

(Continued from page 40.)

Though in exquisite torture every moment lest the fair visitor should address some question to me and oblige me to speak, yet I enjoyed being where I could look into her bewitching face immensely. She had such blue eyes, and such cherry lips! And those lips had kissed me! I blushed red hot to think of it, and my good mother anxiously commented on my high color, saying she was afraid I was going to have the erysipelas. Erysipelas, indeed!

It rained all the afternoon. Florence stayed to tea, and by the time the meal was over I had broken two plates, knocked down a saucer, upset the cream-pitcher and nearly cut the end of my thumb off with my knife. Also, the rain had ceased and it was dark.

Florence declared she could not stop another moment. Her friends would be alarmed about her; she must go at once. My mother urged her to remain all night. But she could not think of it; and while she was arranging her wraps, my mother beckoned to me in the entry.

"Roy, she said, decisively, "Florence should not go home alone."

"I can't help it," said I doggedly. "I guess nothing will devour her on her journey."

"My son," she exclaimed with just severity, "I cannot permit you to speak in that way of one whom I so highly respect. It is ungentlemanly! your father is absent, the servant is busy, and Florence has a full half-mile to walk. You will attend her home!"

My limbs trembled under me. I would have darted from the back door, and left my mother's favorite to shift for herself; but my austere relative had kept a firm hold of my arm, and without further parley, drew me back to the parlor.

"If you must go," she said to Florence, "I will not urge you. Roy shall walk home with you."

Florence opened wide her blue eyes in evident astonishment; and, as for me, the whole creation was in a whirl! The room went round and round like a top—I was obliged to grasp the back of a chair to keep me from falling—I was penetrated with speechless dismay.

"Roy, Florence is waiting," said my unrelenting mother.

There was no appeal. To use a vulgar; but expressive phrase, "I was in for it," and nerved by a desperate courage, which sometimes comes to the aid of the weak in great extremities, I flung open the door, blundered down the steps and out into the street. Florence followed leisurely behind, shut the gate after her and fastened the latch. How I envied her provoking coolness.

We went on—she on one side of the road, and I on the other, and about three yards in advance of her. By and by, when we had proceeded in utter silence for a quarter of a mile, my companion said, demurely:

"Roy, you can get over the fence, and go in the field, and I'll keep the road."

The little jade was quizzing me! I could not endure her ridicule, so forthwith I made a sort of flying leap to her side of the street, spattering the mud in every direction as I landed beside her. I had just begun to think how much better the footing was on that side-walk than on the one I had left, when I heard somebody whistling, and looking up, I saw Will Richardson, a mutual acquaintance, approaching. The cold perspiration started to my brow—how could I endure to be seen going home with a girl? I could not. No, never! The idea was out of the question! I flew to the wall, sprang over, and threw myself down behind a pile of stones.

I heard Will and Florence laughing together in a vastly amused way—and then she took his arm and off they went! I shook my clenched hand after them! At that moment I could have cudged Will without compunction.

The ridiculous story of my adventure got wind; and no doubt Will spread it, and I was the laughing stock of the village. My mother gave me a sound berating, and my staid, punctilious father administered the severest rebuke of all—he said I was a disgrace to my ancestors.

I managed to live through it, though, and a few months later entered college. I will not linger on the days spent with my Alma Mater; the history of the scrapes which my mischief loving students got me into during those four years would fill three volumes of octavo.

At the end of the prescribed time I graduated with the highest honors, for I had always been a most determined book-worm; and with my diploma in my pocket, I returned home.

My friends were rejoiced to see me, they said, and Aunt Alice informed me that I had improved wonderfully in manners, as well as looks; she thought me decidedly handsome, she said, which remark, I privately concluded, was about as sensible as any I had ever heard her make.

The day following my arrival home, my mother spoke of Florence. I had been longing to ask about her, but dared not hazard the question. My mother thought I ought to call on the Hay family, we had always been intimate, she said, and it would be no more than courteous for me to surprise them with my presence.

I told her the truth. I should be extremely happy to do so, but lacked the courage.

"Mother," said I, frankly, "you know my cardinal failing. Be merciful unto me. I should only make a fool of myself."

"I will make an errand for you," she replied, quickly; "Mrs. Hay is troubled with a cough, and she wanted some of my tomatoe preserves for it. You shall carry them over."

Ah! it takes a woman to manage things; depend on that.

I caught eagerly at the suggestion, for the imaged face of Florence Hay had obtruded between my eyes and endless Greek roots a great many times during the past four years. I was glad of an excuse to see once more the face itself.

Armed with my letter of introduction, a glass jar of tomatoes, and arrayed in my best suit, I rang the bell at the door of Mr. Hay. A servant girl admitted and showed me directly into the room where Florence was sitting.

How very beautiful she had grown during my absence. I had never seen so fair a vision. She rose at my entrance, and bowing with inimitable grace, extended her hand.

"Am I right in believing that I have the pleasure of addressing Mr. Sunderland?" she said with gentle politeness.

I bowed—the jar slipped from my grasp and fell to the floor; I made a hasty movement to take the hand she offered me, and in so doing, I put my foot on the jar; it was crushed to atoms, and the seeds and syrup flew in every direction. The obstacle beneath my feet made me stagger; I grasped the folds of a window-curtain in the hope of saving myself, but my equilibrium was too far gone—down came the curtain, over I went, head first against the flower stand, on which were a nondescript array of flower pots, a canary bird in a cage, and a big Maltese cat in a basket.

The force of my fall upset the stand, with all its favorites it went over on the carpet. Cat, bird, cage, plants and Roy Sunderland, all lay in one mass of ruin together at the feet of the astonished Miss Hay. The cat was the first to recover her presence of mind and with a "midnight cry" which would have appalled the stoutest heart, she sprang into my face, tearing up the skin with a violence worthy of the admiration of all persons who believe in the wisdom of "getting at the root of a matter" at once.

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

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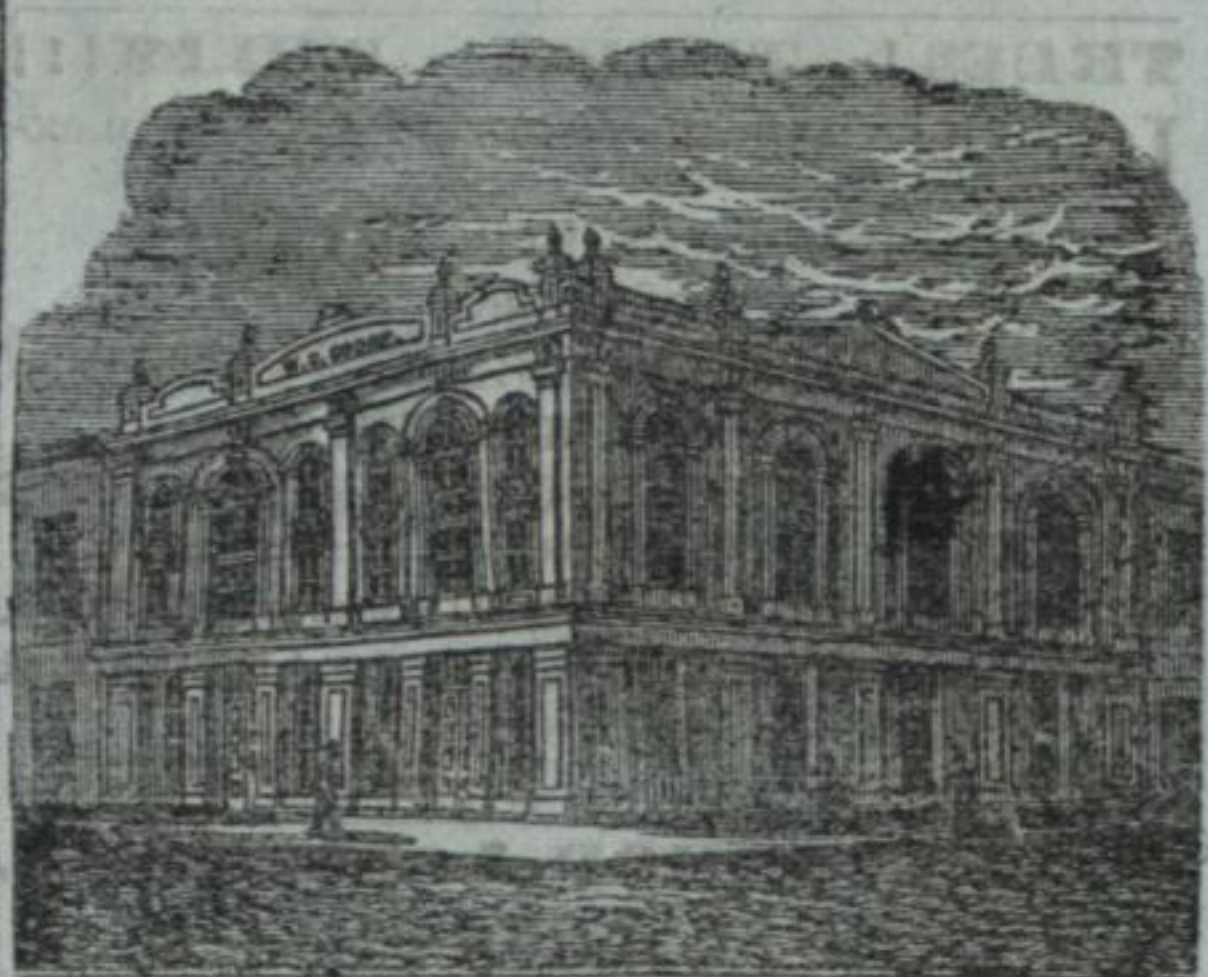
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