

Aunt Patsy's Lover
by Miss Amanda M. Halle

For the world, I would not intimate that a single lover was all that fell to Aunt Patsy's share. Nothing would be further from the truth, or more warmly resented by my charming relative.

Aunt Patsy is papa's half-sister. She is one of those fair, sweet, subtle, alluring women, who are hated by their own sex, as naturally as they are adored by the other. She is a plump, round creature, who—however in times past, she may have worried the flesh off other people's bones—by virtue of her abundance of adipose matter can never look old; she has plenty of red iron in her blood, and it sparkles rosily in her lips and cheeks; shining, blonde hair, that is always slipping from its fastenings, and curling in the prettiest fashion around her inch-high forehead; a straight mouth, that can shut firmly over its own secrets, yet can be smiling and frank enough upon occasion, and one of those short, broad, good-natured noses, that just escape ugliness. Patsy was always dressed in exquisite taste. She had a talent for dress, as many a woman has, who is a goose in everything else. Warm, bright, yet soft colors, pretty contrasts, charming correspondences, ornaments that were never redundant, and always communicated grace and style—these were what she did with—materials at most women's command—but it was her way of using them. As for her means, her income was just about enough to keep her in gloves, her friends did the rest.

When Patsy was not visiting among these friends, she stayed at our house. Of course the family was divided according to sex; papa and Fred thought her perfect; Rose and I hated her; mamma, who is simply too sweet-tempered to hate anybody, tried hard to get along as if nothing was amiss, and was always gently reproaching us for being so uncompromising as regarded our charming aunt.

“Poor Patsy—”

“Now mamma,” interrupted Rose, “pray don't pity Aunt Patsy! Doesn't she live in fine houses, and have plenty of servants to wait upon her, and enjoy all the gayeties of the city all winter, and then doesn't she go to the mountains, and the seashore, and the lakes all summer, and have nothing in the world to do but just enjoy herself? Poor Patsy indeed!”

“My dear, you don't know at what a sacrifice of moral principle she wins all these things!”

“Bless me! *She* sacrifice moral principle? Why, she hasn't got any to sacrifice. If she ever had any—which I don't believe—she lost it all long ago. She's just a selfish pagan—selfish clear through! You know how she will do, mamma! She will take the best chamber, and secure the coziest chair in the parlor, and dress, and dawdle, and flirt all summer—”

“Flirt with Rose's lover, mamma!” I interrupted.

Rose went on, grimly:

“And eat strawberries, that we swelter in the sun to pick, and custards and cake, that you stay in the hot kitchen to cook; and Bell and I will have to wash and iron her dresses and muslins.”

“She is your father’s sister, Rose,” said mamma.

“I am very sorry, I assure you.”

“And she is very good-natured, Rose!”

Yes, mamma! She’d see you work for her till you dropped, and smile sweetly all the time.”

“Well, at any rate, she is coming, and we must make the best of it.”

This was the way it always ended. Rose growled and mamma sighed, and I scolded, but we all remained slaves.

Patsy came. She was almost as round, and fresh, and fair as she was when Rose and I were little girls, but of course she couldn’t have been quite so young. It is work, and worry and care that pinch the features and bleach the cheeks, and change dark hair to gray; it is thought that chisels away upon the face, and gives it, too, sometimes, a grander beauty than even the sweet roundness of youth could boast. But Patsy never did any work, nor had any worry, nor ever did any thinking worth speaking of; and she inherited a vigorous liver, and a capital pair of lungs, and was consequently the same lump of pink and white flesh that she was at twenty. Patsy came, as I said. Papa brightened up, and staid at home all the evening, and talked to her about things that the little hypocrite didn’t know anything about; but she smiled and fenced adroitly, and papa was charmed.

Fred forgot the snubbings he had received at her hands, when, two years before, she spent the summer at Redclyffe, and he, an awkward boy of eighteen, had sometimes been an annoyance to her. But Fred had softened and rounded off the corners, and somehow got made into a gentleman, as boys will, in two years; and now, a handsome young man who could do escort duty, and serve as a nucleus for other lovers, was not to be despised. So my Lady Patsy was all honeyed graciousness, and Fred was speedily as much in love with her as it is possible for a man to be with his aunt.

Perhaps I ought to give you some idea of our family, and our way of living, before I go on with Aunt Patsy’s story.

Father was the only lawyer in a dull country town. Of course, by right of our position, we were among the *elite* of the village, but it was sometimes pretty hard to live in the fashion that our dignity required. Father’s cares were much more numerous and heavy than his fees. There were plenty of people who wanted the pleasure of going to law, but none who were willing to pay adequately for the pastime, so that if it had not been for the fifty-acred farm, where Fred worked in the college vacations, and where Will delved all the year round, we should have fared poorly indeed. As it was, papa could not get away to the mountains, nor mamma afford the expense of a trip to the seashore. This was why we grudged the extra expense that Patsy entailed upon us.

Why should she idle about, doing nothing but enjoy herself, while we worked, and pinched, and stayed mowed up in sober little Redclyffe? This was what Rose wanted to know.

We all loved Redclyffe, though. It was a small town, of one street, the houses scattered along upon it, like beads upon a string.

Our house was large, square and roomy—a genuine old country house, with which no sacrilegious hand had ever ventured to tamper. It was set in a green, turfy front yard; there were lilacs, and guelder roses, and similar old-fashioned shrubs about; two graceful larches that cheered the dreariness of winter, and a row of cherry-trees, just inside the fence, that hung heavy with luscious globes every year, and allured all the birds in the vicinage.

On one side of us was the parsonage; opposite, the two Misses Hammond lived, in their cosy cottage; on the other side, the orchard ran over the slopes of the hill, till the land fell steeply to a pretty brook that ran through the valley; then the little plank-bridge, and again the smooth, green hill, rising to the church.

Redclyffe was the quietest place in the world. One or two tourists, who had chanced upon it, had been enthusiastic in praise of its wealth of meadow and woodland scenery, but no notoriety grew out of it, no visitors came to admire, and you might walk the street for months, and never meet an unfamiliar face.

I was out in the yard, the morning after Patsy's arrival, tying up roses. Nobody had yet seen Patsy that morning. We had our breakfast early, as usual, and then the coffee had been replaced on the stove, and the muffins nicely covered with napkins, and the cream and butter set into the ice chest, and the table left in the floor, in order that a fresh and comfortable meal might be ready for my aunt, when she should come down.

"I suppose poor Patsy is tired with her journey," said papa.

"I shouldn't think there could be anything terrily fatiguing in a journey of twenty miles by rail," said Rose, sarcastically.

"Ah, my dear, Patsy is not so strong as your country maidens," said papa, in his most indulgent tone.

Rose looked indignant, and mamma imploring, but Rose held her peace. We move about very softly, all the morning, so as not to disturb that renovating slumber. Rose refrained from practice, Nora was cautioned against slamming doors, and the whole house was as still and cool as possible.

It was nine o'clock, and the sun began to get above the tops of the cherry-trees, and to shine down rather insolently upon me. I gathered up tacks, and tape, and hammer, preparatory to going in; just at this moment, a bright head appeared at a window above.

"O, there you are, Bell! There's a flower to wish you good-morning."

“O Patsy! My heliotrope! Pray, don’t break off any more. It is its first blossoming, you know.”

A saucy laugh came back to me, and then I heard the patter of quick feet over the stairs. She came out, fresh and pretty in her white pique, her pink cheeks glowing, her eyes clear and bright, her crinkling hair partly tucked away under a bewitching morning-cap.

“O, how cool and pleasant it is here! But how dreadfully still!” she exclaimed.

“I like the stillness.”

“Do you? That is because you are used to it. Now I should find it *triste*. No music, no theatre, no amusement of any sort—”

“We are too busy to wish for amusements,” I interrupted. “Not but that I should like to go to the opera sometimes, but I am sure that to live for such things is a terrible waste of opportunities.

Patsy put her head on one side, and eyed me curiously.

“What a funny little saint you are, Bell! You remind me of a pair of pretty Quaker girls that I saw at a street corner last summer. Everybody was stopping to look at them, just as they would at a bunch of May-flowers, or any other sweet country thing. Such pure, fresh complexions, wide, innocent blue eyes, smooth, soft brown hair, all hid away under demure white cape-bonnets. You’re just such a prim little body, as ignorant of the world’s ways as if you had lived in a Friends’ neighborhood all your life.”

“The world’s way is, I suppose, to take care of itself,” I said.

“To be sure! And why not? Who’ll care for you, if you don’t care for yourself? Am I not the most important person alive to myself? And is not self-preservation the first law of nature?”

“Of a selfish nature—yes!”

“All people are selfish. Self-abnegation sounds very prettily as a theory, and reads charmingly in a poem or novel; but, applied to life, it is terribly dismal.”

“Did you ever try it?” I said, dryly.

“Try it? No indeed!” And she laughed gayly. “I don’t believe in it. My nature revolts at it.”

“That is because you are unregenerate.”

“I hope to remain so, then. I don’t pretend to any goodness.”

Rose leaned down from her window.

“Nobody ever suspected you of any goodness!” she said, quietly.

Patsy put on a look of injured innocence.

“Nobody ever appreciated me, of course,” she said, in a serio-comic tone. “That is the usual fate of merit. You are particularly hard upon me. And all because I want to be rich, and gay, and idle, and happy.”

“But how are you going to compass it, Patsy?” I asked.

“I will confide it to you, Bell. By a rich marriage,” she said, with great pretence of gravity.

“Really, my dear aunt, you have the merit of frankness, and that is a very uncommon one, in these days.”

“My dear Bell, you never call me aunt, except when you are angry with me. I’m glad, though, you allow me the possession of one good quality. I have several. And one is penetration. Now here you and Rose are thinking in this way—‘What in the world has Aunt Patsy to do with marriage—this old creature with her rouge’—I only rouge the least bit in the world, girls—‘and her gray temple-locks, and her pearl-powder, and all her made-up beauty?’ But, my dears, I shall charm all your lovers away in a week. Hush! Who is this?”

It was Caspar Goldthwaite. Caspar was not exactly Rose’s lover. There had been no spoken promises between them, but a great deal of intimate intercourse, of that admiration and tenderness, one side, and that shy happiness, on the other, that naturally leads up to an engagement. If he had not put his love into words, it was none the less avowed. We all called Caspar a splendid fellow, and so he was; talented, cultured, generous, frank, mirthful, lacking a little, perhaps, in steadiness of purpose, but that was because he was young; never found wanting in principle or high-heartedness. He came up, with his genial, self-possessed air, not in the least dismayed by Aunt Patsy’s presence.

“Mr. Goldthwaite, Miss Earle! Mr. Goldthwaite is papa’s student, Patsy.”

They shook hands. Patsy was very pretty, as I have told you, and Caspar had appreciative eyes, and could anybody wonder that in the few minutes that followed, his eyes sought her often, and lingered upon the fair face, the slender white hands, the thousand pretty attitudes which she seemed to take unconsciously? For Patsy was an incorrigible coquette, and couldn’t have talked with Mike, the hired man five minutes, without instinctively putting forth all her allurements. So, in five minutes, her talk with Caspar put on the air of a flirtation.

“Where did you get those charming water-lilies, Mr. Goldthwaite? Would it be asking too much to beg for one?”

“By no means. Pray, choose for yourself. Take as many as you like, “ said Caspar, gallantly.

“O, you are too kind! There, I’ll take these two.” And she chose two half-open flowers. “One for my hair, you know;” and the little white hands were busy for an instant among the mass of fluffy, fair hair. “There! is that pretty?” bending her head towards him, with a charmingly innocent air.

“Beautiful!” he said, gazing straight into her eyes.

They drooped in sweet confusion. It was such a natural trick, that it was no wonder a neophyte like Caspar would take it for genuine. He colored, looked confused, and glanced around towards Rose, who sat apparently blind and deaf, and sewing as if her work were the most important matter in the universe.

“Here, Rose, will you have the rest?” tossing them towards her.

They missed their aim, and fell, tangled in the bushes of sweet-brier that grew below the window.

“O me! What a shame!” cried Patsy. “Rose, are you going to let them lie there?”

“You can pick them up yourself, if you like,” said Rose, coldly. “I don’t care for them.”

Now this, considering that Caspar had been off on the lake that morning on purpose to get them for her, was rather hard. Patsy’s eyes twinkled. Caspar reddened, bid us a hasty good-morning, and strode off down the path.

“O Mr. Goldthwaite!” Patsy called, hastily.

He turned back.

“Are you going past the express office?”

Caspar was going there. Had she any commands for him?

“O, if you would be good enough to inquire if my lost trunk came on the train this morning.”

Now one of Aunt Patsy’s peculiarities was, always to lose some article of luggage when she travelled, and it was generally the work of a week, after she came to us, to get her possessions together.

Caspar said he would be most happy to oblige her.

“Why, Patsy, papa said he would look in when he came to dinner.”

But Patsy did not hear. She was tripping down to the turfy path to the gate.

“O Patsy, you’ll soil your dress!” I cried, as the immaculate pique trailed over the dew-wet grass.

But she only threw back a merry laugh; and now, having reached Caspar, she had so much to say about the missing trunk—at least, one must suppose it was all about that—that the minutes slipped away, one after another, and the sun grew more and more uncomfortable, so that at last I went in. Rose had drawn the blind close where she sat, and was sewing very fast, with a look on her face that I did not like to see.

“Now, Rose, pray don’t let anything that Patsy can do make you unhappy,” I said, earnestly.

Rose looked up quickly. Her face, that could be so sweet, was proud and cold.

“Don’t give yourself any uneasiness, Bell,” she said, haughtily. “My happiness is not so much in Caspar Goldthwait’s keeping, that his surrender to Aunt Patsy’s fascinations can destroy it.”

Ah! That was all very well to say. But would it be so easy to throw the idol from the pedestal, and to give up that sweet dream which had just begun to charm?

Before a week was at an end, I heartily wished Aunt Patsy at the antipodes. Caspar came in two or three times every day, and always in the evening. One sunny, warm morning he came, the excuse being to get a book from Rose. The cool parlor was half-darkened, much to the advantage of Patsy’s looks. She sat in one corner of the lounge, her pretty hands gracefully folded in her lap. All her attitudes were the perfection of ease. Caspar looked at her, while he made his request to see Rose. I took up the rondo I was playing, saying, coolly:

“Rose is out in the kitchen, ironing Patsy’s muslins, and there are so many to do, that unless you are very particular about it, I had rather not disturb her.”

Caspar looked puzzled and dismayed.

“Rose is the nicest getter-up of muslins that I ever saw,” said my aunt, precisely as if Rose had been a laundry-woman.

I’m afraid that the piano suffered for my vexation. In the midst of a passage that I played with more vigor than was necessary, Caspar got up to go.

“O, pray don’t go now, Mr. Goldthwaite,” cooed my aunt. “Come here and tell me the news, please.”

Caspar yielded, as he always did. I had begun to despise him. I have no patience with weak men. And it was such a disappointment to find Caspar one. They talked under cover of my practice, till my curiosity overcame me. I stopped then.

“What were you saying, Caspar, about some one having taken the Carlin place?”

The Carlin place was a fine, old-fashioned house, with a rich farm attached, that, since the demise of the last member of the family, had been shut up, and allowed to fall into ruin. It was a dream of Redclyffe that some rich man would some time buy the Carlin estate, and make the old

mansion what it had once been, the nucleus of the village society. And this accounts for my vivid interest.

“I said that the house had been taken—by a stranger—a Mr. Armstrong.”

“Mr. Armstrong?” That sounded good and substantial. “Who is he? Has he bought the place? Or has he only rented it? Has he a family? Is he a man of means?”

Caspar playfully held up his hand, and told off my questions *a seriatim* upon his fingers.

“Mr. Armstrong says he is a retired merchant. He has not bought the place. He has rented it, with, however, the option of purchase at the end of six months. He is, I believe, a bachelor; and he seems to have money at command.”

I don't think Caspar caught the sudden gleam of interest that lit Aunt Patsy's eyes. But it did not escape me, and instantly a certain hope sprang to life in my heart.

“And how came this rich Mr. Armstrong to think of coming to little Redclyffe?” said Aunt Patsy, in her softest tone.

“He says he passed through the town once, and was struck by its remarkable beauty. And he wants quiet.”

Aunt Patsy lifted her hands.

“He has certainly come to the right place to find it.”

“But he doesn't want monastic seclusion,” said Caspar, smiling, “and he already complains of craving for society. May I take the liberty of bringing him up here this evening?” And Caspar turned to me.

“If papa is willing.”

“O, he brought letters to your father, from people of the highest respectability,” Caspar said, at once.

I went out and told the news to mamma and Rose. Poor, dear Rose was sitting in the porch, leaning her head upon the door, looking flushed and weary.

“And since he is rich and unmarried, I hope Aunt may find her fate in him,” I said, abruptly.

“You should not say that, Bell, when you see how great is Caspar's interest in her,” said Rose.

She tried to make her voice quite steady, but I detected the tremor that it was impossible to conceal.

“It is only Caspar’s fancy that is charmed,” I said. “His heart is not touched; that is fixed where it always has been—ever since he knew my sister Rose,” I added, softly.

Rose got up, all the vivid color gone from her face, her eyes bright and cold.

“Bell, I think it is best you should understand me—because, two or three times you have spoken as if you thought Caspar would by-and-by come back to me, and I would gladly receive him.” There was an indignant thrill in her voice here, and it was a moment before she went on. “But it will not be so. I don’t understand the distinction between fancy and affection. I don’t know but a man can love one woman with one part of his nature and another with the rest. But that is not the way women love. That is not my idea of love. And I don’t want anyone whom I can’t possess wholly.”

Her fine, clearly-cut face looked exceedingly proud and tense when she said this. I wondered where all the sweetness was; I thought it would be hard for a lover to plead to a mistress that looked like that. But I ventured a remonstrance.

“Indeed, indeed, Rose, it is partly your fault. You are unduly proud and sensitive—”

“Pride belongs to a woman, in such cases as this. It is her only armor, and Heaven help her, if she hasn’t it,” she interrupted.

“Heaven help her, if she has too much of it! Your pride took fire at the outset; you might have kept him then, if you had chosen—”

“As though I would make the least movement to keep a vacillating heart!” she said, with flashing eyes.

“You needn’t have taken pains to be disagreeable,” I persisted. “Dear Rose, pray don’t make a mistake here. This is all play on Patsy’s part. She never means to marry a penniless young lawyer. And I don’t think Caspar has sinned beyond forgiveness. He may have been weak—”

She made a gesture of impatience.

“Weakness is wickedness, always!” And so, with this apothegm, which is, after all, only true in the general way, she sailed out of the room, like a wronged queen.

That is not too grand a comparison. Rose was dressed in a shilling print, and her smooth, dark hair was pushed away from her hot forehead, and her eyes were strained and tired, and her hands flushed with the contact with the flat-iron. But all this did not spoil her beauty and dignity, and beautiful, dignified women were what Caspar admired. Patsy was pretty in a small way, and had a multitude of winning wiles to lure men’s fancy withal, and these had fascinated Caspar. But I doubted if she had won his heart, and I was sure he would some time understand her, and be disenchanted. This was to come about much sooner than I anticipated.

In the evening Caspar came, and with him a tall man who wore a beard, black, and copious, and handsome enough to have graced an Austrian hussar. Mr. Armstrong, of course.

Aunt Patsy rose from her *neglige* attitude in a corner of the sofa with a flutter of muslins and laces, and welcomed the stranger with charming cordiality. There was so much *empressement* in her manner that I am sure Mr. Armstrong must have immediately risen to his own estimation materially.

He sat down murmuring some commonplace in a deep, melodious bass voice. Nora brought more lights. Rose came in, pale and beautiful, and dignified. A playful conversation sprang up, and under cover of it I watched Mr. Armstrong.

He interested me curiously. He had a certain brigandish aspect. With his dark, scintillating eyes, his manner, peculiar and gallant, his style of dress somewhat foreign and altogether graceful, he was a man to delight a romantic girl. But as I am very matter-of-fact he only puzzled me.

I soon found that his handsome face was a perfect mask. What operations went on behind it, who could guess? He had a singularly repulsive, mechanical smile. I could not help fancying that he was aware of my scrutiny. Sometimes he would flash a cold, bright look upon me that was very uncomfortable.

He knew how to draw people out. Here was Aunt Patsy talking to him familiarly, of her city friends, an incredible number of whom he knew by name, going into details with a profuseness and freedom that rather shocked my country ideas of reticence. I longed to beg her to be silent. I felt an unconquerable distrust of our new friend. Not so Patsy. She danced about the parlor after the gentlemen were gone.

“Isn’t he splendid?” she cried, ecstatically.

“Who? Caspar?”

“Poor Caspar! a pretty, beardless boy,” said Patsy, with contempt. “You know I mean Mr. Armstrong.”

“Ah! But does he really dye his beard, do you think?” I asked.

“How frightfully envious you are, Bell!” said my aunt, much displeased. “I don’t wonder though that you can’t appreciate a gentleman—only having the society of lawyers’ clerks.”

Caspar! His star sank suddenly in the gloom of neglect. Did he call? Patsy was too tired to come down. Did he ask her to walk or ride? She had always some ingenious excuse.

“It is evident that Patsy doesn’t mean the old love shall be in the way of the new,” I said, to Rose.

But Rose’s beautiful blue eyes would not soften into pity.

“Caspar will speedily see his folly,” I continued.

Rose got up and left the room.

“Was ever woman in such humor won?” I said, in my vexation.

A week—a month passed. Mr. Armstrong had become very intimate at our house, and nobody could fail to see that Patsy was the attraction. He scarcely exchanged a word with Rose or me till a little occurrence that drew us temporarily together.

Rose came into the parlor one afternoon, and turned over the books and papers on the table in evident uneasiness.

“Are you looking for anything, Miss Rose? Can I help you?” said Mr. Armstrong, politely.

“It is my brooch,” said Rose. “I am afraid I have lost it.”

I laid down my book.

“Ah, Rose! Is it the pretty, pink coral one that Aunt Patsy gave you?”

“Yes! the chain became detached from it this afternoon, and I was afraid I would lose the pin, and so I took it out and laid it on the table behind the vase there, thinking to carry it upstairs in a moment. But I forgot it till a minute ago.”

We were all busily searching for it now, for such elegant trifles did not come easily to Rose or me. This had strayed out of Aunt Patsy’s opulent casket in a moment of rare generosity.

“Never mind, Rose! I’ll give you another,” said Patsy, with the air of a princess.

Still we did not intermit our efforts. Books were opened, table mats were shaken, cushions overturned, sly corners ransacked—Mr. Armstrong assisting us with great courtesy and interest.

At last he said:

“May it not have been thrown out of the window?”

“Why, Mr. Armstrong, how could that happen?”

“Perhaps the kitten might have made a plaything of it?”

So out among the green grass under the window we hunted in vain.

As I said, this brought Mr. Armstrong into more familiar acquaintance with us. His daily inquiries as to whether the missing brooch had been found was apt to lead on to a discussion

concerning precious gems in which Mr. Armstrong showed himself a connoisseur. His knowledge of such things was remarkable.

“I suspect the Armstrong family jewels are something quite wonderful,” said Aunt Patsy, one day.

Mr. Armstrong’s peculiar smile gleamed over his face. I had become used to him lately, but it impressed me anew with its extraordinary repulsiveness.

“Well, yes!” he admitted. “The Armstrong jewels were somewhat valuable.” And he gave us a description of carbuncles, emeralds and pearls that were heirlooms, as he said—dilating on their splendor till we could seem to see them in all their dazzling glory.

A day or two after this Aunt Patsy came down to breakfast—an occurrence in itself sufficiently wonderful. But she was also looking extremely fresh, and was doing her best at blushing. She succeeded, however, only in looking very much pleased, as, dropping her head on papa’s shoulder, she whispered something in his ear.

“Engaged!” said papa, in a solemn, pathetic tone. He always treated her as if she had been a child of sixteen.

Patsy drew out her lace-trimmed handkerchief, and made a feint of wiping away invisible tears.

“Dear Will,” she said, faintly. “I couldn’t help it, indeed.”

“I hope, my dear, that you don’t want to help it,” said papa, smiling. “But it is a step involving grave consequences!”

“I know it, Will,” said Patsy demurely, “and I would not take it without your approbation.” And the pretty handkerchief was again called into use.

“What are you crying about, Patsy?” growled Fred. “You’ve got at last what you wanted—a rich husband—for of course it is Mr. Armstrong.”

Patsy owned it with unconcealed triumph, and as papa’s consent was accompanied by a promise of material aid, she was more than satisfied. And then she says—really embarrassed now:

“Mr. Armstrong proposes that we shall go abroad in October. We shall return in the spring, and then he will purchase the Carlin place and build a magnificent mansion for a summer house.”

“In October?” cried mamma. “And it is September now.”

“In a great hurry,” muttered Fred, surily. Fred’s star had also paled of late.

“Well, well, child! we’ll get you ready,” laughed papa. “Here’s something to begin with.” And he put a fresh, crisp note into her hand.

And now Patsy's multitude of adoring friends were immediately written to, and every mail brought congratulations and presents. Before many days we were deep in the bridal paraphernalia.

Mr. Armstrong's constant presence during this anxious busy time was, on the whole, an annoyance, but as Patsy encouraged it nobody presumed object. He was fairly domesticated at our house, came in and out at all hours, and disposed of himself as he chose. And all this time where was Caspar?

Papa said he was hard at work in the office. From being somewhat unreliable and careless he had suddenly become the most diligent of students. Mamma and I confided to each other our opinion that it was pleasant to hear creditable news of Caspar if we could not see him. Rose said not a word, but with that unrelenting look on her face that made me so angry, sat and sewed, and sewed upon Patsy's things as if there were no Caspar Goldthwaite in the world.

And so swiftly came round the bright October. It was only the day before the wedding, and there were innumerable last stitches still to be set. We were all sitting in a mist of muslin, and *tulle*, and a shimmer of silk, when papa came in unexpectedly.

"Why, William!"

It was mamma's voice, startled, frightened. We all looked up. Papa's face was pale and grave.

"O William, what is it?"

She was at his side, and we all waited trembling.

"I have met with a loss," said papa. "Coupon bonds to the amount of a thousand dollars have been stolen from my safe. I fancied I could keep them there securely. But they are gone. It is a good deal for us to lose."

There was a dead silence. Who could be the robber?

"Do you suspect any one?" said mamma, in a low voice. Papa hesitated. The dreadful truth flashed upon mamma in a moment.

"William, you don't"—she faltered.

Papa's voice was hoarse and unnatural when he spoke.

"Caspar Goldthwaite has disappeared since last night, and no one knows where he has gone."

We sat petrified. Nobody uttered a word. At last Patsy cried out:

"Look at Rose!" And went off into hysterical sobbing.

“Patsy, my love, calm yourself,” said Mr. Armstrong, in a sympathetic voice. “Dear Miss Rose, it is terrible to be betrayed by one in whom you have confided, but let us believe the young man had some strong temptation.”

Rose looked up at him. The intensity of the fire in her eyes illuminated her face with cold, white light. She started up, drew back a step—for Mr. Armstrong had approached her—and said, in sharp, clear accents:

“Caspar Goldthwaite is not a robber! No one need tell me so. He might do a weak thing—he would never do a base one.”

The last words quivered from her pale lips, and she sank down fainting. We were a grave party that evening. I sat by Rose after her recovery, till the bright eyes that so haunted me shut, and she slept. Then I went down stairs.

They were all together in the parlor. Papa had telegraphed his loss to Boston, and a detective would be put at once upon Caspar’s track. This was Mr. Armstrong’s suggestion.

“I would rather have given away the money than have lost faith in that boy,” said papa. “How is Rose, my dear?”

I told him, and then Mr. Armstrong spoke of her touching confidence in Caspar, and the shock it must have been to her. Indeed, it had been a terrible shock to himself, he said. He was indeed pale, and his eyes gleamed out like stars from under the coal-black brows. He looked very handsome in a certain *outré* bandit style.

“There!” cried Patsy, suddenly. “I don’t doubt that wretch stole Rose’s coral brooch. Don’t you remember, Bell? He hasn’t been here since.”

The idea of Caspar engaged in such petit larceny somehow struck me as so ludicrous that I laughed.

“It is no laughing matter, Bell,” said my aunt, surprised and vexed. “To think that we have been cherishing a viper in our bosoms! Dear, dear! We don’t know whom to trust. I declare I don’t feel safe about my presents.”

They were all on the buffet in the dining-room—many of them solid silver, and all unique and costly.

“Why, Patsy, if Caspar took the money, he has gone away.”

“You don’t know, Bell. He may have an accomplice,” she said, nervously. “I’m positive I shan’t sleep a wink to-night.”

“O, that would never do,” said Mr. Armstrong. “If you think you would feel any safer—” he hesitated.

“What, Arthur?”

“I was going to say I could sleep here to-night.”

Patsy caught eagerly at this, and papa seconding the plan, it was so decided.

At ten o'clock the house was still. I looked in upon Rose. She was still sleeping—the sleep of exhaustion. I think her emotions had been kept at such a terrible tension so long that reaction was inevitable. My heart grew bitter towards Caspar as I bent over and kissed her. Then I went away to my own room. But it was a long time before I could sleep. I lay watching the crescent moon slow falling to the west, and thinking—could this be true of Caspar Goldthwaite?

The moon was out of sight before I feel asleep. Then disturbed dreams haunted me, from which I woke suddenly. What was that noise? I was sure I had heard a faint sound below! Burglars? But I had not shared Patsy's nervous tremors, and a moment's though dissipated that fear. It must be Hero, who having been shut up in the hall, was becoming weary of her confinement.

I rose hastily, threw on a wrapper, and went down stairs noiselessly. But Hero was not in the hall. Then I remembered seeing her upon the rug before the dining-room fire, when I went to bed. I turned the knob softly, pushed open the door, and stopped aghast.

The room was lighted. Two large valises stood open on the floor. Aunt Patsy's silver, her jewel-cases, her rare and costly bijouterie lay scattered about in confusion, and in the midst knelt Mr. Armstrong, cramming them into the valises in haste. A second—it may be that the draught from the open door startled him—and he looked around. With an oath he sprang to his feet, his hand clenched my arm in a grasp like iron, his baleful eyes glared upon me, a pistol, a pistol clicked at my ear.

“Make the slightest noise, and I'll kill you,” he said, fiercely.

A minute passed. I suppose he felt me tremble under his hands, for presently he drew me in, released me, and with his hateful smile said:

“Well! You are surprised, Miss Bell!”

“I am,” I said, finding my voice and courage. “Did you mean to carry away those things?”

“I do mean it!”

“And it was you who took the coupon bonds, and not Caspar at all,” I exclaimed, my voice rising in my indignation.

Again the revolver came near my forehead.

“Take care, my dear young lady, or you will drive me to a thing that I am very reluctant to do. If you should scream out, you know, my bullet would have done its work, and I should be gone before any one would come. And you would never know it.”

“Take away your revolver! I shall not scream unless you frighten me into doing it. And even then I don’t think you would shoot me, because that could not help your flight, and would only make your detection more certain.”

“Very well reasoned, Miss Bell. And yet it is not safe to calculate upon what a desperate man may do. You are a confounded hindrance to me, you see. Ah! I have it. You shall finish packing the things while I keep guard,” he said, coolly.

“Thank you! You honor me too much by choosing me for your accomplice,” I said. But I began to pick up the morocco cases that were lying about. The lid of one unclosed, a delicate rose color shone out.

“Why! this is Rose’s brooch—that you tried to help us find,” I said, in my amazement.

“Certainly!” he returned, with the utmost nonchalance. “What else could I do, as a gentleman?”

I stood up looking at him.

“You never meant to marry my aunt!”

“At fist I did, but not lately. The little hypocrite deceived me. I thought she had a handsome fortune, and I meant to settle down upon it and live like an honest gentleman. But I found out the cheat. Then I was forced to indemnify myself in the way you see.”

“Yes, I see! I thought you were a villain from the first.” He smiled.

“I was aware of that. Your perspicacity does you great credit. Miss Bell, I hope you will meet with all manner of good fortune, and that your pretty sister’s lover will return and make her happy. He is a fine fellow, really, and I am sorry that his reputation should have suffered temporarily on my account. And now, to secure my own safety—shall I be obliged to confine you to this chair?” And a long coil of new small cord unwound before me.

“O, I beg you wont do that!” I cried, in terror.

“If I could trust you not to make an alarm!” he said, looking at me doubtfully. “Even if you should arouse the house in would avail nothing. I have a friend outside waiting for me. We are both well armed. You are too far from neighbors to call them to your assistance in season—your father could interpose no obstacle to our flight that would avail, and if he attempted any it would be at the cost of bloodshed.”

This was all true. I reflected a moment.

“I will promise you to keep quiet until you are out of the house,” I said, presently.

“Well! That will do. We shall be able to baffle pursuit.”

He took up the two valises.

“I am glad I persuaded your aunt not to have her silver marked with her name. That would have been awkward, wouldn't it? Good-by!”

I was silent.

“You wont bid me good-by then? But will you give my love to Patsy, and tell her how sorry I am that I cannot remain to [fulfill] our engagement.”

He shouldered his booty and passed stealthily out into the hall. In a moment the front door opened softly—then, breaking harshly upon the silence, I heard a shout, a pistol shot, a heavy fall. I ran out. A lantern in somebody's hand flashed a light over the scene. Mr. Armstrong lay wounded on the floor.

I am no heroine, and this last occurrence was the climax of my fright. Everything swam in a mist before me, and then went out altogether. When I came to myself I was lying on the sofa in the dining-room, and mamma and Caspar were standing over me.

“O Caspar!” I cried, remembering it all instantly. “Was he taken?”

“The rascal! Yes! He's safe in jail by this time,” said Caspar.

“Poor Patsy! O mamma, how is she?”

“In hysterics.”

“I dare say they wont be fatal,” said Caspar, dryly.

“That is a very hard-hearted speech, Caspar, considering everything.”

Caspar colored and looked so much ashamed that I pitied him, and forgave him too—the more readily since the *quasi* lover was arrested through his efforts, It seemed that Caspar had suspected something, and had gone to the city on purpose to look up Mr. Armstrong's antecedents. He obtained such information there as led to his speedy return accompanied by officers.

Papa got his coupon bonds back—and this, too, was owing to Caspar. So I composed quite a touching speech which was to induce Rose to forgive him. But when I went to her one day to make it, I found Caspar there, also, and speedily guessed that my entreaties would be superfluous. Aunt Patsy recovered her spirits in time, and this experience materially modified her

character. She grew so unselfish and helpful that when, two years later, an old lover came down and was accepted, we were genuinely sorry to lose her.

Flag of Our Union, April 6, 1867