an indomitable will kept him steady at his ledgers till he could feel that he had earned the right to read. Like wine to many another was an open page to him; he read a line, and, longing for more, took a hasty sip from his neighbor's cup, forgetting that it was a stranger's also.

Down the page went the two pairs of eyes, and the merriment from Debby's seemed to light up the sombre ones behind her with a sudden shine that softened the whole face and made it very winning. No wonder they twinkled, for Elijah Pogram spoke, and "Mrs. Hominy, the mother of the modern Gracchi, in the classical blue cap and the red cotton picket-handkerchief, came down the room in a procession of one." A low laugh startled Debby, though it was smothered like the babes in the Tower; and, turning, she beheld the trespasser scarlet with confusion, and sobered with a tardy sense of his transgression. Debby was not a starched young lady of the "prune and prism" school, but a frank, free-hearted little body, quick to read the sincerity of others, and to take looks and words at their real value. Dickens was her idol; and for his sake she could have forgiven a greater offense than this. The stranger's contrite countenance and respectful apology won her good-will at once; and with a finer courtesy than any Aunt Pen would have taught, she smilingly bowed her pardon, and taking another book from her basket, opened it, saying, pleasantly,

"Here is the first volume, if you like it, Sir. I can recommend it as an invaluable consolation for the discomforts of a summer day's journey, and it is heartily at your service."

As much surprised as gratified, the gentleman accepted the book, and retired behind it with the sudden discovery that wrong-doing has its compensation in the pleasurable sensation of being forgiven. Stolen delights are well known to be specially saccharine; and much as this pardoned sinner loved books, it seemed to him that the interest of the story flagged, and that the enjoyment of reading was much enhanced by the proximity of a gray bonnet and a girlish profile. But Dickens soon proved more powerful than Debby, and she was forgotten, till, pausing to turn a leaf, the young man met her shy glance, as she asked, with the pleased expression of a child who has shared an apple with a playmate,

"Is it good?"

"Oh, very!" and the man looked as honestly grateful for the book as the boy would have done for the apple.

Only five words in the conversation, but Aunt Pen woke, as if the watchful spirit of propriety had roused her to pluck her charge from the precipice on which she stood.

"Dora, I'm astonished at you! Speaking to strangers in that free manner is a most unladylike thing. How came you to forget what I have told you over and over again about a proper reserve?"

The energetic whisper reached the gentleman's ear, and he expected to be annihilated with a look when his offense was revealed; but he was spared that ordeal, for the young voice answered, softly,

"Don't faint, Aunt Pen; I only did as I'd be done by; for I had two books, and the poor man looked so hungry for something to read that I couldn't resist sharing my 'goodies.' He will see that I'm a countrified little thing in spite of my fine feathers, and won't be shocked at my want of rigidity and frigidity; so don't look dismal, and I'll be prim and proper all the rest of the way, if I don't forget it."

"I wonder who he is; may belong to some of our first families, and in that case it might be worth while to exert ourselves, you know. Did you learn his name, Dora?" whispered the elder lady.

Debby shook her head, and murmured, "Hush!" but Aunt Pen had heard of matches being made in cars as well as in heaven; and as an experienced general, it became her to reconnoitre, when one of the enemy

approached her camp. Slightly altering her position, she darted an all-comprehensive glance at the invader, who seemed entirely absorbed, for not an eyelash stirred during the scrutiny. It lasted but an instant, yet in that instant he was weighed and found wanting; for that experienced eye detected that his cravat was two inches wider than fashion ordained, that his coat was not of the latest style, that his gloves were mended, and his handkerchief neither cambric nor silk. That was enough, and sentence was passed forthwith, "Some respectable clerk, good-looking, but poor, and not at all the thing for Dora"; and Aunt Pen turned to adjust a voluminous green veil over her niece's bonnet, "To shield it from the dust, dear," which process also shielded the face within from the eye of man.

A curious smile, half mirthful, half melancholy, passed over their neighbor's lips; but his peace of mind seemed undisturbed, and he remained buried in his book till they reached , at dusk. As he returned it, he offered his services in procuring a carriage or attending to luggage; but Mrs. Carroll, with much dignity of aspect, informed him that her servants would attend to those matters, and, bowing gravely, he vanished into the night.

As they rolled away to the hotel, Debby was wild to run down to the beach whence came the solemn music of the sea, making the twilight beautiful. But Aunt Pen was too tired to do anything but sup in her own apartment and go early to bed; and Debby might as soon have proposed to walk up the Great Pyramid as to make her first appearance without that sage matron to mount guard over her; so she resigned herself to pie and patience, and fell asleep, wishing it were to-morrow.

At five, A.M., a nightcapped head appeared at one of the myriad windows of the – Hotel, and remained there as if fascinated by the miracle of sunrise over the sea. Under her simplicity of character and girlish merriment Debby possessed a devout spirit and a nature full of the real poetry of life, two gifts that gave her dawning womanhood its sweetest charm, and made her what she was. As she looked out that summer dawn upon the royal marriage of the ocean and the sun, all petty hopes and longings faded out of sight, and her young face grew luminous with thoughts too deep for words. Her day was happier for that silent hour, her life richer for the aspirations that uplifted her like beautiful strong angels, and left a blessing when they went. The smile of the June sky touched her lips, the morning red seemed to linger on her cheek, and in her eye arose a light kindled by the shimmer of that broad sea of gold; for Nature rewarded her young votary well, and gave her beauty, when she offered love. How long she leaned there Debby did not know; steps from below roused her from her reverie, and led her back into the world again. Smiling at herself, she stole to bed, and lay wrapped in waking dreams as changeful as the shadows dancing on her chamber-wall.

The advent of her aunt's maid, Victorine, some two hours later, was the signal to be "up and doing"; and she meekly resigned herself into the hands of that functionary, who appeared to regard her in the light of an animated pin-cushion, as she performed the toilet-ceremonies with an absorbed aspect, which impressed her subject with a sense of the solemnity of the occasion.

"Now, Mademoiselle, regard yourself, and pronounce that you are ravishing," Victorine said at length, folding her hands with a sigh of satisfaction, as she fell back in an attitude of serene triumph.

Debby obeyed, and inspected herself with great interest and some astonishment; for there was a sweeping amplitude of array about the young lady whom she beheld in the much-befrilled gown and embroidered skirts, which somewhat alarmed her as to the navigation of a vessel "with such a spread of sail," while a curious sensation of being somebody else pervaded her from the crown of her head, with its shining coils of hair, to the soles of the French slippers, whose energies seemed to have been devoted to the production of marvellous rosettes.

"Yes, I look very nice, thank you; and yet I felt like a doll, helpless and fine, and fancy I was more of a woman in my fresh gingham, with a knot of clovers in my hair, than I am now. Aunt Pen was very kind to get

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me all these pretty things; but I'm afraid my mother would look horrified to see me in such a high state of flounce externally and so little room to breathe internally."

"Your mamma would not flatter me, Mademoiselle; but come now to Madame; she is waiting to behold you, and I have yet her toilet to make"; and, with a pitying shrug, Victorine followed Debby to her aunt's room.

"Charming! really elegant!" cried that lady, emerging from her towel with a rubicund visage. "Drop that braid half an inch lower, and pull the worked end of her handkerchief out of the right-hand pocket, Vic. There! Now, Dora, don't run about and get rumpled, but sit quietly down and practice repose till I am ready."

Debby obeyed, and sat mute, with the air of child in its Sunday—best on a week—day, pleased with the novelty, but somewhat oppressed with the responsibility of such unaccustomed splendor, and utterly unable to connect any ideas of repose with tight shoes and skirts in a rampant state of starch.

"Well, you see, I bet on Lady Gay against Cockadoodle, and if you'll believe me — Hullo! there's Mrs. Carroll, and deuse take me if she hasn't got a girl with her! Look, Seguin!" and Joe Leavenworth, a "man of the world," aged twenty, paused in his account of an exciting race to make the announcement.

Mr. Seguin, his friend and Mentor, as much his senior in worldly wickedness as in years, tore himself from his breakfast long enough to survey the newcomers, and then returned to it, saying, briefly,

"The old lady is worth cultivating, gives good suppers, and thanks you for eating them. The girl is well got up, but has no style, and blushes like a milkmaid. Better fight shy of her, Joe."

"Do you think so? Well, now I rather fancy that kind of thing. She's new, you see, and I get on with that sort of girl the best, for the old ones are so deused knowing that a fellow has no chance of a — By the Lord Harry, she's eating bread and milk!"

Young Leavenworth whisked his glass into his eye, and Mr. Seguin put down his roll to behold the phenomenon. Poor Debby! her first step had been a wrong one.

All great minds have their weak points. Aunt Pen's was her breakfast, and the peace of her entire day depended upon the success of that meal. Therefore being down rather late, the worthy lady concentrated her energies upon the achievement of a copious repast, and, trusting to former lessons, left Debby to her own resources for a few fatal moments. After the flutter occasioned by being scooped into her seat by a severe-nosed waiter, Debby had only courage enough left to refuse tea and coffee and accept milk. That being done, she took the first familiar viand that appeared, and congratulated herself upon being able to get her usual breakfast. With returning composure, she looked about her and began to enjoy the buzz of voices, the clatter of knives and forks, and the long lines of faces all intent upon the business of the hour; but her peace was of short duration. Pausing for a fresh relay of toast, Aunt Pen glanced toward her niece with the comfortable conviction that her appearance was highly creditable; and her dismay can be imagined, when she beheld that young lady placidly devouring a great cup of brown—bread and milk before the eyes of the assembled multitude. The poor lady choked in her coffee, and between her gasps whispered irefully behind her napkin,

"For Heaven's sake, Dora put away that mess! The Ellenboroughs are directly opposite, watching everything you do. Eat that omelet, or anything respectable, unless you want me to die of mortification."

Debby dropped her spoon, and, hastily helping herself from the dish her aunt pushed toward her, consumed the leathery compound with as much grace as she could assume, though unable to repress a laugh at Aunt Pen's disturbed countenance. There was a slight lull in the clatter, and the blithe sound caused several heads

to turn toward the quarter whence it came, for it was as unexpected and pleasant a sound as a bobolink's song in a cage of shrill-voiced canaries.

"She's a jolly little thing and powerful pretty, so deuse take me if I don't make up to the old lady and find out who the girl is. I've been introduced to Mrs. Carroll at our house; but I suppose she won't remember me till I remind her."

The "deuse" declining to accept of his repeated offers, (probably because there was still too much honor and honesty in the boy,) young Leavenworth sought out Mrs. Carroll on the piazza, as she and Debby were strolling there an hour later.

"Joe Leavenworth, my dear, from one of our first families, very wealthy, fine match, pray, be civil, smooth your hair, hold back your shoulders, and put down your parasol," murmured Aunt Pen, as the gentleman approached with as much pleasure in his countenance as it was consistent with manly dignity to express upon meeting two of the inferior race.

"My niece, Miss Dora Wilder. This is her first season at the beach, and we must endeavor to make it pleasant for her, or she will be getting homesick and running away to mamma," said Aunt Pen, in her society-tone, after she had returned his greeting, and perpetrated a polite fiction, by declaring that she remembered him perfectly, for he was the image of his father.

Mr. Leavenworth brought the heels of his varnished boots together with a click, and executed the latest bow imported, then stuck his glass in his eye and stared till it fell out, (the glass, not the eye,) upon which he fell into step with them, remarking,

"I shall be most happy to show the lions: they are deused tame ones, so you needn't be alarmed, Miss Wilder."

Debby was good-natured enough to laugh; and, elated with that success, he proceeded to pour forth his stores of wit and learning in true collegian style, quite unconscious that the "jolly little thing" was looking him through and through with the smiling eyes that were producing such pleasurable sensations under the mosaic studs. They strolled toward the beach, and, meeting an old acquaintance, Aunt Pen fell behind, and beamed upon the young pair as if her prophetic eye even at this early stage beheld them walking altarward in a proper state of blond white vest and bridal awkwardness.

"Can you skip a stone, Mr. Leavenworth?" asked Debby, possessed with a mischievous desire to shock the piece of elegance at her side.

"Eh? what's that?" he inquired, with his head on one side, like an inquisitive robin.

Debby repeated her question, and illustrated it by sending a stone skimming over the water in the most scientific manner. Mr. Joe was painfully aware that this was not at all "the thing," that his sisters never did so, and that Seguin would laugh confoundedly, if he caught him at it; but Debby looked so irresistibly fresh and pretty under her rose-lined parasol that he was moved to confess that he had done such a thing, and to sacrifice his gloves by poking in the sand, that he might indulge in a like unfashionable pastime.

"You'll be at the hop to-night, I hope, Miss Wilder," he observed, introducing a topic suited to a young lady's mental capacity.

"Yes, indeed; for dancing is one of the joys of my life, next to husking and making hay"; and Debby polked a few steps along the beach, much to the edification of a pair of old gentlemen, serenely taking their first

"constitutional."

"Making what?" cried Mr. Joe, polking after her.

"Hay; ah, that is the pleasantest fun in the world, and better exercise, my mother says, for soul and body, than dancing till dawn in crowded rooms, with everything in a state of unnatural excitement. If one wants real merriment, let him go into a new-mown field, where all the air is full of summer odors, where wild-flowers nod along the walls, where blackbirds make finer music than any band, and sun and wind and cheery voices do their part, while windrows rise, and great loads go rumbling through the lanes with merry brown faces atop. Yes, much as I like dancing, it is not to be compared with that; for in the one case we shut out the lovely world, and in the other we become a part of it, till by its magic labor turns to poetry, and we harvest something better than dried buttercups and grass."

As she spoke, Debby looked up, expecting to meet a glance of disapproval; but something in the simple earnestness of her manner had recalled certain boyish pleasures as innocent as they were hearty, which now contrasted very favorably with the later pastimes in which fast horses, and that lower class of animals, fast men, bore so large a part. Mr. Joe thoughtfully punched five holes in the sand, and for a moment Debby liked the expression of his face; then the old listlessness returned, and, looking up, he said, with an air of ennui that was half sad, half ludicrous, in one so young and so generously endowed with youth, health, and the good gifts of this life,

"I used to fancy that sort of thing years ago, but I'm afraid I should find it a little slow now, though you describe it in such an inviting manner that I should be tempted to try it, if a hay-cock came in my way; for, upon my life, it's deused heavy work loafing about at these watering-places all summer. Between ourselves, there's a deal of humbug about this kind of life, as you will find, when you've tried it as long as I have."

"Yes, I begin to think so already; but perhaps you can give me a few friendly words of warning from the stores of your experience, that I may be spared the pain of saying what so many look, 'Grandma, the world is hollow; my doll is stuffed with sawdust; and I should like to go into a convent, if you please.'"

Debby's eyes were dancing with merriment; but they were demurely downcast, and her voice was perfectly serious.

The milk of human kindness had been slightly curdled for Mr. Joe by sundry College-tribulations; and having been "suspended," he very naturally vibrated between the inborn jollity of his temperament and the bitterness occasioned by his wrongs. He had lost at billiards the night before, had been hurried at breakfast, had mislaid his cigar-case, and splashed his boots; consequently the darker mood prevailed that morning, and when his counsel was asked, he gave it like one who had known the heaviest trials of this "Piljin Projiss of a wale."

"There's no justice in the world, no chance for us young people to enjoy ourselves, without some penalty to pay, some drawback to worry us like these confounded 'all-rounders.' Even here, where all seems free and easy, there's no end of gossips and spies who tattle and watch till you feel as if you lived in a lantern. 'Every one for himself, and the Devil take the hindmost': that's the principle they go on, and you have to keep your wits about you in the most exhausting manner, or you are done for before you know it. I've seen a good deal of this sort of thing, and hope you'll get on better than some do, when it's known that you are the rich Mrs. Carroll's niece; though you don't need that fact to enhance your charms, upon my life, you don't."

Debby laughed behind her parasol at this burst of candor; but her independent nature prompted her to make a fair beginning, in spite of Aunt Pen's polite fictions and well-meant plans.

"Thank you for your warning, but I don't apprehend much annoyance of that kind," she said, demurely. "Do you know, I think, if young ladies were truthfully labelled when they went into society, it would be a charming fashion and save a world of trouble? Something in this style: 'Arabella Marabout, aged nineteen, fortune \$100,000, temper warranted'; 'Laura Eau-de-Cologne, aged twenty-eight, fortune \$30,000, temper slightly damaged'; 'Deborah Wilder, aged eighteen, fortune, one pair of hands, one head, indifferently well filled, one heart, (not in the market,) temper decided, and no expectations.' There, you see, that would do away with much of the humbug you lament, and we poor souls would know at once whether we were sought for our fortunes or ourselves, and that would be so comfortable!"

Mr. Leavenworth turned away, with a convicted sort of expression, as she spoke, and, making a spyglass of his hand, seemed to be watching something out at sea with absorbing interest. He had been guilty of a strong desire to discover whether Debby was an heiress, but had not expected to be so entirely satisfied on that important subject, and was dimly conscious that a keen eye had seen his anxiety, and a quick wit devised a means of setting it at rest forever. Somewhat disconcerted, he suddenly changed the conversation, and, like many another distressed creature, took to the water, saying briskly,

"By-the-by, Miss Wilder, as I've engaged to do the honors, shall I have the pleasure of bathing with you when the fun begins? As you are fond of hay-making, I suppose you intend to pay your respects to the old gentleman with the three-pronged pitchfork?"

"Yes, Aunt Pen means to put me through a course of salt water, and any instructions in the art of navigation will be gratefully received; for I never saw the ocean before, and labor under a firm conviction, that, once in, I never shall come out again till I am brought, like Mr. Mantilini, a 'damp, moist, unpleasant body.'"

As Debby spoke, Mrs. Carroll hove in sight, coming down before the wind with all sails set, and signals of distress visible long before she dropped anchor and came along-side. The devoted woman had been strolling slowly for the girl's sake, though oppressed with a mournful certainty that her most prominent feature was fast becoming a fine copper-color; yet she had sustained herself like a Spartan matron, till it suddenly occurred to her that her charge might be suffering a like

"Sea-change

Into something rich and strange."

Her fears, however, were groundless, for Debby met her without a freckle, looking all the better for her walk; and though her feet were wet with chasing the waves, and her pretty gown the worse for salt water, Aunt Pen never chid her for the destruction of her raiment, nor uttered a warning word against an unladylike exuberance of spirits, but replied to her inquiry most graciously,

"Certainly, my love, we shall bathe at eleven, and there will be just time to get Victorine and our dresses; so run on to the house, and I will join you as soon as I have finished what I am saying to Mrs. Earle," then added, in a stage-aside, as she put a fallen lock off the girl's forehead, "You are doing beautifully! He is evidently struck; make yourself interesting, and don't burn your nose, I beg of you."

Debby's bright face clouded over, and she walked on with so much stateliness that her escort wondered "what the deuse the old lady had done to her," and exerted himself to the utmost to recall her merry mood, but with indifferent success.

"Now I begin to feel more like myself, for this is getting back to first principles, though I fancy I look like the little old woman who fell asleep on the king's highway and woke up with abbreviated drapery; and you look funnier still, Aunt Pen," said Debby, as she tied on her pagoda-hat, and followed Mrs. Carroll, who walked

out of her dressing-room an animated bale of blue cloth surmounted by a gigantic sun-bonnet.

Mr. Leavenworth was in waiting, and so like a blond-headed lobster in his scarlet suit that Debby could hardly keep her countenance as they joined the groups of bathers gathering along the breezy shore.

For an hour each day the actors and actresses who played their different roles at the Hotel with such precision and success put off their masks and dared to be themselves. The ocean wrought the change, for it took old and young into its arms, and for a little while they played like children in their mother's lap. No falsehood could withstand its rough sincerity; for the waves washed paint and powder from worn faces, and left a fresh bloom there. No ailment could entirely resist its vigorous cure; for every wind brought healing on its wings, endowing many a meagre life with another year of health. No gloomy spirit could refuse to listen to its lullaby, and the spray baptized it with the subtle benediction of a cheerier mood. No rank held place there; for the democratic sea toppled down the greatest statesman in the land, and dashed over the bald pate of a millionaire with the same white-crested wave that stranded a poor parson on the beach and filled a fierce reformer's mouth with brine. No fashion ruled, but that which is as old as Eden, the beautiful fashion of simplicity. Belles dropped their affectations with their hoops, and ran about the shore blithe-hearted girls again. Young men forgot their vices and their follies, and were not ashamed of the real courage, strength, and skill they had tried to leave behind them with their boyish plays. Old men gathered shells with the little Cupids dancing on the sand, and were better for that innocent companionship; and young mothers never looked so beautiful as when they rocked their babies on the bosom of the sea.

Debby vaguely felt this charm, and, yielding to it, splashed and sang like any beach-bird, while Aunt Pen bobbed placidly up and down in a retired corner, and Mr. Leavenworth swam to and fro, expressing his firm belief in mermaids, sirens, and the rest of the aquatic sisterhood, whose warbling no manly ear can resist.

"Miss Wilder, you must learn to swim. I've taught quantities of young ladies, and shall be delighted to launch the 'Dora,' if you'll accept me as a pilot. Stop a bit; I'll get a life-preserver"; and leaving Debby to flirt with the waves, the scarlet youth departed like a flame of fire.

A dismal shriek interrupted his pupil's play, and looking up, she saw her aunt beckoning wildly with one hand, while she was groping in the water with the other. Debby ran to her, alarmed at her tragic expression, and Mrs. Carroll, drawing the girl's face into the privacy of her big bonnet, whispered one awful word, adding, distractedly,

"Dive for them! oh, dive for them! I shall be perfectly helpless, if they are lost!"

"I can't dive, Aunt Pen; but there is a man, let us ask him," said Debby, as a black head appeared to windward.

But Mrs. Carroll's "nerves" had received a shock, and gathering up her dripping garments, she fled precipitately along the shore and vanished into her dressing-room.

Debby's keen sense of the ludicrous got the better of her respect, and peal after peal of laughter broke from her lips, till a splash behind her put an end to her merriment, and, turning, she found that this friend in need was her acquaintance of the day before. The gentleman seemed pausing for permission to approach, with much the appearance of a sagacious Newfoundland, wistful and wet.

"Oh, I'm very glad it's you, Sir!" was Debby's cordial greeting, as she shook a drop off the end of her nose, and nodded, smiling.

The new comer immediately beamed upon her like an amiable Triton, saying as they turned shoreward,

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"Our first interview opened with a laugh on my side, and our second with one on yours. I accept the fact as a good omen. Your friend seemed in trouble; allow me to atone for my past misdemeanors by offering my services now. But first let me introduce myself; and as I believe in the fitness of things, let me present you with an appropriate card"; and, stooping, the young man wrote "Frank Evan" on the hard sand at Debby's feet.

The girl liked his manner, and, entering into the spirit of the thing, swept as grand a curtsy as her limited drapery would allow, saying, merrily,

"I am Debby Wilder, or Dora, as aunt prefers to call me; and instead of laughing, I ought be four feet under water, looking for something we have lost; but I can't dive, and my distress is dreadful as you see."

"What have you lost? I will look for it, and bring it back in spite of the kelpies, if it is a human possibility," replied Mr. Evan, pushing his wet locks out of his eyes, and regarding the ocean with a determined aspect.

Debby leaned toward him, whispering with solemn countenance,

"It is a set of teeth, Sir."

Mr. Evan was more a man of deeds than words, therefore he disappeared at once with a mighty splash, and after repeated divings and much laughter appeared bearing the chief ornament of Mrs. Penelope Carroll's comely countenance. Debby looked very pretty and grateful as she returned her thanks, and Mr. Evan was guilty of a secret wish that all the worthy lady's features were at the bottom of the sea, that he might have the satisfaction of restoring them to her attractive niece; but curbing this unnatural desire, he bowed, saying, gravely,

"Tell your aunt, if you please, that this little accident will remain a dead secret, so far as I am concerned, and I am very glad to have been of service at such a critical moment."

Whereupon Mr. Evan marched again into the briny deep, and Debby trotted away to her aunt, whom she found a clammy heap of blue flannel and despair. Mrs. Carroll's temper was ruffled, and though she joyfully rattled in her teeth, she said, somewhat testily, when Debby's story was done,

"Now that man will have a sort of claim on us, and we must be civil, whoever he is. Dear! dear! I wish it had been Joe Leavenworth instead. Evan I don't remember any of our first families with connections of that name, and I dislike to be under obligations to a person of that sort, for there's no knowing how far he may presume; so, pray, be careful, Dora."

"I think you are very ungrateful, Aunt Pen; and if Mr. Evan should happen to be poor, it does not become me to turn up my nose at him, for I'm nothing but a make-believe myself just now. I don't wish to go down upon my knees to him, but I do intend to be as kind to him as I should to that conceited Leavenworth boy; yes, kinder even; for poor people value such things more, as I know very well."

Mrs. Carroll instantly recovered her temper, changed the subject, and privately resolved to confine her prejudices to her own bosom, as they seemed to have an aggravating effect upon the youthful person whom she had set her heart on disposing of to the best advantage.

Debby took her swimming-lesson with much success, and would have achieved her dinner with composure, if white-aproned gentleman had not effectually taken away her appetite by whisking bills-of-fare into her hands, and awaiting her orders with a fatherly interest, which induced them to congregate mysterious dishes before her, and blandly rectify her frequent mistakes. She survived the ordeal, however, and at four P.M.

went to drive with "that Leavenworth boy" in the finest turnout – could produce. Aunt Pen then came off guard, and with a sigh of satisfaction subsided into a peaceful doze, still murmuring, even in her sleep,

"Propinquity, my love, propinquity works wonders."

"Aunt Pen, are you a modest woman?" asked the young crusader against established absurdities, as she came into the presence–chamber that evening ready for the hop.

"Bless the child, what does she mean?" cried Mrs. Carroll, with a start that twitched her back–hair out of Victorine's hands.

"Would you like to have a daughter of yours go to a party looking as I look?" continued her niece, spreading her airy dress, and standing very erect before her astonished relative.

"Why, of course I should, and be proud to own such a charming creature," regarding the slender white shape with much approbation, adding, with a smile, as she met the girl's eye,

"Ah, I see the difficulty, now; you are disturbed because there is not a bit of lace over these pretty shoulders of yours. Now don't be absurd, Dora; the dress is perfectly proper, or Madam Tiphany never would have sent it home. It is the fashion, child; and many a girl with such a figure would go twice as décolletée, and think nothing of it, I assure you."

Debby shook her head with an energy that set the pink heather–bells a–tremble in her hair, and her color deepened beautifully as she said, with reproachful eyes,

"Aunt Pen, I think there is a better fashion in every young girls' heart than any Madame Tiphany can teach. I am very grateful for all you have done for me, but I cannot go into public in such an undress as this; my mother would never allow it, and father never forgive it. Please don't ask me to, for indeed I cannot do it even for you."

Debby looked so pathetic that both mistress and maid broke into a laugh which somewhat reassured the young lady, who allowed her determined features to relax into a smile, as she said,

"Now, Aunt Pen, you want me to look pretty and be a credit to you; but how would you like to see my face the color of those geraniums all evening?"

"Why, Dora, you are out of your mind to ask such a thing, when you know it's the desire of my life to keep your color down and make you look more delicate," said her aunt, alarmed at the fearful prospect of a peony–faced protégée.

"Well, I should be anything but that, if I wore this gown in its present waistless condition; so here is a remedy which will prevent such a calamity and ease my mind."

As she spoke, Debby tied on her little blonde fichu with a gesture which left nothing more to be said.

Victorine scolded, and clasped her hands; but Mrs. Carroll, fearing to push her authority too far, made a virtue of necessity, saying, resignedly,

"Have your own way, Dora, but in return oblige me by being agreeable to such persons as I may introduce to you; and some day, when I ask a favor remember how much I hope to do for you, and grant it cheerfully."

Debby's Debut

"Indeed I will, Aunt Pen, if it is anything I can do without disobeying mother's 'notions,' as you call them. Ask me to wear an orange-colored gown, or dance with the plainest, poorest man in the room, and I'll do it; for there never was a kinder aunt than mine in all the world," cried Debby, eager to atone for her seeming wilfulness, and really grateful for her escape from what seemed to her benighted mind a very imminent peril.

Like a clover-blossom in a vase of camellias little Debby looked that night among the dashing or languid women who surrounded her; for she possessed the charm they had lost, the freshness of her youth. Innocent gayety sat smiling in her eyes, healthful roses bloomed upon her cheek, and maiden modesty crowned her like a garland. She was the creature that she seemed, and, yielding to the influence of the hour, danced to the music of her own blithe heart. Many felt the spell whose secret they had lost the power to divine, and watched the girlish figure as if it were symbol of their early aspirations dawning freshly from the dimness of their past. More than one old man thought again of some little maid whose love made his boyish days a pleasant memory to him now. More than one smiling fop felt the emptiness of his smooth speech, when the truthful eyes looked up into his own; and more than one pale woman sighed regretfully within herself, "I, too, was a happy-hearted creature once!"

"That Mr. Evan does not seem very anxious to claim our acquaintance, after all, and I think better of him on that account. Has he spoken to you to-night, Dora?" asked Mrs. Carroll, as Debby dropped down beside her after a "splendid polka."

"No, Ma'am, he only bowed. You see some people are not so presuming as other people thought they were; for we are not the most attractive beings on the planet; therefore a gentleman can be polite and then forget us without breaking any of the Ten Commandments. Don't be offended with him yet, for he may prove to be some great creature with a finer pedigree than any of 'our fist families.' Mr. Leavenworth, as you know everybody, perhaps you can relieve Aunt Pen's mind, by telling her something about the tall, brown man standing behind the lady with salmon-colored hair."

Mr. Joe, who was fanning the top of Debby's head with the best intentions in life, took a survey, and answered readily,

"Why, that's Frank Evan. I know him, and a deused good fellow he is, though he don't belong to our set, you know."

"Indeed! pray, tell us something about him, Mr. Leavenworth. We met in the cars, and he did us a favor of two. Who and what is the man?" asked Mrs. Carroll, relenting at once toward a person who was favorably spoken of by one who did belong to her "set."

"Well, let me see," began Mr. Joe, whose narrative powers were not great. "He is a book-keeper in my Uncle Josh Loring's importing concern, and a powerful smart man, they say. There's some kind of clever story about his father's leaving a load of debts, and Frank's working a deused number of years till they were paid. Good of him, wasn't it? Then, just as he was going to take things easier and enjoy life a bit, his mother died, and that rather knocked him up, you see. He fell sick, and came to grief generally, Uncle Josh said; so he was ordered off to get righted, and here he is, looking like a tombstone. I've a regard for Frank, for he took care of me through the smallpox a year ago, and I don't forget things of that sort; so, if you wish to be introduced, Mrs. Carroll, I'll trot him out with pleasure, and make a proud man of him."

Mrs. Carroll glanced at Debby, and as that young lady was regarding Mr. Joe with a friendly aspect, owing to the warmth of his words, she graciously assented, and the youth departed on his errand. Mr. Evan went though the ceremony with a calmness wonderful to behold, considering the position of one lady and the charms of the other, and soon glided into the conversation with the ease of a more accomplished courtier.

"Now I must tear myself away, for I'm engaged to that stout Miss Bandoline for this dance. She's a friend of my sister's, and I must do the civil, you know; powerful slow work it is, too, but I pity the poor soul, upon my life, I do"; and Mr. Joe assumed the air of a martyr.

Debby looked up with a wicked smile in her eyes, as she said,

"Ah, that sounds very amiable here; but in five minutes you'll be murmuring in Miss Bandoline's ear, 'I've been pining to come to you this half hour, but I was obliged to take out that Miss Wilder, you see, countrified little thing enough, but not bad-looking, and has a rich aunt; so I've done my duty to her, but deuse take me if I can stand it any longer.'"

Mr. Evan joined in Debby's merriment; but Mr. Joe was so appalled at the sudden attack that he could only stammer a remonstrance and beat a hasty retreat, wondering how on earth she came to know that his favorite style of making himself agreeable to one young lady was by decrying another.

"Dora, my love, that is very rude, and 'Deuse' is not a proper expression for a woman's lips. Pray, restrain your lively tongue, for strangers may not understand that it is nothing but the sprightliness of your disposition which sometimes runs away with you."

"It was only a quotation, and I thought you would admire anything Mr. Leavenworth said, Aunt Pen," replied Debby, demurely.

Mrs. Carroll trod on her foot, and abruptly changed the conversation, by saying, with an appearance of deep interest,

"Mr. Evan, you are doubtless connected with the Malcoms of Georgia; for they, I believe, are descended from the ancient Evans of Scotland. They are a very wealthy and aristocratic family, and I remember seeing their coat-of arms once: three bannocks and thistle."

Mr. Evan had been standing before them with a composure which impressed Mrs. Carroll with a belief in his gentle blood, for she remembered her own fussy, plebeian husband, whose fortune had never been able to purchase him the manners of a gentleman. Mr. Evan only grew a little more erect, as he replied, with an untroubled mien,

"I cannot claim relationship with the Malcoms of Georgia or the Evans of Scotland, I believe, Madam. My father was a farmer, my grandfather a blacksmith, and beyond that my ancestors may have been street-sweepers, for anything I know; but whatever they were, I fancy they were honest men, for that has always been our boast, though, like President Jackson's, our coat -of-arms is nothing but 'a pair of shirt-sleeves.'"

From Debby's eyes there shot a bright glance of admiration for the young man who could look two comely women in the face and serenely own that he was poor. Mrs. Carroll tried to appear at ease, and gliding out of personalities, expatiated on the comfort of "living in a land where fame and fortune were attainable by all who chose to earn them," and the contempt she felt for those "who had no sympathy with the humbler classes, no interest in the welfare of the race." and many more moral reflections as new and original as the Multiplication-Table or the Westminster Catechism. To all of which Mr. Evan listened with polite deference, though there was something in the keen intelligence of his eye that made Debby blush for shallow Aunt Pen, and rejoice when the good lady got out of her depth and seized upon a new subject as a drowning mariner would a hen-coop.

Debby's Debut

"Dora, Mr. Ellenborough is coming this way; you have danced with him but once, and he is a very desirable partner; so, pray, accept, if he asks you," said Mrs. Carroll, watching a far-off individual who seemed steering his zigzag course toward them.

"I never intend to dance with Mr. Ellenborough again, so please don't urge me, Aunt Pen"; and Debby knit her brows with a somewhat irate expression.

"My love, you astonish me! He is a most agreeable and accomplished young man, spent three years in Paris, moves in the first circles, and is considered an ornament to fashionable society. What can be your objection, Dora?" cried Mrs. Carroll, looking as alarmed as if her niece had suddenly announced her belief in the Koran.

"One of his accomplishments consists in drinking Champagne till he is not a 'desirable partner' for any young lady with a prejudice in favor of decency. His moving in 'circles' is just what I complain of; and if he is an ornament, I prefer my society undecorated. Aunt Pen, I cannot make the nice distinctions you would have me, and a sot in broadcloth is as odious as one in rags. Forgive me, but I cannot dance with that silver-labelled decanter again."

Debby was a genuine little piece of womanhood; and though she tried to speak lightly, her color deepened, as she remembered looks that had wounded her like insults, and her indignant eyes silenced the excuses rising to her aunt's lips. Mrs. Carroll began to rue the hour that she ever undertook the guidance of Sister Deborah's headstrong child, and for an instant heartily wished she had left her to bloom unseen in the shadow of the parsonage; but she concealed her annoyance, still hoping to overcome the girl's absurd resolve, by saying, mildly,

"As you please, dear; but if you refuse Mr. Ellenborough, you will be obliged to sit through the dance, which is your favorite, you know."

Debby's countenance fell, for she had forgotten that, and the Lancers was to her the crowning rapture of the night. She paused a moment, and Aunt Pen brightened; but Debby made her little sacrifice to principle as heroically as many a greater one had been made, and, with a wistful look down the long room, answered steadily, though her foot kept time to the first strains as she spoke,

"Then I will sit, Aunt Pen; for that is preferable to staggering about the room with a partner who has no idea of the laws of gravitation."

"Shall I have the honor of averting either calamity?" said Mr. Evan, coming to the rescue with a devotion beautiful to see; for dancing was nearly a lost art with him, and the Lancers to a novice is equal to a second Labyrinth of Crete.

"Oh, thank you!" cried Debby, tumbling fan, bouquet, and handkerchief into Mrs. Carroll's lap, with a look of relief that repaid him fourfold for the trials he was about to undergo. They went merrily away together, leaving Aunt Pen to wish that it was according to the laws of etiquette to rap officious gentlemen over the knuckles, when they introduce their fingers into private pies without permission from the chief cook. How the dance went Debby hardly knew, for the conversation fell upon books, and in the interest of her favorite theme she found even the "grand square" an impertinent interruption, while her own deficiencies became almost as great as her partner's; yet, when the music ended with a flourish, and her last curtsy was successfully achieved, she longed to begin all over again, and secretly regretted that she was engaged four deep.

"How do you like our new acquaintance, Dora?" asked Aunt Pen, following Joe Leavenworth with her eye, as the "yellow-haired laddie" whirled by with the ponderous Miss Flora. "Very much; and I'm glad we met as we did, for it makes things free and easy, and that is so agreeable in this ceremonious place," replied Debby,

looking in quite an opposite direction.

"Well, I'm delighted to hear you say so, dear, for I was afraid you had taken a dislike to him, and he is really a very charming young man, just the sort of person to make a pleasant companion for a few weeks. These little friendships are part of the summer's amusement, and do no harm; so smile away, Dora, and enjoy yourself while you may.

"Yes, Aunt, I certainly will, and all the more because I have found a sensible soul to talk to. Do you know, he is very witty and well informed though he says he never had much time for self-cultivation? But I think trouble makes people wise, and he seems to have had a good deal, though he leaves it for others to tell of. I am glad you are willing I should know him, for I shall enjoy talking about my pet heroes with him as a relief from the silly chatter I must keep up most of the time."

Mrs. Carroll was a woman of one idea; and though a slightly puzzled expression appeared in her face, she listened approvingly, and answered, with a gracious smile,

"Of course, I should not object to your knowing such a person, my love; but I'd no idea Joe Leavenworth was a literary man, or had known much trouble, except his father's death and his sister Clementina's runaway-marriage with her drawing-master."

Debby opened her brown eyes very wide, and hastily picked at the down on her fan, but had no time to correct her aunt's mistake, for the real subject of her commendations appeared at that moment, and Mrs. Carroll was immediately absorbed in the consumption of a large pink ice.

"That girl is what I call a surprise-party, now," remarked Mr. Joe confidentially to his cigar, as he pulled off his coat and stuck his feet up in the privacy of his own apartment. "She looks as mild as strawberries and cream till you come to the complimentary, then she turns on a fellow with that deused satirical look of hers, and makes him feel like a fool. I'll try the moral dodge to-morrow, and see what effect that will have; for she is mighty taking, and I must amuse myself somehow, you know."

"How many years will it take to change that fresh-hearted little girl into fashionable belle, I wonder?" thought Frank Evan, as he climbed the four flights that led to his "sky-parlor."

"What a curious world this is!" mused Debby, with her nightcap in her hand. "The right seems odd and rude, and the wrong respectable and easy, and this sort of life a merry-go-round, with no higher aim than pleasure. Well, I have made my Declaration of Independence, and Aunt Pen must be ready for a Revolution, if she taxes me too heavily."

As she leaned her hot cheek on her arm, Debby's eye fell on the quaint little cap made by the motherly hands that never were tired of working for her. She touched it tenderly, and love's simple magic swept the gathering shadows from her face, and left it clear again, as her thoughts flew home like birds into the shelter of their nest.

"Good night, mother! I'll face temptation steadily. I'll try to take life cheerily, and do nothing that shall make your dear face a reproach, when it looks into my own again."

Then Debby said her prayers like any pious child, and lay down to dream of pulling buttercups with Baby Bess, and singing in the twilight on her father's knee.

The history of Debby's first day might serve as a sample of most that followed, as week after week went by with varying pleasures and increasing interest to more than one young debutante. Mrs. Carroll did her best,

but Debby was too simple for a belle, too honest for a flirt, too independent for a fine lady; she would be nothing but her sturdy little self, open as daylight, gay as a lark, and blunt as any Puritan. Poor Aunt Pen was in despair, till she observed that the girl often "took" with the very peculiarities which she was lamenting; this somewhat consoled her, and she tried to make the best of the pretty bit of homespun which would not and could not become velvet or brocade. Seguin, Ellenborough, Co. looked with lordly scorn upon her, as a worm blind to their attractions. Miss MacFlimsy and her "set" quizzed her unmercifully behind her back, after being worsted in several passages of arms; and more than one successful mamma condoled with Aunt Pen upon the terribly defective education of her charge, till that stout matron could have found it in her heart to tweak off their caps and walk on them, like the irascible Betsey Trotwood.

But Debby had a circle of admirers who loved her with a sincerity few summer queens could boast; for they were real friends, won by gentle arts, and retained by the gracious sweetness of her nature. Moon-faced babies crowed and clapped their chubby hands when she passed by their wicker thrones; story-loving children clustered round her knee, and never were denied; pale invalids found wild-flowers on their pillows; and forlorn papas forgot the state of the money-market when she sang for them the homely airs their daughters had no time to learn. Certain plain young ladies poured their woes into her friendly ear, and were comforted; several smart Sophomores fell into a state of chronic stammer, blush, and adoration, when she took a motherly interest in their affairs; and a melancholy old Frenchman blessed her with the enthusiasm of his nation, because she put a posy in the button-hole of his rusty coat, and never failed to smile and bow as he passed by. Yet Debby was no Edgeworth heroine, preternaturally prudent, wise, and untemptable, she had a fine crop of piques, vanities, and dislikes growing up under this new style of cultivation. She loved admiration, enjoyed her purple and fine linen, hid new-born envy, disappointed hope, and wounded pride behind a smiling face, and often thought with a sigh of the humdrum duties that awaited her at home. But under the airs and graces Aunt Pen cherished with such sedulous care under the flounces and furbelows Victorine daily adjusted with groans, under the polish which she acquired with feminine ease, the girl's heart still beat steadfast and strong, and conscience kept watch and ward that no traitor should enter in to surprise the citadel which mother-love had tried to garrison so well.

In pursuance of his sage resolve, Mr. Joe tried the "moral dodge," as he elegantly expressed it, and, failing in that, followed it up with the tragic, religious, negligent, and devoted ditto; but acting was not his forte, so Debby routed him in all; and at last, when he was at his wit's end for an idea, she suggested one, and completed her victory by saying pleasantly,

"You took me behind the curtain too soon, and now the paste-diamonds and cotton-velvet don't impose upon me a bit. Just be your natural self, and we shall get on nicely, Mr. Leavenworth."

The novelty of the proposal struck his fancy, and after a few relapses it was carried into effect, and thenceforth, with Debby, he became the simple, good-humored lad Nature designed him to be, and, as a proof of it, soon fell very sincerely in love.

Frank Evan, seated in the parquet of society, surveyed the dress-circle with much the same expression that Debby had seen during Aunt Pen's oration; but he soon neglected that amusement to watch several actors in the drama going on before his eyes, while a strong desire to perform a part therein slowly took possession of his mind. Debby always had a look of welcome when he came, always treated him with the kindness of a generous woman who has had an opportunity to forgive, and always watched the serious, solitary man with a great compassion for his loss, a growing admiration for his upright life. More than once the beach-birds saw two figures pacing the sands at sunrise with the peace of early day upon their faces and the light of a kindred mood shining in their eyes. More than once the friendly ocean made a third in the pleasant conversation, and its low undertone came and went between the mellow bass and the silvery treble of the human voices with a melody that lent another charm to interviews which soon grew wondrous sweet to man and maid. Aunt Pen seldom saw the twain together, seldom spoke of Evan; and Debby held her peace, for, when she planned to

make her innocent confessions, she found that what seemed much to her was nothing to another ear and scarcely worth the telling; so, unconscious as yet whither the green path led, she went on her way, leading two lives, one rich and earnest, hoarded deep within herself, the other frivolous and gay for all the world to criticize. But those venerable spinsters, the Fates, took the matter into their own hands, and soon got the better of those short-sighted matrons, Mesdames Grundy and Carroll; for, long before they knew it, Frank and Debby had begun to read together a book greater than Dickens ever wrote, and when they had come to the fairest part of the sweet story Adam first told Eve, they looked for the name upon the title-page, and found that it was "Love."

Eight weeks came and went, eight wonderfully happy weeks to Debby and her friend; for "propinquity" had worked more wonders than poor Mrs. Carroll knew, as the only one she saw or guessed was the utter captivation of Joe Leavenworth. He had become "himself" to such an extent that a change of identity would have been a relief; for the object of his adoration showed no signs of relenting, and he began to fear, that, as Debby said, her heart was "not in the market." She was always friendly, but never made those interesting betrayals of regard which are so encouraging to youthful gentlemen "who fain would climb, yet fear to fall." She never blushed when he pressed her hand, never fainted or grew pale when he appeared with a smashed trotting-wagon and a black eye, and actually slept through a serenade that would have won any other woman's soul out of her body with its despairing quavers. Matters were getting desperate; for horses lost their charms, "flowing bowls" palled upon his lips, ruffled shirt-bosoms no longer delighted him, and hops possessed no soothing power to allay the anguish of his mind. Mr. Seguin, after unavailing ridicule and pity, took compassion on him, and from his large experience suggested a remedy, just as he was departing for a more congenial sphere.

"Now don't be an idiot, Joe, but, if you want to keep your hand in and go through a regular chapter of flirtation, just right about face, and devote yourself to some one else. Nothing like jealousy to teach womankind their own minds, and a touch of it will bring little Wilder round in a jiffy. Try it, my boy, and good luck to you!" with which Christian advice Mr. Seguin slapped his pupil on the shoulder, and disappeared, like a modern Mephistopheles, in a cloud of cigar-smoke.

"I'm glad he's gone, for in my present state of mind he's not up to my mark at all. I'll try his plan, though, and flirt with Clara West; she's engaged, so it won't damage her affections; her lover isn't here, so it won't disturb his; and, by Jove! I must do something, for I can't stand this suspense."

Debby was infinitely relieved by this new move, and infinitely amused as she guessed the motive that prompted it; but the more contented she seemed, the more violently Mr. Joe flirted with her rival, till at last weak-minded Miss Clara began to think her absent George the most undesirable of lovers, and to mourn that she ever said "Yes" to a merchant's clerk, when she might have said it to a merchant's son. Aunt Pen watched and approved this stratagem, hoped for the best results, and believed the day won when Debby grew pale and silent, and followed with her eyes the young couple who were playing battledoor and shuttlecock with each other's hearts, as if she took some interest in the game. But Aunt Pen clashed her cymbals too soon; for Debby's trouble had a better source than jealousy, and in the silence of the sleepless nights that stole her bloom she was taking counsel of her own full heart, and resolving to serve another woman as she would herself be served in a like peril, though etiquette was outraged and the customs of polite society turned upside down.

"Look, Aunt Pen! what lovely shells and moss I've got! Such a splendid scramble over the rocks as I've had with Mrs. Duncan's boys! It seemed so like home to run and sing with a troop of topsy-turvy children that it did me good; and I wish you had all been there to see," cried Debby, running into the drawing room, one day, where Mrs. Carroll and a circle of ladies sat enjoying a dish of highly flavored scandal, as they exercised their eyesight over fancy-work.

Debby's Debut

"My dear Dora, spare my nerves; and if you have any regard for the proprieties of life, don't go romping in the sun with a parcel of noisy boys. If you could see what an object you are, I think you would try to imitate Miss Clara, who is always a model of elegant repose."

Miss West primmed up her lips, and settled a fold in her ninth flounce, as Mrs. Carroll spoke, while the whole group fixed their eyes with dignified disapproval on the invader of their refined society. Debby had come like a fresh wind into a sultry room; but no one welcomed the healthful visitant, no one saw a pleasant picture in the bright-faced girl with wind-tossed hair and rustic hat heaped with moss and many-tinted shells; they only saw that her gown was wet, her gloves forgotten, and her scarf trailing at her waist in a manner no well-bred lady could approve. The sunshine faded out of Debby's face, and there was a touch of bitterness in her tone, as she glanced at the circle of fashion-plates, saying with an earnestness which caused Miss West to open her pale eyes to their widest extent,

"Aunt Pen, don't freeze me yet, don't take away my faith in simple things, but let me be a child a little longer, let me play and sing and keep my spirit blithe among the dandelions and the robins while I can; for trouble comes soon enough, and all my life will be the richer and the better for a happy youth."

Mrs. Carroll had nothing at hand to offer in reply to this appeal, and four ladies dropped their work to stare; but Frank Evan looked in from the piazza, saying, as he beckoned like a boy,

"I'll play with you, Miss Dora; come and make sand pies upon the shore. Please let her, Mrs. Carroll; we'll be very good, and not wet our pinafores or feet."

Without waiting for permission, Debby poured her treasures in the lap of a certain lame Freddy, and went away to a kind of play she had never known before. Quiet as a chidden child, she walked beside her companion, who looked down at the little figure, longing to take it on his knee and call the sunshine back again. That he dared not do; but accident, the lover's friend, performed the work, and did him a good turn beside. The old Frenchman was slowly approaching, when a frolicsome wind whisked off his hat and sent it skimming along the beach. In spite of her late lecture, away went Debby, and caught the truant chapeau just as a wave was hurrying up to claim it. This restored her cheerfulness, and when she returned, she was herself again.

"A thousand thanks; but does Mademoiselle remember the forfeit I might demand to add to the favor she has already done me?" asked the gallant old gentleman, as Debby took the hat off her own head, and presented it with a martial salute.

"Ah, I had forgotten that; but you may claim it, Sir, indeed, you may; I only wish I could do something more to give you pleasure"; and Debby looked up into the withered face which had grown familiar to her, with kind eyes, full of pity and respect.

Her manner touched the old man very much; he bent his gray head before her, saying, gratefully,

"My child, I am not good enough to salute these blooming cheeks; but I shall pray the Virgin to reward you for the compassion you bestow on the poor exile, and I shall keep your memory very green through all my life."

He kissed her hand, as if it were a queen's, and went on his way, thinking of the little daughter whose death left him childless in a foreign land.

Debby softly began to sing, "Oh, come unto the yellow sands!" but stopped in the middle of a line, to say,

"Shall I tell you why I did what Aunt Pen would call a very unladylike and improper thing, Mr. Evan?"

"If you will be so kind"; and her companion looked delighted at the confidence about to be reposed in him.

"Somewhere across this great wide sea I hope I have a brother," Debby said, with softened voice and a wistful look into the dim horizon. "Five years ago he left us, and we have never heard from him since, except to know that he landed safely in Australia. People tell us he is dead; but I believe he will yet come home; and so I love to help and pity any man who needs it, rich or poor, young or old, hoping that as I do by them some tender-hearted woman far away will do by Brother Will."

As Debby spoke, across Frank Evan's face there passed the look that seldom comes but once to any young man's countenance; for suddenly the moment dawned when love asserted its supremacy, and putting pride, doubt, and fear underneath its feet, ruled the strong heart royally and bent it to its will. Debby's thoughts had floated across the sea; but they came swiftly back when her companion spoke again, steadily and slow, but with a subtile change in tone and manner which arrested them at once.

"Miss Dora, if you should meet a man who had known a laborious youth, a solitary manhood, who had no sweet domestic ties to make home beautiful and keep his nature warm, who longed most ardently to be so blessed, and made it the aim of his life to grow more worthy the good gift, should it ever come, if you should learn that you possessed the power to make this fellow-creature's happiness, could you find it in your gentle heart to take compassion on him for the love of 'Brother Will'?"

Debby was silent, wondering why heart and nerves and brain were stirred by such a sudden thrill, why she dared not look up, and why, when she desired so much to speak, she could only answer, in a voice that sounded strange to her own ears,

"I cannot tell."

Still, steadily and slow, with strong emotion deepening and softening his voice, the lover at her side went on,

"Will you ask yourself this question in some quiet hour? For such a man has lived in the sunshine of your presence for eight happy weeks, and now, when his holiday is done, he finds that the old solitude will be more sorrowful than ever, unless he can discover whether his summer dream will change into a beautiful reality. Miss Dora, I have very little to offer you; a faithful heart to cherish you, a strong arm to work for you, and honest name to give into your keeping, these are all; but if they have any worth in your eyes, they are most truly yours forever."

Debby was steadying her voice to reply, when a troop of bathers came shouting down the bank, and she took flight into her dressing-room, there to sit staring at the wall, till the advent of Aunt Pen forced her to resume the business of the hour by assuming her aquatic attire and stealing shyly down into the surf.

Frank Evan, still pacing in the footprints they had lately made, watched the lithe figure tripping to and fro, and, as he looked, murmured to himself the last line of a ballad Debby sometimes sang,

"Dance light! for my heart it lies under your feet, love!"

Presently a great wave swept Debby up, and stranded her very near him, much to her confusion and his satisfaction. Shaking the spray out her eyes, she was hurrying away, when Frank said,

"You will trip, Miss Dora; let me tie these strings for you"; and, suiting the action to the word, he knelt down and began to fasten the cords of her bathing shoe.

Debby stood looking down at the tall head bent before her, with a curious sense of wonder that a look from her could make a strong man flush and pale, as he had done and she was trying to concoct some friendly speech, when Frank, still fumbling at the knots, said very earnestly and low,

"Forgive me, if I am selfish in pressing for an answer; but I must go tomorrow, and a single word will change my whole future for the better or the worse. Won't you speak it, Dora?"

If they had been alone, Debby would have put her arms about his neck, and said it with all her heart; but she had a presentiment that she should cry, if her love found vent; and here forty pairs of eyes were on them, and salt water seemed superfluous. Besides, Debby had not breathed the air of coquetry so long without a touch of the infection; and the love of power, that lies dormant in the meekest woman's breast, suddenly awoke and tempted her.

"If you catch me before I reach that rock, perhaps I will say 'Yes,'" was her unexpected answer; and before her lover caught her meaning, she was floating leisurely away.

Frank was not in bathing—costume, and Debby never dreamed that he would take her at her word; but she did not know the man she had to deal with; for, taking no second thought, he flung hat and coat away, and dashed into the sea. This gave a serious aspect to Debby's foolish jest. A feeling of dismay seized her, when she saw a resolute face dividing the waves behind her, and thought of the rash challenge she had given; but she had a spirit of her own, and had profited well by Mr. Joe's instructions; so she drew a long breath, and swam as if for life, instead of love. Evan was incumbered by his clothing, and Debby had much the start of him; but, like a second Leander, he hoped to win his Hero, and, lending every muscle to the work, gained rapidly upon the little hat which was his beacon through the foam. Debby heard the deep breathing drawing nearer and nearer, as her pursuer's strong arms cleft the water and sent it rippling past her lips. Something like terror took possession of her for the strength seemed going out of her limbs, and the rock appeared to recede before her; but the unconquerable blood of the Pilgrims was in her veins and "Nil desperandum" her motto; so, setting her teeth, she muttered, defiantly,

"I'll not be beaten, if I go to the bottom!"

A great splashing arose, and when Evan recovered the use of his eyes, the pagoda—hat had taken a sudden turn, and seemed making for the farthest point of the goal. "I am sure of her now," thought Frank; and, like a gallant sea—god, he bore down upon his prize, clutching it with a shout of triumph. But the hat was empty, and like a mocking echo came Debby's laugh, as she climbed, exhausted, to a cranny in the rock.

"A very neat thing, by Jove! Deuse take me if you a'n't 'an honor to your teacher, and terror to the foe,' Miss Wilder," cried Mr. Joe, as he came up from a solitary cruise and dropped anchor at her side. "Here, bring along the hat, Evan; I'm going to crown the victor with appropriate what—d'—ye—call—'ems," he continued, pulling a handful of sea—weed that looked like well—boiled greens.

Frank came up, smiling; but his lips were white, and in his eye a look Debby could not meet; so, being full of remorse, she naturally assumed an air of gayety, and began to sing the merriest air she knew, merely because she longed to throw herself upon the stones and cry violently.

"It was 'most as exciting as a regatta, and you pulled well, Evan; but you had too much ballast aboard, and Miss Wilder ran up false colors just in time to save her ship. What was the wager?" asked the lively Joseph complacently surveying his marine millinery, which would have scandalized a fashionable mermaid.

"Only a trifle," answered Debby, knotting up her braids with a revengeful jerk.

"It's taken the wind out of your sails, I fancy, Evan, for you look immensely Byronic with the starch minus in you collar and your hair in a poetic toss. Come, I'll try a race with you; and Miss Wilder will dance all the evening with the winner. Bless the man, what's he doing down there? Burying sunfish, hey?"

Frank had been sitting below them on a narrow strip of sand, absently piling up a little mound that bore some likeness to a grave. As his companion spoke, he looked at it, and a sudden flush of feeling swept across his face, as he replied,

"No, only a dead hope."

"Deuse take it, yes, a good many of that sort of craft founder in these waters as I know to my sorrow"; and, sighing tragically, Mr. Joe turned to help Debby from her perch, but she had glided silently into the sea and was gone.

For the next four hours the poor girl suffered the sharpest pain she had ever known; for now she clearly saw the strait her folly had betrayed her into. Frank Evan was a proud man, and would not ask her love again, believing she had tacitly refused it; and how could she tell him that she had trifled with the heart she wholly loved and longed to make her own? She could not confide in Aunt Pen, for that worldly lady would have no sympathy to bestow. She longed for her mother; but there was no time to write, for Frank was going on the morrow, might even then be gone; and as this fear came over her, she covered up her face and wished that she were dead. Poor Debby? her last mistake was sadder than her first, and she was reaping a bitter harvest from her summer's sowing. She sat and thought till her cheeks burned and her temples throbbed; but she dared not ease her pain with tears. The gong sounded like a Judgment-Day trump of doom, and she trembled at the idea of confronting many eyes with such a telltale face; but she could not stay behind, for Aunt Pen must know the cause. She tried to play her hard part well; but wherever she looked, some fresh anxiety appeared, as if every fault and folly of those months had blossomed suddenly within the hour. She saw Frank Evan more sombre and more solitary than when she met him first, and cried regretfully within herself, "How could I so forget the truth I owed him?" She saw Clara West watching with eager eyes for the coming of young Leavenworth, and sighed, "This is the fruit of my wicked vanity!" She saw Aunt Pen regarding her with an anxious face, and longed to say, "Forgive me, for I have not been sincere!" At last, as her trouble grew, she resolved to go away and have a quiet "think," a remedy which had served her in many a lesser perplexity; so, stealing out, she went to a grove of cedars usually deserted at that hour. But in ten minutes Joe Leavenworth appeared at the door of the summer-house, and, looking in, said, with a well-acted start of pleasure and surprise,

"Beg pardon, I thought there was no one here. My dear Miss Wilder, you look contemplative; but I fancy it wouldn't do to ask the subject of your meditations, would it?"

He paused with such an evident intention of remaining that Debby resolved to make use of the moment, and ease her conscience of one care that burdened it; therefore she answered his questions with her usual directness,

"My meditations were partly about you."

Mr. Joe was guilty of the weakness of blushing violently and looking immensely gratified; but his rapture was of short duration, for Debby went on very earnestly,

"I believe I am going to do what you may consider a very impertinent thing; but I would rather be unmannerly than unjust to others or untrue to my own sense of right. Mr. Leavenworth, if you were an older

man, I should not dare to say this to you; but I have brothers of my own, and, remembering how many unkind things they do for want of thought, I venture to remind you that a woman's heart is a perilous plaything, and too tender to be used for a selfish purpose or an hour's pleasure. I know this kind of amusement is not considered wrong; but it is wrong, and I cannot shut my eyes to the fact, or sit silent while another woman is allowed to deceive herself and wound the heart that trusts her. Oh if you love your own sisters, be generous, be just, and do not destroy that poor girl's happiness, but go away before your sport becomes a bitter pain to her!"

Joe Leavenworth had stood staring at Debby with a troubled countenance, feeling as if all the misdemeanors of his life were about to be paraded before him; but, as he listened to her plea, the womanly spirit that prompted it appealed more loudly than her words, and in his really generous heart he felt regret for what had never seemed a fault before. Shallow as he was, nature was stronger than education, and he admired and accepted what many a wiser, worldlier man would have resented with anger or contempt. He loved Debby with all his little might; he meant to tell her so, and graciously present his fortune and himself for her acceptance; but now, when the moment came, the well-turned speech he had prepared vanished from his memory, and with the better eloquence of feeling he blundered out his passion like a very boy.

"Miss Dora, I never meant to make trouble between Clara and her lover ;upon my soul I didn't, and with Seguin had not put the notion into my head, since it has given you pain. I only tried to pique you into showing some regret when I neglected you; but you didn't and then I got desperate and didn't care what became of any one. Oh, Dora, if you knew how much I loved you, I am sure you'd forgive it, and let me prove my repentance by giving up everything that you dislike. I mean what I say; upon my life I do; and I'll keep my word, if you will only let me hope."

If Debby had wanted a proof of her love for Frank Evan, she might have found it in the fact that she had words enough at her command now, and no difficulty in being sisterly pitiful toward her second suitor.

"Please get up," she said; for Mr. Joe, feeling very humble and very earnest, had gone down upon his knees, and sat there entirely regardless of his personal appearance.

He obeyed; and Debby stood looking up at him with her kindest aspect, as she said, more tenderly than she had ever spoken to him before,

"Thank you for the affection you offer me, but I cannot accept it, for I have nothing to give you in return but the friendliest regard, the most sincere good-will. I know you will forgive me, and do for your own sake the good things you would have done for mine, that I may add to my esteem a real respect for one who has been very kind to me."

"I'll try, indeed, I will, Miss Dora, though it will be powerful hard without yourself for a help and a reward."

Poor Joe choked a little, but called up an unexpected manliness, and added, stoutly,

"Don't think I shall be offended at your speaking so, or saying 'No' to me, not a bit; it's all right, and I'm much obliged to you. I might have known you couldn't care for such a fellow as I am, and don't blame you, for nobody in the world is good enough for you. I'll go away at once, I'll try to keep my promise, and I hope you'll be very happy all your life."

He shook Debby's hands heartily, and hurried down the steps, but at the bottom paused and looked back. Debby stood upon the threshold with sunshine dancing on her winsome face, and kind words trembling on her lips; for the moment it seemed impossible to part, and, with an impetuous gesture, he cried to her,

"Oh, Dora, let me stay and try to win you! for everything is possible to love, and I never knew how dear you were to me till now!"

There were sudden tears in the young man's eyes, the flush of a genuine emotion on his cheek the tremor of an ardent longing in his voice, and, for the first time, a very true affection strengthened his whole countenance. Debby's heart was full of penitence; she had given so much pain to more than one that she longed to atone for it, longed to do some very friendly thing, and soothe some trouble such as she herself had known. She looked into the eager face uplifted to her own and thought of Will, then stooped and touched her lover's forehead with the lips that softly whispered, "No."

If she had cared for him, she never would have done it; poor Joe knew that, and murmuring an incoherent "Thank you!" he rushed away, feeling very much as he remembered to have felt when his baby sister died and he wept his grief away upon his mother's neck. He began his preparations for departure at once, in a burst of virtuous energy quite refreshing to behold, thinking within himself, as he flung his cigar-case into the grate, kicked a billiard-ball into a corner, and suppressed his favorite allusion to the Devil,

"This is a new sort of thing to me, but I can bear it, and upon my life I think I feel the better for it already."

And so he did; for though he was no Augustine to turn in an hour from worldly hopes and climb to sainthood through long years of inward strife, yet in aftertimes no one knew how many false steps had been saved, how many small sins repented of, through the power of the memory that far away a generous woman waited to respect him, and in his secret soul he owned that one of the best moments of his life was that in which little Debby Wilder whispered "No," and kissed him.

As he passed from sight, the girl leaned her head upon her hand, thinking sorrowfully to herself,

"What right had I to censure him, when my own actions are so far from true? I have done a wicked thing, and as an honest girl I should undo it, if I can. I have broken through the rules of a false propriety for Clara's sake; can I not do as much for Frank's? I will. I'll find him, if I search the house, and tell him all, though I never dare to look him in the face again, and Aunt Pen sends me home to-morrow."

Full of zeal and courage, Debby caught up her hat and ran down the steps, but, as she saw Frank Evan coming up the path, a sudden panic fell upon her, and she could only stand mutely waiting his approach.

It is asserted that Love is blind; and on the strength of that popular delusion novel heroes and heroines go blundering through three volumes of despair with the plain truth directly under their absurd noses: but in real life this theory is not supported; for to a living man the countenance of a loving woman is more eloquent than any language, more trustworthy than a world of proverbs, more beautiful than the sweetest love-lay ever sung.

Frank looked at Debby, and "all her heart stood up in her eyes," as she stretched her hands to him, though her lips only whispered very low,

"Forgive me, and let me say the 'Yes' I should have said so long ago."

Had she required any assurance of her lover's truth, or any reward for her own, she would have found it in the change that dawned so swiftly in his face, smoothing the lines upon his forehead, lighting the gloom of his eye, stirring his firm lips with a sudden tremor and making his touch as soft as it was strong. For a moment both stood very still, while Debby's tears streamed down like summer rain; then Frank drew her into the green shadow of the grove, and its peace soothed her like a mother's voice, till she looked up smiling with a shy delight her glance had never known before. The slant sunbeams dropped a benediction on their heads, the

robins peeped, and the cedars whispered, but no rumor of what further passed ever went beyond the precincts of the wood; for such hours are sacred, and Nature guards the first blossoms of a human love as tenderly as she nurses May—flowers underneath the leaves.

Mrs. Carroll had retired to her bed with a nervous headache, leaving Debby to the watch and ward of friendly Mrs. Earle, who performed her office finely by letting her charge entirely alone. In her dreams Aunt Pen was just imbibing a copious draught of Champagne at the wedding—breakfast of her niece, "Mrs. Joseph Leavenworth," when she was roused by the bride elect, who passed through the room with a lamp and a shawl in her hand.

"What time is it, and where are you going, dear?" she asked, dozily wondering if the carriage for the wedding—tour was at the door so soon.

"It's only nine, and I am going for a sail, Aunt Pen."

As Debby spoke, the light flashed full into her face, and a sudden thought into Mrs. Carroll's mind. She rose up from her pillow, looking as stately in her nightcap as Maria Theresa is said to have done in like unassuming head—gear.

"Something has happened, Dora! What have you done? What have you said? I insist upon knowing immediately," she demanded, with somewhat startling brevity.

"I have said 'No' to Mr. Leavenworth and 'Yes' to Mr. Evan; and I should like to go home to—morrow, if you please," was the equally concise reply.

Mrs. Carroll fell flat in her bed, and lay there stiff and rigid as Morlena Kenwigs. Debby gently drew the curtains, and stole away, leaving Aunt Pen's wrath to effervesce before morning.

The moon was hanging luminous and large on the horizon's edge, sending shafts of light before her till the melancholy ocean seemed to smile, and along that shining pathway happy Debby and her lover floated into that new world where all things seem divine.