

CHAPTER XIV NIPPED IN THE BUD

ON the evening of Fan's visit, Polly sat down before her fire with a resolute and thoughtful aspect. She pulled her hair down, turned her skirt back, put her feet on the fender, and took Puttel into her lap, all of which arrangements signified that something very important had got to be thought over and settled. Polly did not soliloquize aloud, as heroines on the stage and in books have a way of doing, but the conversation she held with herself was very much like this: "I 'm afraid there is something in it. I 've tried to think it 's nothing but vanity or imagination, yet I can't help seeing a difference, and feeling as if I ought not to pretend that I don't. I know it 's considered proper for girls to shut their eyes and let things come to a crisis no matter how much mischief is done. But I don't think it 's doing as we 'd be done by, and it seems a great deal more honest to show a man that you don't love him before he has entirely lost his heart. The girls laughed at me when I said so, and they declared that it would be a very improper thing to do, but I 've observed that they don't hesitate to snub 'ineligible parties,' as they call poor, very young, or unpopular men. It 's all right then, but when a nice person comes it 's part of the fun to let him go on to the very end, whether the girls care for him or not. The more proposals, the more credit.

Fan says Trix always asks when she comes home after the summer excursions, 'How many birds have you bagged?' as if men were partridges. What wicked creatures we are! some of us at least. I wonder why such a love of conquest was put into us? Mother says a great deal of it is owing to bad education nowadays, but some girls seem born for the express purpose of making trouble and would manage to do it if they lived in a howling wilderness. I 'm afraid I 've got a spice of it, and if I had the chance, should be as bad as any of them. I 've tried it and liked it, and maybe this is the consequence of that night's fun."

Here Polly leaned back and looked up at the little mirror over the chimney-piece, which was hung so that it reflected the faces of those about the fire. In it Polly saw a pair of telltale eyes looking out from a tangle of bright brown hair, cheeks that flushed and dimpled suddenly as the fresh mouth smiled with an expression of conscious power, half proud, half ashamed, and as pretty to see as the coquettish gesture with which she smoothed back her curls and flourished a white hand. For a minute she regarded the pleasant picture while visions of girlish romances and triumphs danced through her head, then she shook her hair all over her face and pushed her chair out of range of the mirror, saying, with a droll mixture of self-reproach and self-approval in her tone; "Oh, Puttel, Puttel, what a fool I am!"

Puss appeared to endorse the sentiment by a loud purr and a graceful wave of her tail, and Polly returned to the subject from which these little vanities had beguiled her.

"Just suppose it is true, that he does ask me, and I say yes! What a stir it would make, and what fun it would be to see the faces of the girls when it came out! They all think a great deal of him because he is so hard to please, and almost any of them would feel immensely flattered if he liked them, whether they chose to marry him or not. Trix has tried for years to fascinate him, and he can't bear her, and I 'm so glad! What a spiteful thing I am. Well, I can't help it, she does aggravate me so!" And Polly gave the cat such a tweak of the ear that Puttel bounced out of her lap in high dudgeon.

"It don't do to think of her, and I won't!" said Polly to herself, setting her lips with a grim look that was not at all becoming. "What an easy life I should have plenty of money, quantities of friends, all sorts of pleasures, and no work, no poverty, no cold shoulders or patched boots. I could do so much for all at home how I should enjoy that!" And Polly let her thoughts revel in the luxurious future her fancy painted. It was a very bright picture, but something seemed amiss with it, for presently she sighed and shook her head, thinking sorrowfully, "Ah, but I don't love him, and I 'm afraid I never can as I ought! He 's very good, and generous, and wise, and would be kind, I know, but somehow I can't imagine spending my life with him; I 'm so afraid I should get tired of him, and then what should I do? Polly Sydney don't sound well, and Mrs. Arthur Sydney don't seem to fit me a bit. Wonder how it would seem to call him 'Arthur'?" And Polly said it under her breath, with a look over her shoulder to be sure no one heard it. "It 's a pretty name, but rather too fine, and I should n't dare to say 'Syd,' as his sister does. I like short, plain, home-like names, such as Will, Ned, or Tom. No, no, I can never care for him, and it 's no use to try!" The exclamation broke from Polly as if a sudden trouble had seized her, and laying her head down on her knees, she sat motionless for many minutes.

When she looked up, her face wore an expression which no one had ever seen on it before; a look of mingled pain and patience, as if some loss had come to her, and left the bitterness of regret behind.

"I won't think of myself, or try to mend one mistake by making another," she said with a heavy sigh. "I 'll do what I can for Fan, and not stand between

her and a chance of happiness. Let me see, how can I begin? I won't walk with him any more; I 'll dodge and go roundabout ways, so that we can't meet. I never had much faith in the remarkable coincidence of his always happening home to dinner just as I go to give the Roths their lesson. The fact is, I like to meet him, I am glad to be seen with him, and put on airs, I dare say, like a vain goose as I am. Well, I won't do it any more, and that will spare Fan one affliction. Poor dear, how I must have worried her all this time, and never guessed it. She has n't been quite as kind as ever; but when she got sharp, I fancied it was dyspepsia. Oh, me! I wish the other trouble could be cured as easily as this."

Here puss showed an amiable desire to forgive and forget, and Polly took her up, saying aloud: "Puttel, when missis abuses you, play it 's dyspepsia, and don't bear malice, because it 's a very trying disease, my dear."

Then, going back to her thoughts, she rambled on again; "If he does n't take that hint, I will give him a stronger one, for I will not have matters come to a crisis, though I can't deny that my wicked vanity strongly tempts me to try and 'bag a bird' just for the excitement and credit of the thing. Polly, I 'm ashamed of you! What would your blessed mother say to hear such expressions from you? I 'd write and tell her all the worry, only it would n't do any good, and would only trouble her. I 've no right to tell Fan's secrets, and I 'm ashamed to tell mine. No, I 'll leave mother in peace, and fight it out alone. I do think Fan would suit him excellently by and by. He has known her all her life, and has a good influence over her. Love would do so much toward making her what she might be; it 's a shame to have the chance lost just because he happens to see me. I should think she 'd hate me; but I 'll show her that she need n't, and do all I can to help her; for she has been so good to me nothing shall ever make me forget that. It is a delicate and dangerous task, but I guess I can manage it; at any rate I 'll try, and have nothing to reproach myself with if things do go 'contrary.' "

What Polly thought of, as she lay back in her chair, with her eyes shut, and a hopeless look on her face, is none of our business, though we might feel a wish to know what caused a tear to gather slowly from time to time under her lashes, and roll down on Puttel's Quaker-colored coat. Was it regret for the conquest she relinquished, was it sympathy for her friend, or was it an uncontrollable overflow of feeling as she read some sad or tender passage of the little romance which she kept hidden away in her own heart?

On Monday, Polly began the "delicate and dangerous task." Instead of going to her pupils by way of the park and the pleasant streets adjoining, she took a roundabout route through back streets, and thus escaped Mr. Sydney, who, as usual, came home to dinner very early that day and looked disappointed because he nowhere saw the bright face in the modest bonnet. Polly kept this up for a week, and by carefully avoiding the Shaws' house during calling hours, she saw nothing of Mr. Sydney, who, of course, did n't visit her at Miss Mills'. Minnie happened to be poorly that week and took no lesson, so Uncle Syd was deprived of his last hope, and looked as if his allowance of sunshine had been suddenly cut off.

Now, as Polly was by no means a perfect creature, I am free to confess that the old temptation assailed her more than once that week, for, when the first excitement of the dodging reform had subsided, she missed the pleasant little interviews that used to put a certain flavor of romance into her dull, hard-working days. She liked Mr. Sydney very much, for he had always been kind and friendly since the early times when he had treated the little girl with a courtesy which the young woman gratefully remembered. I don't think it was his wealth, accomplishments, or position that most attracted Polly, though these doubtless possessed a greater influence than she suspected. It was that indescribable something which women are quick to see and feel in men who have been blessed with wise and good mothers. This had an especial charm to Polly, for she soon found that this side of his character was not shown to every one. With most girls, he was very like the other young men of his set, except perhaps in a certain grace of manner which was as natural to him as his respect for all womankind. But with Fanny and Polly he showed the domestic traits and virtues which are more engaging to womanly women than any amount of cool intellect or worldly wisdom.

Polly had seen a good deal of him during her visits at the Shaws', where he was intimate, owing to the friendship between Madam and his mother; but she had never thought of him as a possible lover for either Fanny or herself because he was six or eight years older than they, and still sometimes assumed the part of a venerable mentor, as in the early days. Lately this had changed, especially towards Polly, and it flattered her more than she would confess even to herself. She knew he admired her one talent, respected her independence, and enjoyed her society; but when something warmer and more flattering than admiration, respect, or pleasure crept into his manner, she could not help seeing that one of the good gifts of this life was daily coming more and more within her reach, and began to ask herself

if she could honestly receive the gift, and reward the giver.

At first she tried to think she could, but unfortunately hearts are so "contrary" that they won't be obedient to reason, will, or even gratitude. Polly felt a very cordial friendship for Mr. Sydney, but not one particle of the love which is the only coin in which love can be truly paid. Then she took a fancy into her head that she ought to accept this piece of good fortune for the sake of the family, and forget herself. But this false idea of self-sacrifice did not satisfy, for she was not a fashionable girl trained to believe that her first duty was to make "a good match" and never mind the consequences, though they rendered her miserable for life. Polly's creed was very simple: "If I don't love him, I ought not to marry him, especially when I do love somebody else, though everything is against me." If she had read as many French novels as some young ladies, she might have considered it interesting to marry under the circumstances and suffer a secret anguish to make her a romantic victim. But Polly's education had been neglected, and after a good deal of natural indecision she did what most women do in such cases, thought she would "wait and see."

The discovery of Fanny's secret seemed to show her something to do, for if the "wait and see" decision was making her friend unhappy, it must be changed as soon as possible. This finished Polly's indecision, and after that night she never allowed herself to dwell upon the pleasant temptation which came in a guise particularly attractive to a young girl with a spice of the old Eve in her composition. So day after day she trudged through the dull back streets, longing for the sunny park, the face that always brightened when it saw her coming, and most of all the chance of meeting well, it was n't Trix.

When Saturday came, Polly started as usual for a visit to Becky and Bess, but could n't resist stopping at the Shaws' to leave a little parcel for Fan, though it was calling time. As she stepped in, meaning to run up for a word if Fanny should chance to be alone, two hats on the hall table arrested her.

"Who is here, Katy?"

"Only Mr. Sydney and Master Tom. Won't you stop a bit, Miss Polly?"

"Not this morning, I'm rather in a hurry." And away went Polly as if a dozen eager pupils were clamoring for her presence. But as the door shut behind

her she felt so left out in the cold, that her eyes filled, and when Nep, Tom's great Newfoundland, came blundering after her, she stopped and hugged his shaggy head, saying softly, as she looked into the brown, benevolent eyes, full of almost human sympathy: "Now, go back, old dear, you must n't follow me. Oh, Nep, it 's so hard to put love away when you want it very much and it is n't right to take it." A foolish little speech to make to a dog, but you see Polly was only a tender-hearted girl, trying to do her duty.

"Since he is safe with Fanny, I may venture to walk where I like. It's such a lovely day, all the babies will be out, and it always does me good to see them," thought Polly, turning into the wide, sunny street, where West End- dom promenaded at that hour.

The babies were out in full force, looking as gay and delicate and sweet as the snow-drops, hyacinths, and daffodils on the banks whence the snow had melted. But somehow the babies did n't do Polly the good she expected, though they smiled at her from their carriages, and kissed their chubby hands as she passed them, for Polly had the sort of face that babies love. One tiny creature in blue plush was casting despairing glances after a very small lord of creation who was walking away with a toddling belle in white, while a second young gentleman in gorgeous purple gaiters was endeavoring to console the deserted damsel.

"Take hold of Master Charley's hand, Miss Mamie, and walk pretty, like Willy and Flossy," said the maid.

"No, no, I want to do wid Willy, and he won't let me. Do 'way, Tarley, I don't lite you," cried little Blue-bonnet, casting down her ermine muff and sobbing in a microscopic handkerchief, the thread-lace edging on which could n't mitigate her woe, as it might have done that of an older sufferer.

"Willy likes Flossy best, so stop crying and come right along, you naughty child."

As poor little Dido was jerked away by the unsympathetic maid, and Purple-gaiters essayed in vain to plead his cause, Polly said to herself, with a smile and a sigh; "How early the old story begins!"

It seemed as if the spring weather had brought out all manner of tender things beside fresh grass and the first dandelions, for as she went down the street Polly kept seeing different phases of the sweet old story which she was trying to forget.

At a street corner, a black-eyed school-boy was parting from a rosy-faced school-girl, whose music roll he was reluctantly surrendering.

"Don't you forget, now," said the boy, looking bashfully into the bright eyes that danced with pleasure as the girl blushed and smiled, and answered reproachfully; "Why, of course I shan't!"

"That little romance runs smoothly so far; I hope it may to the end," said Polly heartily as she watched the lad tramp away whistling as blithely as if his pleasurable emotions must find a vent, or endanger the buttons on the round jacket; while the girl pranced on her own doorstep, as if practising for the joyful dance which she had promised not to forget.

A little farther on Polly passed a newly engaged couple whom she knew, walking arm in arm for the first time, both wearing that proud yet conscious look which is so delightful to behold upon the countenances of these temporarily glorified beings.

"How happy they seem; oh, dear!" said Polly, and trudged on, wondering if her turn would ever come and fearing that it was impossible.

A glimpse of a motherly-looking lady entering a door, received by a flock of pretty children, who cast themselves upon mamma and her parcels with cries of rapture, did Polly good; and when, a minute after she passed a gray old couple walking placidly together in the sunshine, she felt better still, and was glad to see such a happy ending to the romance she had read all down the street.

As if the mischievous little god wished to take Polly at a disadvantage, or perhaps to give her another chance, just at that instant Mr. Sydney appeared at her side. How he got there was never very clear to Polly, but there he was, flushed, and a little out of breath, but looking so glad to see her that she had n't the heart to be stiff and cool, as she had fully intended

to be when they met.

"Very warm, is n't it?" he said when he had shaken hands and fallen into step, just in the old way.

"You seem to find it so." And Polly laughed, with a sudden sparkle in her eyes. She really could n't help it, it was so pleasant to see him again, just when she was feeling so lonely.

"Have you given up teaching the Roths?" asked Sydney, changing the subject.

"No."

"Do you go as usual?"

"Yes."

"Well, it 's a mystery to me how you get there."

"As much as it is to me how you got here so suddenly."

"I saw you from the Shaws' window and took the liberty of running after you by the back street," he said, laughing.

"That is the way I get to the Roths," answered Polly. She did not mean to tell, but his frankness was so agreeable she forgot herself.

"It 's not nearly so pleasant or so short for you as the park."

"I know it, but people sometimes get tired of old ways and like to try new ones."

Polly did n't say that quite naturally, and Sydney gave her a quick look, as he asked; "Do you get tired of old friends, too, Miss

Polly?"

"Not often; but " And there she stuck, for the fear of being ungrateful or unkind made her almost hope that he would n't take the hint which she had been carefully preparing for him.

There was a dreadful little pause, which Polly broke by saying abruptly; "How is Fan?"

"Dashing, as ever. Do you know I 'm rather disappointed in Fanny, for she don't seem to improve with her years," said Sydney, as if he accepted the diversion and was glad of it.

"Ah, you never see her at her best. She puts on that dashing air before people to hide her real self. But I know her better; and I assure you that she does improve; she tries to mend her faults, though she won't own it, and will surprise you some day, by the amount of heart and sense and goodness she has got."

Polly spoke heartily now, and Sydney looked at her as if Fanny's defender pleased him more than Fanny's defence.

"I 'm very glad to hear it, and willingly take your word for it. Everybody shows you their good side, I think, and that is why you find the world such a pleasant place."

"Oh, but I don't! It often seems like a very hard and dismal place, and I croak over my trials like an ungrateful raven."

"Can't we make the trials lighter for you?"

The voice that put the question was so very kind, that Polly dared not look up, because she knew what the eyes were silently saying.

"Thank you, no. I don't get more tribulation than is good for me, I fancy, and

we are apt to make mistakes when we try to dodge

troubles."

"Or people," added Sydney in a tone that made Polly color up to her forehead.

"How lovely the park looks," she said, in great confusion.

"Yes, it 's the pleasantest walk we have; don't you think so?" asked the artful young man, laying a trap, into which Polly immediately fell.

"Yes, indeed! It 's always so refreshing to me to see a little bit of the country, as it were, especially at this season."

Oh, Polly, Polly, what a stupid speech to make, when you had just given him to understand that you were tired of the park! Not being a fool or a coxcomb, Sydney put this and that together, and taking various trifles into the account, he had by this time come to the conclusion that Polly had heard the same bits of gossip that he had, which linked their names together, that she did n't like it, and tried to show she did n't in this way. He was quicker to take a hint than she had expected, and being both proud and generous, resolved to settle the matter at once, for Polly's sake as well as his own. So, when she made her last brilliant remark, he said quietly, watching her face keenly all the while; "I thought so; well, I 'm going out of town on business for several weeks, so you can enjoy your 'little bit of country' without being annoyed by me."

"Annoyed? Oh, no!" cried Polly earnestly; then stopped short, not knowing what to say for herself. She thought she had a good deal of the coquette in her, and I 've no doubt that with time and training she would have become a very dangerous little person, but now she was far too transparent and straightforward by nature even to tell a white lie cleverly. Sydney knew this, and liked her for it, but he took advantage of it, nevertheless by asking suddenly; "Honestly, now, would n't you go the old way and enjoy it as much as ever, if I was n't anywhere about to set the busybodies gossiping?"

"Yes," said Polly, before she could stop herself, and then could have bitten

her tongue out for being so rude. Another awful pause seemed impending, but just at that moment a horseman clattered by with a smile and a salute, which caused Polly to exclaim, "Oh, there 's Tom!" with a tone and a look that silenced the words hovering on Sydney's lips, and caused him to hold out his hand with a look which made Polly's heart flutter then and ache with pity for a good while afterward, though he only said, "Good by, Polly."

He was gone before she could do anything but look up at him with a remorseful face, and she walked on, feeling that the first and perhaps the only lover she would ever have, had read his answer and accepted it in silence. She did not know what else he had read, and comforted herself with the thought that he did not care for her very much, since he took the first rebuff so quickly.

Polly did not return to her favorite walk till she learned from Minnie that "Uncle" had really left town, and then she found that his friendly company and conversation was what had made the way so pleasant after all. She sighed over the perversity of things in general, and croaked a little over her trials in particular, but on the whole got over her loss better than she expected, for soon she had other sorrows beside her own to comfort, and such work does a body more good than floods of regretful tears, or hours of sentimental lamentation.

She shunned Fanny for a day or two, but gained nothing by it, for that young lady, hearing of Sydney's sudden departure, could not rest till she discovered the cause of it, and walked in upon Polly one afternoon just when the dusk made it a propitious hour for tender confidences.

"What have you been doing with yourself lately?" asked Fanny, composing herself, with her back toward the rapidly waning light.

"Wagging to and fro as usual. What's the news with you?" answered Polly, feeling that something was coming and rather glad to have it over and done with.

"Nothing particular. Trix treats Tom shamefully, and he bears it like a lamb. I tell him to break his engagement, and not be worried so; but he won't, because she has been jilted once and he thinks it's such a mean thing to do."

"Perhaps she 'll jilt him."

"I 've no doubt she will, if anything better comes along. But Trix is getting pass,e, and I should n't wonder if she kept him to his word, just out of perversity, if nothing else."

"Poor Tom, what a fate!" said Polly with what was meant to be a comical groan; but it sounded so tragical that she saw it would n't pass, and hastened to hide the failure by saying, with a laugh, "If you call Trix pass,e at twenty-three, what shall we all be at twenty-five?" "Utterly done with, and laid upon the shelf. I feel so already, for I don't get half the attention I used to have, and the other night I heard Maud and Grace wondering why those old girls' did n't stay at home, and give them a chance.' "

"How is Maudie?"

"Pretty well, but she worries me by her queer tastes and notions. She loves to go into the kitchen and mess, she hates to study, and said right before the Vincents that she should think it would be great fun to be a beggar-girl, to go round with a basket, it must be so interesting to see what you 'd get."

"Minnie said the other day she wished she was a pigeon so she could paddle in the puddles and not fuss about rubbers."

"By the way, when is her uncle coming back?" asked Fanny, who could n't wait any longer and joyfully seized the opening Polly made for her.

"I 'm sure I don't know."

"Nor care, I suppose, you hard-hearted thing."

"Why, Fan, what do you mean?"

"I 'm not blind, my dear, neither is Tom, and when a young gentleman cuts

a call abruptly short, and races after a young lady, and is seen holding her hand at the quietest corner of the park, and then goes travelling all of a sudden, we know what it means if you don't."

"Who got up that nice idea, I should like to know?" demanded

Polly, as Fanny stopped for breath.

"Now don't be affected, Polly, but just tell me, like a dear, has n't he proposed?"

"No, he has n't."

"Don't you think he means to?"

"I don't think he 'll ever say a word to me."

"Well, I am surprised!" And Fanny drew a long breath, as if a load was off her mind. Then she added in a changed tone: "But don't you love him, Polly?"

"No."

"Truly?"

"Truly, Fan."

Neither spoke for a minute, but the heart of one of them beat joyfully and the dusk hid a very happy face.

"Don't you think he cared for you, dear?" asked Fanny, presently. "I don't mean to be prying, but I really thought he did."

"That 's not for me to say, but if it is so, it 's only a passing fancy and he 'll soon get over it."

"Do tell me all about it; I'm so interested, and I know something has happened, I hear it in your voice, for I can't see your face."

"Do you remember the talk we once had after reading one of Miss Edgeworth's stories about not letting one's lovers come to a declaration if one did n't love them?"

"Yes."

"And you girls said it was n't proper, and I said it was honest, anyway. Well, I always meant to try it if I got a chance, and I have. Mind you, I don't say Mr. Sydney loved me, for he never said so, and never will, now, but I did fancy he rather liked me and might do more if I did n't show him that it was of no use."

"And you did?" cried Fanny, much excited.

"I just gave him a hint and he took it. He meant to go away before that, so don't think his heart is broken, or mind what silly tattlers say. I did n't like his meeting me so much and told him so by going another way. He understood, and being a gentleman, made no fuss. I dare say he thought I was a vain goose, and laughed at me for my pains, like Churchill in 'Helen.' "

"No, he would n't; He 'd like it and respect you for doing it. But, Polly, it would have been a grand thing for you."

"I can't sell myself for an establishment."

"Mercy! What an idea!"

"Well, that 's the plain English of half your fashionable matches. I'm 'odd,' you know, and prefer to be an independent spinster and teach music all my days."

"Ah, but you won't. You were made for a nice, happy home of your own, and

I hope you 'll get it, Polly, dear," said Fanny warmly, feeling so grateful to Polly, that she found it hard not to pour out all her secret at once.

"I hope I may; but I doubt it," answered Polly in a tone that made Fanny wonder if she, too, knew what heartache meant.

"Something troubles you, Polly, what is it? Confide in me, as I do in you," said Fanny tenderly, for all the coldness she had tried to hide from Polly, had melted in the sudden sunshine that had come to her.

"Do you always?" asked her friend, leaning forward with an irresistible desire to win back the old-time love and confidence, too precious to be exchanged for a little brief excitement or the barren honor of "bagging a bird," to use Trix's elegant expression. Fanny understood it then, and threw herself into Polly's arms, crying, with a shower of grateful tears; "Oh, my dear! my dear! did you do it for my sake?"

And Polly held her close, saying in that tender voice of hers, "I didn't mean to let a lover part this pair of friends if I could help it."