

M.A.B.

He turns his head and half smiles at me again. "In another week," he says, as one who has answered my question and changes his tone. "The laborer and his wife will both be in bloom."

"Yes."
"And then we are both silent."
"Ned, we have been friends so many years," I plead, trying to speak easily, frankly, pleasantly, in friendly fashion;

"—friends are useless if they can not grumble to one another! Twenty years ago—fifteen years ago—we used to pour out to one another all our causes of discontent."

He looks before him for nearly a minute before he answers.

"Since then—" he says and pauses.

"Yes."

"We have been both more and less than friends."

"Does that prevent our speaking—of our troubles to each other?"

"It prevents my speaking of one trouble to you," he answered, simply.

How my hands trembled! I clasped my fingers together. My heart was beating so fast and furiously that I could scarcely draw my breath; my mouth was open forward to a bold resolve—a resolve too bold to be womanly—a resolve to hold that I dare not pause to speak.

"Ned, once you told me you loved me. You have not loved me since then?"

The answer, the answer of nine years is broken. It is I who have torn down the barrier! And yet I have only partly



"NED, ONCE YOU SAID YOU LOVED ME!" destroyed it; he would like to hastily pile up the breach.

"One gets over most things, Ned, in time," he says. But I scarcely hear his words; his voice has a tremor which makes my pulses beat with joy; his face betrays that the time of which he speaks has not yet come.

I scarcely know what I do, but I know that I put out my hand and lay it on his arm.

"Don't get over it, Ned." I say in the lowest of tones; and then, having been the silliest, and burst into a flood of hysterical, foolish tears.

And ten minutes later Ned and I are sitting together on the rustic seat; his arm is around me and his strong clasps hold me close to him.

"You loved me nine years ago when you refused me?" he asks, incredulously, repeating a statement I have just, with laughter and wear, felt red death.

"Yes; but I thought you loved me out of pity. I thought you would easily forget."

"And I thought my offer had hurt and offended you. I thought your girlish love for me was dead. I resolved not to persecute you with my love, notwithstanding to you again."

"And you have cared for me—all these years?"

"All these years—yes. And we might have been happy together."

"And now I am so old, Ned?"

"Old! Not so very old, Mab. If you were younger, you would scorn your gray-haired lover."

"Pard will call it a prosaic one."

We both smiled. Our eyes met, and the smiles in our eyes deepened.

"Whatever his verdict may be, we can bear it with philosophy," says Ned. And again we smile.

"Is the match, a prosaic one to you, Mab?" he questions, a thread of laughter and a thread of tenderness both running through his tone.

My answer is a smile and a question.

"Is it prosaic to you?" I asked. "Oh, Ned, why have we thrown away so many years of happiness?"

"Perhaps the discipline has been good for us," he whispers quietly. "Every thing happens for the best to those who do not take their lives into their own hands. And you, Mab, are do-er, sweeter to me than ever."

He gently lays my head upon his shoulder and folds me in his arms. My heart is at rest at last. I would not another thirteen years for this happiness.

[THE END.]

Flossy's Christmas Surprise.

From Democrat's Magazine.

CHAPTER I

There was a time, improbable as it may seem to the younger members of the present generation, when the United States had a merchant marine; when swift and staunch American sailing-vessels, manned by brave and skillful American tars, carrying the Stars and Stripes to every portion of the globe to which commercial enterprise stretched its myriad arms. Courageously, but vainly, our seafarers fought against the inexorable pressure for survival of the cheapest, that has eventually driven us out of the world's carrying-trade.

Capt. Daniel Merwin, owner and master of the bark "Mollie," was one of the last of them to give up the struggle. He was proud of being an American sailor, as his father and his grandfather had been, and it filled him with rage to know how lonesome he was becoming in that character. The sight of an English "tramp" steamer had upon him something of the effect that a red flag has upon a bull. But he had sense enough to know that he was facing the inevitable, that he and his kind were doomed, or, as he phrased it, that "The day of kettle had come." It was only a question of time when the "tramps" would have crowded his flag off the high seas altogether.

"Dan is in a good humor to be let alone," said his wife to herself when he came in to dinner one day. And she was right, as she generally was in such matters, for she "could read him like a book." There had been another reduction in freight, thanks to the competition, among the "tramps," of which the harbor seemed full, and the captain's reflections were unusually bitter. But after dinner his mental clouds soon rolled away, and he smiled again, as his wont.

"Mollie," he said, addressing Mrs. Merwin, "do you ever think of happy times we used to have in old days when we were voyaging together?"

"Yes indeed, Dan! There isn't a day goes over my head that those times don't come back to me. Ah! If we could only stay young always, and go on forever sailing together!"

"Why so we do, Mollie. You are just as young to me as you were the first time we were out of sight of land together."

The good wife laid her arm about his neck and pressed her lips affectionally to his forehead. He put one of his big strong arms about her waist and drew her down upon his knee. For a few moments both were silent. Then, with a little sigh, she said:

"But our sailing days are over."

"I guess not. That is just what I was going to speak to you about. I've pretty well made up my mind that my next voyage shall be my last, and that I'll take you along with it. When we get back I'll sell the old bark and give up my share of the ocean to the consarned "tramps." Thank God! we've got enough to keep us in comfort while we live."

"But there's Joe——"

"In business,—fair way for a partnership,—old enough to look out for himself."

"And Florence——"

"At boarding-school, and her Aunt Lucy will look out for her during vacation. Besides we ain't going to be gone long."

"Where do you go?"

"Assorted cargo to San Francisco, grain thence to Liverpool, whatever I can get home,—ballast probably, if the 'tramps' haven't secured all there is of that, too."

"And when will you start?"

"About New Year's, and get back in time for a Christmas dinner at home,—may be a good deal sooner."

"And then the bark will be sold?"

"Yes, turned into a coaster or a coal carrier or freighter or something of the sort. I know it will be like parting with a child, but it can't be helped."

"Well I suppose I had better go along, to keep you out of mischief in foreign ports."

"Is that all?"

"O, my great old practical darling! Your hard head can never understand what is in a woman's heart when her words are lightest. If you could, you would know that out on the blue water, with only the star above and the silence about us, all the years that have clouded the memory of the time when we so sailed together will fade away, and besides you my heart will seem to stand again at the threshold of a new life of love and joy."

So it was settled that in a fortnight Captain Merwin and his wife would start on their last voyage aboard the bark Mollie. Anticipation thereof in no wise dampened the enjoyment of their farewell Christmas dinner. The Merwins were not afraid of the sea. Joe, the captain's only son, frankly lamented the wasting of his life in the hardware business, instead of its enjoyment as a sailor; and even Flossy—a lovely girl only sixteen years old—begged hard to be allowed to go along on the final voyage. To that the captain very postively said "No." She must get an education, he declared, and when she had graduated he would take her and her mother over to Europe. That compromise Flossy accepted, perforce; and all thenceforth went merrily, until papa and mama said "Farewell."

The most perfect chronic grumblers are, beyond question, developed in the fore-castle; but not even the most faultfinding Jack-tar afloat could have found just ground for complaint against the weather during that last voyage of the Mollie, until the thirteenth day after she had passed the Horn and squared away for the North. Then a vicious storm from the northeast came down to beat her back into the teeth of a gale from the South, and that swung around until it joined forces with a genuine "Northern." During five days the tempest raged without abatement. In that time the wind had shifted to every point of the compass, "generally," as the mate swore, "coming from most points at once," and with such violence that only a shred of sail, at best, could be carried. When there was at cessation of the rage of the element, the Mollie was in a deplorable condition; her foremast had been carried away from just above the deck; only a stump of a mainmast, about fifteen feet in height, remained; and the disappearance of her standing rigging back to the mizzen, and the smashing of her bulwark, made her look like a wreck. Still, nobody aboard was unduly alarmed, for her hull was sound, and sailors in distress are fruitful resources. But it would have been a satisfaction to them to know where they were, a fact at which they could not have guessed had been certain of coming within a thousand miles of the truth.

(To be Continued.)

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