II. THE MATERALIZING OF CECIL

It had never worried me in the least that I wasn't married, although everybody in Avonlea pitied old maids; but it DID worry me, and I frankly confess it, that I had never had a chance to be. Even Nancy, my old nurse and servant, knew that, and pitied me for it. Nancy is an old maid herself, but she has had two proposals. She did not accept either of them because one was a widower with seven children, and the other a very shiftless, good-for-nothing fellow; but, if anybody twitted Nancy on her single condition, she could point triumphantly to those two as evidence that "she could an she would." If I had not lived all my life in Avonlea I might have had the benefit of the doubt; but I had, and everybody knew everything about me--or thought they did.

I had really often wondered why nobody had ever fallen in love with me. I was not at all homely; indeed, years ago, George Adoniram Maybrick had written a poem addressed to me, in which he praised my beauty quite extravagantly; that didn't mean anything because George Adoniram wrote poetry to all the good-looking girls and never went with anybody but Flora King, who was cross-eyed and red-haired, but it proves that it was not my appearance that put me out of the running. Neither was it the fact that I wrote poetry myself--although not of George Adoniram's kind--because nobody ever knew that. When I felt it

coming on I shut myself up in my room and wrote it out in a little blank book I kept locked up. It is nearly full now, because I have been writing poetry all my life. It is the only thing I have ever been able to keep a secret from Nancy. Nancy, in any case, has not a very high opinion of my ability to take care of myself; but I tremble to imagine what she would think if she ever found out about that little book. I am convinced she would send for the doctor post-haste and insist on mustard plasters while waiting for him.

Nevertheless, I kept on at it, and what with my flowers and my cats and my magazines and my little book, I was really very happy and contented. But it DID sting that Adella Gilbert, across the road, who has a drunken husband, should pity "poor Charlotte" because nobody had ever wanted her. Poor Charlotte indeed! If I had thrown myself at a man's head the way Adella Gilbert did at--but there, there, I must refrain from such thoughts. I must not be uncharitable.

The Sewing Circle met at Mary Gillespie's on my fortieth birthday. I have given up talking about my birthdays, although that little scheme is not much good in Avonlea where everybody knows your age--or if they make a mistake it is never on the side of youth. But Nancy, who grew accustomed to celebrating my birthdays when I was a little girl, never gets over the habit, and I don't try to cure her, because, after all, it's nice to

have some one make a fuss over you. She brought me up my breakfast before I got up out of bed--a concession to my laziness that Nancy would scorn to make on any other day of the year. She had cooked everything I like best, and had decorated the tray with roses from the garden and ferns from the woods behind the house. I enjoyed every bit of that breakfast, and then I got up and dressed, putting on my second best muslin gown. I would have put on my really best if I had not had the fear of Nancy before my eyes; but I knew she would never condone THAT, even on a birthday. I watered my flowers and fed my cats, and then I locked myself up and wrote a poem on June. I had given up writing birthday odes after I was thirty.

In the afternoon I went to the Sewing Circle. When I was ready for it I looked in my glass and wondered if I could really be forty. I was quite sure I didn't look it. My hair was brown and wavy, my cheeks were pink, and the lines could hardly be seen at all, though possibly that was because of the dim light. I always have my mirror hung in the darkest corner of my room. Nancy cannot imagine why. I know the lines are there, of course; but when they don't show very plain I forget that they are there.

We had a large Sewing Circle, young and old alike attending. I really cannot say I ever enjoyed the meetings--at least not up to that time--although I went religiously because I thought it my duty to go. The married women talked so much of their husbands

and children, and of course I had to be quiet on those topics; and the young girls talked in corner groups about their beaux, and stopped it when I joined them, as if they felt sure that an old maid who had never had a beau couldn't understand at all. As for the other old maids, they talked gossip about every one, and I did not like that either. I knew the minute my back was turned they would fasten into me and hint that I used hair-dye and declare it was perfectly ridiculous for a woman of FIFTY to wear a pink muslin dress with lace-trimmed frills.

There was a full attendance that day, for we were getting ready for a sale of fancy work in aid of parsonage repairs. The young girls were merrier and noisier than usual. Wilhelmina Mercer was there, and she kept them going. The Mercers were quite new to Avonlea, having come here only two months previously.

I was sitting by the window and Wilhelmina Mercer, Maggie Henderson, Susette Cross and Georgie Hall were in a little group just before me. I wasn't listening to their chatter at all, but presently Georgie exclaimed teasingly:

"Miss Charlotte is laughing at us. I suppose she thinks we are awfully silly to be talking about beaux."

The truth was that I was simply smiling over some very pretty thoughts that had come to me about the roses which were climbing

over Mary Gillespie's sill. I meant to inscribe them in the little blank book when I went home. Georgie's speech brought me back to harsh realities with a jolt. It hurt me, as such speeches always did.

"Didn't you ever have a beau, Miss Holmes?" said Wilhelmina laughingly.

Just as it happened, a silence had fallen over the room for a moment, and everybody in it heard Wilhelmina's question.

I really do not know what got into me and possessed me. I have never been able to account for what I said and did, because I am naturally a truthful person and hate all deceit. It seemed to me that I simply could not say "No" to Wilhelmina before that whole roomful of women. It was TOO humiliating. I suppose all the prickles and stings and slurs I had endured for fifteen years on account of never having had a lover had what the new doctor calls "a cumulative effect" and came to a head then and there.

"Yes, I had one once, my dear," I said calmly.

For once in my life I made a sensation. Every woman in that room stopped sewing and stared at me. Most of them, I saw, didn't believe me, but Wilhelmina did. Her pretty face lighted up with interest.

"Oh, won't you tell us about him, Miss Holmes?" she coaxed, "and why didn't you marry him?"

"That is right, Miss Mercer," said Josephine Cameron, with a nasty little laugh. "Make her tell. We're all interested. It's news to us that Charlotte ever had a beau."

If Josephine had not said that, I might not have gone on. But she did say it, and, moreover, I caught Mary Gillespie and Adella Gilbert exchanging significant smiles. That settled it, and made me quite reckless. "In for a penny, in for a pound," thought I, and I said with a pensive smile:

"Nobody here knew anything about him, and it was all long, long ago."

"What was his name?" asked Wilhelmina.

"Cecil Fenwick," I answered promptly. Cecil had always been my favorite name for a man; it figured quite frequently in the blank book. As for the Fenwick part of it, I had a bit of newspaper in my hand, measuring a hem, with "Try Fenwick's Porous Plasters" printed across it, and I simply joined the two in sudden and irrevocable matrimony.

"Where did you meet him?" asked Georgie.

I hastily reviewed my past. There was only one place to locate Cecil Fenwick. The only time I had ever been far enough away from Avonlea in my life was when I was eighteen and had gone to visit an aunt in New Brunswick.

"In Blakely, New Brunswick," I said, almost believing that I had when I saw how they all took it in unsuspectingly. "I was just eighteen and he was twenty-three."

"What did he look like?" Susette wanted to know.

"Oh, he was very handsome." I proceeded glibly to sketch my ideal. To tell the dreadful truth, I was enjoying myself; I could see respect dawning in those girls' eyes, and I knew that I had forever thrown off my reproach. Henceforth I should be a woman with a romantic past, faithful to the one love of her life--a very, very different thing from an old maid who had never had a lover.

"He was tall and dark, with lovely, curly black hair and brilliant, piercing eyes. He had a splendid chin, and a fine nose, and the most fascinating smile!"

"What was he?" asked Maggie.

"A young lawyer," I said, my choice of profession decided by an enlarged crayon portrait of Mary Gillespie's deceased brother on an easel before me. He had been a lawyer.

"Why didn't you marry him?" demanded Susette.

"We quarreled," I answered sadly. "A terribly bitter quarrel. Oh, we were both so young and so foolish. It was my fault. I vexed Cecil by flirting with another man"--wasn't I coming on!-- "and he was jealous and angry. He went out West and never came back. I have never seen him since, and I do not even know if he is alive. But--but--I could never care for any other man."

"Oh, how interesting!" sighed Wilhelmina. "I do so love sad love stories. But perhaps he will come back some day yet, Miss Holmes."

"Oh, no, never now," I said, shaking my head. "He has forgotten all about me, I dare say. Or if he hasn't, he has never forgiven me."

Mary Gillespie's Susan Jane announced tea at this moment, and I was thankful, for my imagination was giving out, and I didn't know what question those girls would ask next. But I felt already a change in the mental atmosphere surrounding me, and all

through supper I was thrilled with a secret exultation. Repentant? Ashamed? Not a bit of it! I'd have done the same thing over again, and all I felt sorry for was that I hadn't done it long ago.

When I got home that night Nancy looked at me wonderingly, and said:

"You look like a girl to-night, Miss Charlotte."

"I feel like one," I said laughing; and I ran to my room and did what I had never done before--wrote a second poem in the same day. I had to have some outlet for my feelings. I called it "In Summer Days of Long Ago," and I worked Mary Gillespie's roses and Cecil Fenwick's eyes into it, and made it so sad and reminiscent and minor-musicky that I felt perfectly happy.

For the next two months all went well and merrily. Nobody ever said anything more to me about Cecil Fenwick, but the girls all chattered freely to me of their little love affairs, and I became a sort of general confidant for them. It just warmed up the cockles of my heart, and I began to enjoy the Sewing Circle famously. I got a lot of pretty new dresses and the dearest hat, and I went everywhere I was asked and had a good time.

But there is one thing you can be perfectly sure of. If you do

wrong you are going to be punished for it sometime, somehow and somewhere. My punishment was delayed for two months, and then it descended on my head and I was crushed to the very dust.

Another new family besides the Mercers had come to Avonlea in the spring--the Maxwells. There were just Mr. and Mrs. Maxwell; they were a middle-aged couple and very well off. Mr. Maxwell had bought the lumber mills, and they lived up at the old Spencer place which had always been "the" place of Avonlea. They lived quietly, and Mrs. Maxwell hardly ever went anywhere because she was delicate. She was out when I called and I was out when she returned my call, so that I had never met her.

It was the Sewing Circle day again--at Sarah Gardiner's this time. I was late; everybody else was there when I arrived, and the minute I entered the room I knew something had happened, although I couldn't imagine what. Everybody looked at me in the strangest way. Of course, Wilhelmina Mercer was the first to set her tongue going.

"Oh, Miss Holmes, have you seen him yet?" she exclaimed.

"Seen whom?" I said non-excitedly, getting out my thimble and patterns.

"Why, Cecil Fenwick. He's here--in Avonlea--visiting his sister,

Mrs. Maxwell."

I suppose I did what they expected me to do. I dropped everything I held, and Josephine Cameron said afterwards that Charlotte Holmes would never be paler when she was in her coffin. If they had just known why I turned so pale!

"It's impossible!" I said blankly.

"It's really true," said Wilhelmina, delighted at this development, as she supposed it, of my romance. "I was up to see Mrs. Maxwell last night, and I met him."

"It--can't be--the same--Cecil Fenwick," I said faintly, because I had to say something.

"Oh, yes, it is. He belongs in Blakely, New Brunswick, and he's a lawyer, and he's been out West twenty-two years. He's oh! so handsome, and just as you described him, except that his hair is quite gray. He has never married--I asked Mrs. Maxwell--so you see he has never forgotten you, Miss Holmes. And, oh, I believe everything is going to come out all right."

I couldn't exactly share her cheerful belief. Everything seemed to me to be coming out most horribly wrong. I was so mixed up I didn't know what to do or say. I felt as if I were in a bad

dream--it MUST be a dream--there couldn't really be a Cecil Fenwick! My feelings were simply indescribable. Fortunately every one put my agitation down to quite a different cause, and they very kindly left me alone to recover myself. I shall never forget that awful afternoon. Right after tea I excused myself and went home as fast as I could go. There I shut myself up in my room, but NOT to write poetry in my blank book. No, indeed! I felt in no poetical mood.

I tried to look the facts squarely in the face. There was a Cecil Fenwick, extraordinary as the coincidence was, and he was here in Avonlea. All my friends--and foes--believed that he was the estranged lover of my youth. If he stayed long in Avonlea, one of two things was bound to happen. He would hear the story I had told about him and deny it, and I would be held up to shame and derision for the rest of my natural life; or else he would simply go away in ignorance, and everybody would suppose he had forgotten me and would pity me maddeningly. The latter possibility was bad enough, but it wasn't to be compared to the former; and oh, how I prayed--yes, I DID pray about it--that he would go right away. But Providence had other views for me.

Cecil Fenwick didn't go away. He stayed right on in Avonlea, and the Maxwells blossomed out socially in his honor and tried to give him a good time. Mrs. Maxwell gave a party for him. I got a card--but you may be very sure I didn't go, although Nancy

thought I was crazy not to. Then every one else gave parties in honor of Mr. Fenwick and I was invited and never went. Wilhelmina Mercer came and pleaded and scolded and told me if I avoided Mr. Fenwick like that he would think I still cherished bitterness against him, and he wouldn't make any advances towards a reconciliation. Wilhelmina means well, but she hasn't a great deal of sense.

Cecil Fenwick seemed to be a great favorite with everybody, young and old. He was very rich, too, and Wilhelmina declared that half the girls were after him.

"If it wasn't for you, Miss Holmes, I believe I'd have a try for him myself, in spite of his gray hair and quick temper--for Mrs. Maxwell says he has a pretty quick temper, but it's all over in a minute," said Wilhelmina, half in jest and wholly in earnest.

As for me, I gave up going out at all, even to church. I fretted and pined and lost my appetite and never wrote a line in my blank book. Nancy was half frantic and insisted on dosing me with her favorite patent pills. I took them meekly, because it is a waste of time and energy to oppose Nancy, but, of course, they didn't do me any good. My trouble was too deep-seated for pills to cure. If ever a woman was punished for telling a lie I was that woman. I stopped my subscription to the Weekly Advocate because it still carried that wretched porous plaster

advertisement, and I couldn't bear to see it. If it hadn't been for that I would never have thought of Fenwick for a name, and all this trouble would have been averted.

One evening, when I was moping in my room, Nancy came up.

"There's a gentleman in the parlor asking for you, Miss Charlotte."

My heart gave just one horrible bounce.

"What--sort of a gentleman, Nancy?" I faltered.

"I think it's that Fenwick man that there's been such a time about," said Nancy, who didn't know anything about my imaginary escapades, "and he looks to be mad clean through about something, for such a scowl I never seen."

"Tell him I'll be down directly, Nancy," I said quite calmly.

As soon as Nancy had clumped downstairs again I put on my lace fichu and put two hankies in my belt, for I thought I'd probably need more than one. Then I hunted up an old Advocate for proof, and down I went to the parlor. I know exactly how a criminal feels going to execution, and I've been opposed to capital punishment ever since.

I opened the parlor door and went in, carefully closing it behind me, for Nancy has a deplorable habit of listening in the hall. Then my legs gave out completely, and I couldn't have walked another step to save my life. I just stood there, my hand on the knob, trembling like a leaf.

A man was standing by the south window looking out; he wheeled around as I went in, and, as Nancy said, he had a scowl on and looked angry clear through. He was very handsome, and his gray hair gave him such a distinguished look. I recalled this afterward, but just at the moment you may be quite sure I wasn't thinking about it at all.

Then all at once a strange thing happened. The scowl went right off his face and the anger out of his eyes. He looked astonished, and then foolish. I saw the color creeping up into his cheeks. As for me, I still stood there staring at him, not able to say a single word.

"Miss Holmes, I presume," he said at last, in a deep, thrilling voice. "I--I--oh, confound it! I have called--I heard some foolish stories and I came here in a rage. I've been a fool--I know now they weren't true. Just excuse me and I'll go away and kick myself."

"No," I said, finding my voice with a gasp, "you mustn't go until you've heard the truth. It's dreadful enough, but not as dreadful as you might otherwise think. Those--those stories--I have a confession to make. I did tell them, but I didn't know there was such a person as Cecil Fenwick in existence."

He looked puzzled, as well he might. Then he smiled, took my hand and led me away from the door--to the knob of which I was still holding with all my might--to the sofa.

"Let's sit down and talk it over 'comfy,'" he said.

I just confessed the whole shameful business. It was terribly humiliating, but it served me right. I told him how people were always twitting me for never having had a beau, and how I had told them I had; and then I showed him the porous plaster advertisement.

He heard me right through without a word, and then he threw back his big, curly, gray head and laughed.

"This clears up a great many mysterious hints I've been receiving ever since I came to Avonlea," he said, "and finally a Mrs. Gilbert came to my sister this afternoon with a long farrago of nonsense about the love affair I had once had with some Charlotte Holmes here. She declared you had told her about it yourself. I

confess I flamed up. I'm a peppery chap, and I thought--I thought--oh, confound it, it might as well out: I thought you were some lank old maid who was amusing herself telling ridiculous stories about me. When you came into the room I knew that, whoever was to blame, you were not."

"But I was," I said ruefully. "It wasn't right of me to tell such a story--and it was very silly, too. But who would ever have supposed that there could be real Cecil Fenwick who had lived in Blakely? I never heard of such a coincidence."

"It's more than a coincidence," said Mr. Fenwick decidedly. "It's predestination; that is what it is. And now let's forget it and talk of something else."

We talked of something else--or at least Mr. Fenwick did, for I was too ashamed to say much--so long that Nancy got restive and clumped through the hall every five minutes; but Mr. Fenwick never took the hint. When he finally went away he asked if he might come again.

"It's time we made up that old quarrel, you know," he said, laughing.

And I, an old maid of forty, caught myself blushing like a girl. But I felt like a girl, for it was such a relief to have that

explanation all over. I couldn't even feel angry with Adella Gilbert. She was always a mischief maker, and when a woman is born that way she is more to be pitied than blamed. I wrote a poem in the blank book before I went to sleep; I hadn't written anything for a month, and it was lovely to be at it once more.

Mr. Fenwick did come again--the very next evening, but one. And he came so often after that that even Nancy got resigned to him. One day I had to tell her something. I shrank from doing it, for I feared it would make her feel badly.

"Oh, I've been expecting to hear it," she said grimly. "I felt the minute that man came into the house he brought trouble with him. Well, Miss Charlotte, I wish you happiness. I don't know how the climate of California will agree with me, but I suppose I'll have to put up with it."

"But, Nancy," I said, "I can't expect you to go away out there with me. It's too much to ask of you."

"And where else would I be going?" demanded Nancy in genuine astonishment. "How under the canopy could you keep house without me? I'm not going to trust you to the mercies of a yellow Chinee with a pig-tail. Where you go I go, Miss Charlotte, and there's an end of it."

I was very glad, for I hated to think of parting with Nancy even to go with Cecil. As for the blank book, I haven't told my husband about it yet, but I mean to some day. And I've subscribed for the Weekly Advocate again.