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BY AMELIA E. BARR.

Author of "Friend Olivia," &c.

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CHAPTER I.

Between the leaves of an old romance I found one day the shadow of a girl and a song. The lily grew forty years ago, the song was sung as it was gathered. The flower is nearly dust, the words have nearly faded away, but the story they keep is unforgetting. For in becoming "Life" it made itself eternal.

Before the flower bloomed, before the song had found a voice, Francesca Atherton had dreamed of love, of a saint's dream of heaven—wonderful, mystical, far off—an object both of fervent desire and of wistful fear and uncertainty. For her young life had been peopled from noble books, and it was in their pages she had met her friends and companions—men, romantically memorable and loyal; women, faithful in love, even unto death—both alike doing nobly with this life, because they held it as the gage for life eternal.

And Francesca believed these shadowy forms to be portraits of the people whom she would one day meet in the world. No one told her differently. Her aunt—the still beautiful Loida Vyner—held the same opinion; for she had only made little holiday visits into the world, and she was quite ignorant of all that was mean or selfish in the pomps and vanities she took part in. Gentle and romantic, carrying in her heart the "hum" of a great sorrow, Miss Vyner had brought up her motherless niece in that sweet, pious simplicity which makes a woman not only charming in good fortune but patient and strong in the days of calamity.

In this exquisite schooling of a young soul Squire Atherton had little part. He distrusted himself entirely where Francesca was concerned. He would have taken a son to the kennels and the ferret hatches, made him wise in stable lore, and taught him all the mysteries of woodcraft. The little maid, even at nine years old, puzzled him. Her eyes, full of solemn wonder, gave him an uncomfortable sense of incompetency. Her hand had but to clasp his finger, and he felt under an irresistible authority. And when her small face lay against his large, unbrowned cheek, he had neither wish nor will of his own to speak of.

"She is just a little lady! God love her!" he said to his sister-in-law, "and she must have a lady to guide her. As for me, Loida, thou know'st, I would lay my hands under her feet." And Loida, looking up at the man standing firm as an oak before her—massive, fit to tough, fearless—felt all the wonderful surrender in this free expression of love, and of love's service—"I would lay my hands under her feet."

If this was the squire's feeling when Francesca was nine years old, when she was nineteen it was ten years stronger. For he had then begun to realize that his child had become a woman, and that the high park walls of Atherton Court would not much longer keep away from her whatever Fate was waiting.

"And I'll tell thee what, Loida," he said one day, as they sat talking, "if anything goes wrong with Francesca, the world will be just four bare walls to me."

As he spoke he rose and went to the window. The leaded panes were open, and a robin-redbreast, singing on an ivy branch, was almost in the room. The squire chirruped to the bird, but kept his eyes upon his daughter. She was coming slowly up the stone steps of the terrace, lifting slightly her long white dress with one hand, and scattering wheat with the other to the many colored pigeons, who paced and plumed and bridled their opal necks, and "coo, coo, coo" around her feet.

He called to her because he wished to hear her voice, and he listened wheat fall from her hand and lifted her hat with a joyous upward movement.

"Where have you been, Francesca?" he asked.

"I went to the south walls, to ask the apricots if they were ripe. And one—like roses and amber—told me to try it."

"Was it good, dearie?"

"It was like sunshine and wine, and musk-roses and—one of your kisses, dear father." She was by this time at the open window, and she sent the compliment straight to his heart, with a smile as ravishing as love and beauty could make it.

"Eh! but thy words are like music. I don't wonder the very birds love to hear them. Robin was singing till you came; now, like a wise bird, he is listening to thee."

"I have just been listening to the starlings. They have been holding a large public meeting. Do you think, father, that they are addicted to politics? No, it must have been a religious meeting. It was extremely orderly. There is a starling who lives in the east gable; he is quite a religious bird. I have often seen him on the topmost stone of the highest chimney gaze on the green earth and up at the sky, and then clap his wings softly, to the most joyful song you can imagine. He was singing to God, I am sure he was."

"I wouldn't wonder, dearie."

"Father, I walked through the park to the great gates. And I saw two gentlemen go past them. One was old, and one was young; that is, one was much older than the other; and they looked so happy, out there in the world. I wished I was a man—if I could only go riding up and down, as my fancy led me."

"I'll warrant it was their business, and not their fancy, that led them into this bit of country, Francesca. Why! They be coming here, my little lady. Go tell your Aunt Loida. They will need a bite and sup, whoever they be."

And she heard, as she went away,

the trample of horses' feet, and the sound of men's voices, and that little flurry of formal welcome that marks the unexpected yet not unwelcome visitor. For visitors were rare at Atherton Court, and the squire was glad to talk to those who brought to him for awhile the atmosphere of the busy world.

To Francesca their coming was also a little event. She felt a kind of personal interest in these strangers, she had seen them before any one in the house; and she was pleased when the ostler took away their horses.

"They are going to stay to dinner," she mentally commented, "and I wonder what I shall put on!" It was a delightful uncertainty to her; she opened first one and then another of the wide drawers in her ambry; and stood looking down at their contents. The scent of lavender stole softly out of the drawers, and mingled with the sweet air of the room. And the sunshine fell on several pale-colored gowns, pink and amber, and blue and white. She could not tell which one was the prettiest, but it was quite an important question to settle; because a stranger was such a rarity; one of these might be a lord or a lover; might be the prince of all her fairylike love-dreams.

In the twinkling of an eye a girl's bright glance can see a great deal; and Francesca in a moment's space, from out of the green shadows in which she stood, had noticed the tall, graceful man who held his bride so lightly, and who turned a handsome, dark face toward the dim beech alley, through which he must have seen her spluttering.

The dresses, crisp and fresh with the clear starching now gone out of use, lay across the counterpane. She considered their claims with a divided heart; none pleased her above all others. "I shall have to shut my eyes and take what fortune sends me," she said, with a low laugh of satisfaction. "We have to do that about many other things, I am sure."

Then she lifted her watch, and saw that it was only a little after eleven. "The dinner will not be served until two—perhaps half-past two; for Ann Pierson will have to make a syllabus, of course. She thinks visitors come to Atherton to eat her syllabubs."

This primitive toilet divination was obviated by the decision of Aunt Loida, who immediately on entering the room perceived the dilemma, and met it.

"I would wear the pink muslin, Frances," she said. "It is sheerer and smarter; and you can go to the garden when you are dressed and get some myrtle leaves and white clematis. And black lace mitts, my dear."

She of the black lace mitts! They give an air of modesty to a young girl. They say to a gentleman: "The tips of my fingers only, sir."

Francesca looked, with a smile, at the tips of her fingers, and said: "If you please, aunt, for whom am I to wear pink muslin, and white clematis, and the limiting black mitts?"

"Our visitors are Mr. Stephen Leigh and his son."

"I have never heard of them before. Did you? I hope they have not come about money. Every one now seems to come about money."

"They are very rich, and we owe them nothing. Mr. Leigh is a loon-lord. He lives to make woolen cloth. But that is neither here nor there. The younger man is extremely handsome, and—and I am sure, Frances, you will be careful. I mean dear—you will not let him make any impression—you know what I mean."

"Indeed, Aunt Loida, I do not know what you mean."

"Young people sometimes fancy they have fallen in love, when they have not."

"Why should you warn me about falling in love? Have I ever done such a thing? Is it a common transgression of mine? How many opportunities have I had to be so imprudent? Is 'imprudent' the word? Or should I use a stronger one?"

"I see that I have been unwise in speaking to you, Francesca."

"You should not have spoken on this subject. I am nearly nineteen years old, Aunt Loida."

"It is such an important subject! O Francesca, such a fateful subject! It makes or mays human lives in a few moments. I am 'one of those who know,' my dear."

Miss Vyner's still face flushed, and she dropped her eyes upon her gray dress and smoothed out a fanciful crease.

It was the first approach to confidence ever given, and Francesca went to her aunt's side and took her hand. Some vague tradition told Loida Vyner's disappointment in love had floated into her consciousness almost imperceptibly, but the idea had always been pale, remote, and without much meaning. At this moment she had a revelation that troubled and restrained her, and a spell of sadness fell between the two women.

It lingered in the room after Miss Vyner had left it, and Francesca was a little impatient of the feeling. She began to sing softly, but ere she was aware her voice had slipped into a monotonous air, full of old world sadness. Then she broke it off suddenly, and, in a quiet hurry, flashed her toilet.

For once she forgot to take a little pleasure in her own beauty—to watch in the two long mirrors the graceful sweep of the pink muslin across the dark oak floor; to notice the gleam of her white arms and throat; the heavy braids of her nut-brown hair; the rose tints of her face, and the sparkling lights of her large gray eyes. But it was only one o'clock, and she could go to the garden and get flowers, and do all these things in that final five minutes before dinner.

As she passed through the hall, she heard her father talking. His voice had an argumentative ring; it was clear and positive.

"Now I know what these people have come for," she said to herself; "politics. I dare say this Stephen Leigh is a Radical, for father never talks that way but when somebody is saying something against the Conservative Government." As soon as she had settled the visit upon a political basis, her spirits rose; the decision put away some unacknowledged money care.

With a light step she went down the terrace into the pleasant stretch of odorous shrubs and blossoming flowers. Here there were all kinds of shady alleys; rose hedges shut in some, and the laburnums' rain of gold and the climbing honeysuckle others; and lower down toward the steps of the second terrace there was a thick screen of white clematis. It covered also a little summer-house, overhanging the steps and the hillside, in which they were set; and lower down, the place of summer fruits. The desire to enter the summer-house was irresistible. It was so cool, and then the light was so green there, and her pink dress made such a charming glow in its dim shadow. She spread it out with an obvious childlike pride in the contrast.

Oh, the stillness! Oh, the sweet smell of growing wood; of the soil; of the flowers; of the ripening fruit! Youth has a sensuous hunger for such alluring odors, and Francesca sat and closed her eyes, the better to enjoy them. The chair was her father's chair; it was large and soft; the air was a noon-tide air, it was warm and sleepy; her soul was in the mood of a truant, and it slipped away into the land of dreams.

She awakened suddenly, as if she had been sharply called. All the lower space of the fruit garden was full of sweetest melody: "I dreamt that I dwelt in marble halls."

That was very like what she had been dreaming. She rose quickly to her feet, a warm crimson wave rushed over her throat and face, her eyes grew larger and darker, she parted the clematis vines and looked through them.

A young man was slowly walking between the plum and the apricot standards, and singing as he walked. His voice had magic in it. The tender, ringing tones, now sharp and clear, then soft and lingering, came floating up the terrace and went straight to her heart. She had heard the first verse of the song in her sleep—purer before—and the second verse had an insinuating familiarity she could not resist.

The singer came slowly onward, taking the terrace-steps with a charming deliberation. He held an apricot, and he threw it lightly from one hand to the other, making the act as rhythmical and graceful as the melody. He sang to the movement. He was bare-headed, slender and tall, and carried himself with a royal air. As he came closer, she saw that he was very handsome; that his mouth was sweet and smiling; that his clothes had the gloss of fashion. He stood a moment on the top-most step; stood in the sunshine singing, serenely glad, and with the look of a man who has always lived in the sunniest places of human happiness.

Francesca would have fled, but flight was now impossible. She forgot even to sit down, and thus give the idea, at least, of indifference. Putting together the parted vines, she stood very upright, facing the leafy entrance. Her left hand was dropped, her right hand grasped the back of the large chair. Pinker than her muslin gown was her face; her eyes shone like stars; her manner expressed forcibly the confusion of a soul surprised in its very citadel.

For a moment the singer and the listener looked straight into each other's eyes. Something impelled them to this recognition. Then Francesca said: "I am Miss Atherton."

And the stranger said: "I am Lancelot Leigh."

And she gave him just the tips of her fingers, and they went through the garden together. And the white clematis were never gathered, which was a fortunate thing for the flowers of the gadding vine hold no love-spell in their wide-open cups. There was one hour before dinner, and love for an hour is love forever—if it be true love. These two souls had just found each other, and they had so much to say, and seemed to choose such unmeaning words that any one not of the faculty of love would have been puzzled at their satisfaction. A few syllables and a glance—a glance and a flower—one step at a time, and the touch of their hands—these simple vehicles of understanding held a measureless contentment. And when they took the terraced steps together, the tips of their fingers had a language all their own—mysteriously sweet as the influences of the Pleiades, mystically binding as the virtues of Orion. They were talking of names at the time, and he said, softly: "I am called Lancelot."

She answered: "I am called Francesca."

He repeated the word slowly—"Francesca!" and every letter was vivid as light, and the name went to his brain like wine.

What did it matter to them that they were late to dinner, and that the squire, with a slow dignity that was almost a reproof, told them so? What did it matter that he looked annoyed, and Aunt Loida anxious,

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