

A Christmas Comedy.

CHAPTER I.

From Demorest's Magazine.

It was two days before Christmas. Night was spreading over the earth a thick gray blanket of stormclouds, and the voice of the blizzard was heard in the land. The thunder of the distant surf dashing against the cliffs was like an anvil chorus accompanying the wild voice on shore.

Half a mile up the gentle slope of the bluff from the sandy beach that was buried under the seething breads, twinkled the lights of Seabright Villa. The wind drove the frozen sleet in hissing gusts against the window panes, between the sobbing of the pines that swayed back and forth in somber obisance to the furious storm king. The skeleton arms of bare trees lashed the stone walls at irregular intervals like the tattoos of woodpeckers on an old tree trunk, and every few moments weird voices wailed and moaned down the wide throats of Queen Anne chimneys.

At the hours when the gray dusk met the black shrouded night, the housekeeper kindled the white radiance of lamp light in the chandelier, and the red glow of freshly fed flames in the wide fireplace with its high art mantle of antique oak and its insensible appetite for hickory logs.

Mildred folded her needlework, —an extravagant trifle of drapery in silk and tinsel for one of the drawing room chairs,—over which she had wasted the whole afternoon and nearly ruined her eyes. She yawned wearily, and blindfolding her smarting eyes with her small, white hands for a moment as she stood before the fire. Then she crossed the soundless cushion of the thick carpet to the front windows. They faced the east, over looking the vast abyss of the booming Atlantic. Her work basket and wicker chair were huddled in one of the bay windows on the north side, where the poor light took advantage of the omission on the part of the architect to build any cloister like veranda, and struggled through the artistic barricade of lace and silken draperies, into the richness of the interior.

The view outside made the young girl shiver. Beyond the plate glass where the driven sleet hissed was a wide expanse of ice glazed veranda where half a dozen boys might have practiced skating. Five great arches, fringed along the arcs with various-sized icicles, showed five somber pictures between the huge, yellow sardstone pillars. The two directly opposite the drawing room windows were exactly alike,—dim etchings of storm beaten trees bent with snow and ice over the drifts that lay where the green lawns of summer had been tramped by tennis players.

Mildred had not played tennis very much. She had watched the city girls play, admired their natty suits and envied them, wishing they were rich and could wear expensive gowns and be admired. The gentlemen seldom noticed her in her simple summer frocks, made as plainly as were those of old Mrs. Farrell's ten year-old granddaughter. There was always an exaggerated necessity for the embroidering of luncheon tablecloths and doilies whenever an avalanche of company swept over Seabright, the country



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house of old Mrs. Farrell, who never lived anywhere else since she bestowed her city property upon her son when he married. The daughter-in-law and grandchildren spend a portion of each summer with the old lady, which was affliction enough for her. She never visited them, nor anyone else, save a few neighbors within driving distance in summer time. As a natural result, her young companion, pretty Mildred Arlington, never visited with anybody within a radius whatever, save the housekeeper within the gates. She had been at Seabright two summers, and now the cocoon of her third winter in the lonely place was weaving itself about the sweet little Chrisalis that never developed from a grub into the beautiful butterfly she ought to have been.

The thrashing tongs of the trees, as she looked out at them through the thickening blackness, seemed to be strangely mixed with the tinsel threads of Oriental embroidery. The somber hues gradually rested her tired eyes. She looked at the desolate tennis-court and thought, oddly enough, of a girl who had played there one afternoon in the bygone summer,—a pretty blonde thing in a ravishingly lovely costume, with half a dozen admirers following her about, and all the other girls jealous of her. She had heard someone say she had a lover, or at least was engaged to one of them, for she had a dozen. He had never been in the vicinity of Seabright, although his lady love lived less than a mile beyond Mrs. Farrell's mansion for a few weeks in the summer time.

Mildred could see the spot where her hammock had swung when she had unwillingly listened to a stray bit of gossip not intended for her ears. She recalled the words now:

"Oh, she is engaged to him, but she doesn't advertise it at all. She likes him better than any of the rest too. I say 'likes,' because she isn't capable of loving anyone,—except herself. She will hold him on her line and throw out bait for others at the same time. If she can catch a bigger fish she will drop him off her hook. She has no more principle than a cat."

"You have seen him?"
"Yes; he is splendid! I am in love with him myself. He is much too good for me. He is not so awfully infatuated with her as other men are,—that's why she likes him."

"He must be infatuated, if he wants to marry her."

"No,—I think he is an insufferable indifferent lover. She will not break his heart when she throws it away. It isn't one of the breaking kind,—is made of gutta-percha, perhaps."

"I shouldn't like him."
"Because a flirt can't break his

heart? That isn't anything against him, or his heart either."

"Why isn't he rich?"

"Because he is poor. No, he isn't exactly poor,—he is a young lawyer who is making his own way. His papa didn't make it for him while he smoked cigarettes and played billiards. He probably proposed to Mabel because it was a fashionable fad among men,—and she surprised him by accepting him. He has that air about him of being in an uncomfortable fix."

Mildred could hear again the ripple of malicious laughter that smote her ears.

Through the central arch of the veranda she could see the white sweep of the drive covered with snow and ice. She stood gazing at it blankly, thinking of some silly thing Mrs. Farrell's granddaughter had said to her once, about her being prettier than any of the girls playing tennis.

Just then, from out the darkness shot two gleaming red eyes. Mildred started, and then discerned the dim outlines of a carriage. She turned from the lace frosted window. The beauty and warmth of the room, as a contrast to the howling bleakness she had been contemplating, was calculated to inspire a feeling of gratitude in her heart, that she was Mrs. Farrell's well-paid companion, who could enjoy all the luxuries of wealth and not own one of them, rather than a beggar "out in the cauld blasts."

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

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