

CHAPTER IV.

GRETCHEN.

"O, what shall I do?" wailed Tom, as she wandered away down by the little brook which trailed its shining course through her aunt's meadow. It was the next evening after Loffden's proposal, and she had gone out and wandered away down into the meadow alone, as was her wont when her heart was troubled; "O, what shall I do? Shall I marry him, when I love another? Marry for money that my sister may live in luxury, while I, broken hearted, to die in misery, in wretchedness? for I can't live with him and love another—O, I can't, I can't!"

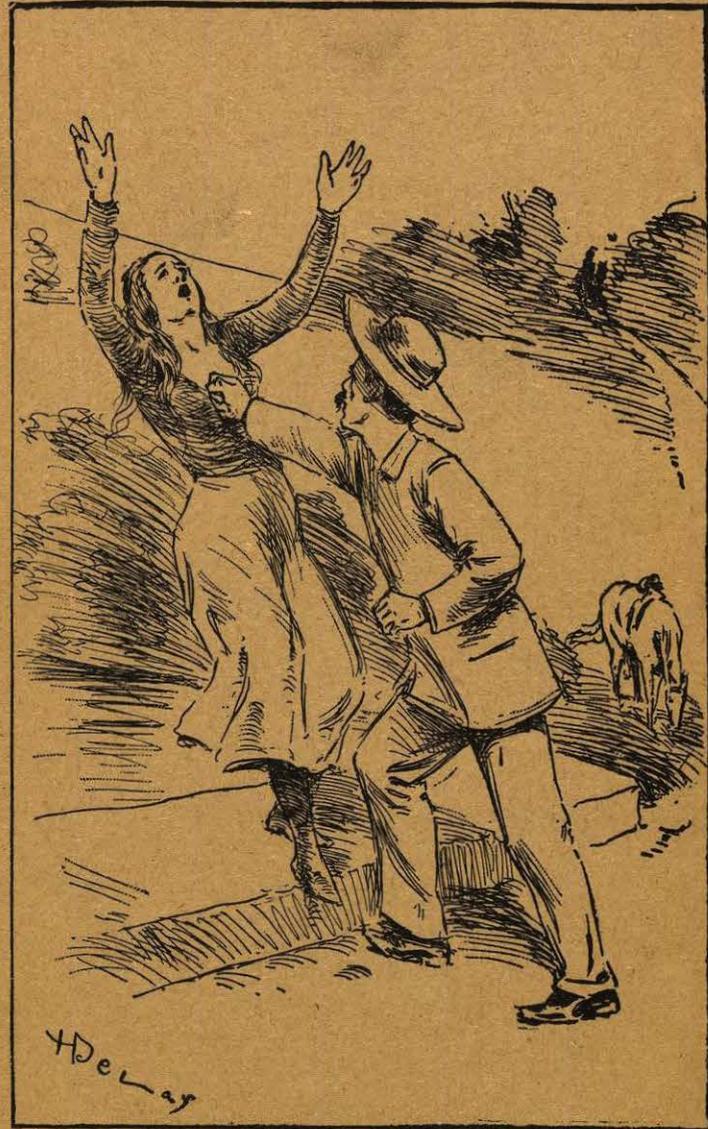
"I will tell you what to do!" came a low, passionate voice close behind her, "Don't marry Silas Loffden!"

With a cry of terror, Tom turned and beheld a wretched, miserable looking girl standing close behind her.

"Who are you?" asked Tom, recovering from her fright, when she beheld the wretched girl.

"Nobody!" cried the girl bitterly, "but I was somebody once. Yes, as light hearted and as free as you. Silas Loffden won my love and I became his happy bride, or I supposed that I had. A few months of happiness and then, O God! I was cast away for another, and when I followed him, he told me that I was no wife. My baby lies buried over there at Amboy and I, an out-cast, without home and without friends will, I pray

(40)



THE CLINCHED FIST DESCENDED UPON THE DEFENSELESS GIRL. P. 44.

God, soon follow her. Heed my warning, beautiful girl—shun Silas Loffden as you would a viper!”

When Tom returned to her home that evening, pale and careworn, there was a set, determined look in her dark, blue eyes, that sent a chill of disappointment to the hearts of her aunt and sister, who welcomed her with an anxious, inquiring glance as she entered the cosy little sitting-room at Aunt Jane's.

Throwing her hat upon the table, Tom flung herself into a chair by the open window and sat gazing intently at the sun as it went down behind the western hills like a great, red ball of fire. Those awful words of warning uttered by poor Gretchen still ringing in her ears—“Shun Silas Loffden as you would shun a viper!”

No one had the courage to question her, for each felt what the answer would be. Upon Aunt Jane's face was an expression of utter disgust, of the most abject and wretched disappointment. The sister was disappointed and piqued beyond description. But there was one who looked over and beyond it all, to whose mind the thought of other things than those which concerned their immediate prosperity and comfort—that one was the father.

With feeble, tottering steps, he walked over to the girl's side and bending down till his snow-white locks mingled with the golden tresses of little Tom, he kissed her pale cheek and whispered:

“God bless you, Tom, you will not marry Silas Loffden!”

“O you ungrateful little hussy!” fairly screamed Aunt Jane, while Lucy cried out in her rage and disappointment—

"You consummate little idiot, to let such a chance go! You deserve to be poor—to have to go to the poor-house! Oh, what shall we do, what shall we do?" cried the disappointed Lucy, hysterically.

"Marry him yourself!" retorted Tom, thoroughly aroused now.

"Marry him myself!" screamed the enraged Lucy, "Marry him myself! yes, I would—I would marry him or anybody else to save my father, my poor, old father from the workhouse, from a pauper's grave! Yes, if I had your pretty face, I would marry him—I would show you what it is to be grateful to our poor, old father for the love he has shown us! I wouldn't let this wretched poverty kill him as it has your mother, for it was that that worried her to death!"

"O you ungrateful little hussy!" again cried Aunt Jane; "you shall leave my house—not a day shall you stay under my roof if you refuse to marry Silas Loffden! Ungrateful! La, that's just the way with girls now-a-days; work and toil for them, and then, when one is old and can't work any longer, they won't raise their hand to help one!" and she flung herself upon the sofa in a fit of hysterical weeping.

Poor, generous, kind-hearted, little Tom, without a word in her own justification, and to escape the cruel words of abuse from her aunt, fled away to her own little room in the attic—a room which she had fitted up for a studio, where she put in her spare moments painting.

* * * * *

Two days had passed, and Silas Loffden, impatient for his answer, had set out for Aunt Jane's. Mounted

upon his powerful, coal-black horse, he went thundering down the road which led across his broad acres, dotted here and there with its rich and beautiful little farms, orchards and vineyards tilled by his many tenants.

Dashing through a beautiful grove of nature's own planting, he came to a small stream which wound its graceful, shining course through the meadow above and entered a deep, dark forest below.

At the bridge which spanned the river, stood, what once must have been a beautiful, graceful girl; but now, as she stood there with disheveled hair, with garments tattered and torn, pale and haggard, she looked the very picture of hopeless despair.

Reining his horse quickly beside the wretched figure, Loffden dismounted and seizing the girl roughly by the arm, he cried in a hoarse passionate tone:

"You here? In the name of God and the devil do you intend to taunt me, to dog my steps even here and at this time of all other? Darn you, Gretchen Beers, if you interfere with me here, your life shall pay the penalty! Do you hear?"

"Hear!" she cried; "Do you think that your threats have any terror for me? No, Silas Loffden, you may do your worst; I fear not your threats and I swear by the great God who rules on High that you shall not drag another innocent girl down to ruin and shame, if the raising of my feeble voice in warning will prevent it? Ha, ha, hound of hell, do your worst! I have already warned her. Death has no terrors for me—yes, yes, strike me if you will, send me to my little babe that lies buried over at Amboy—yes, strike!" she cried, fearless of the uplifted arm. "The dark river rolls at my feet; let

me lie there; it will be a better bed, far better than I have known for many a long, weary day. It will be the kindest act of your life to the girl who gave you the love of her pure, young heart, who gave up home, friends, honor—everything for your vile pleasure! Yes, yes, take my life if you will, it will be a fitting consumation of your hellish deed! Strike, villain, for I have warn—”

Swift as a thunder-bolt the clinched and uplifted fist of the infuriated and thwarted Loffden descended upon the half bare bosom of the defenseless and wretched girl. Without a murmur, the poor creature went down and disappeared 'neath the dark, cold waters of the river which rolled at her feet.

“O God!” cried Loffden, as the girl disappeared, “what have I done?”

Just then, the clatter of horses' hoofs fell upon his ear, and down the road, he saw the tall form and broad shoulders of Harry Lovejoy mounted upon an ivory-gray horse and riding directly toward him.

“God!” muttered Loffden, “I wonder if that Lovejoy saw me when I struck that girl? Heavens! whatever possessed me to do it? But the deed is done,” he muttered, as he mounted his coal-black horse and rode swiftly away. “The deed is done—I am rid of her.”

A half hour later, this cold-hearted villain whose soul was stained with the life blood of an unfortunate maiden, stood before the guiltless, innocent and beautiful little maid—Tom Winterstine—and asked her to be his wife.

Poor Tom! How her little heart fluttered and sunk, as if to escape some terrible doom within the depths of her fair, heaving bosom, as she answered—

“No!” and fell fainting into her father's arms.



SHE FOUND HERSELF CLASPED IN HARRY'S STRONG ARMS. P. 50,

CHAPTER V.

CHICKEN-HEARTED TOM.

A mingled feeling of disappointment and disgust rankled in the bosoms of the inmates of Aunt Jane's since Tom had refused to sell herself for the pleasure and profit of others—had refused her one "great offer of a life-time. But not less surprised and disappointed, in fact fairly "knocked out," was Silas Loffden. That she should refuse him, was a thing that had never occurred to his conceited mind.

"Refuse me? pooh! the idea of a girl standing upon the brink of poverty, refusing an offer of marriage that would make her the wealthiest lady in all the Cape countries!"

But little did he dream of the true nature of the proud, noble spirit of little Tom.

His dark, guilty soul recoiled from the pure-hearted girl and a chill of consternation seized his vile heart as that one little "no," loud and clear, fell from the pale lips of little Tom.

Recoiling at this unexpected answer, he muttered a fearful oath as he dashed from the house and rode swiftly away.

"Curse that wretch!" he hissed, "Curse you Gretchen Beers! But you will bother me no more. If I only knew whether that Lovejoy saw anything that might lead to her discovery—curse him anyway, why need he to happen along just at that time? If I only knew—but he can't prove it! Ah," he ejaculated, as a new idea seem-

ed to occur to his troubled mind, "what is he doing to-night? What business brings him here? Where is he? Where did he go? Darn him anyway! But I don't believe that he knows anything of the girl—curse him I say! And curse old Winterstine, too; I believe that he is more than half to blame for that Tom-fools refusal to marry me! Ah, but we shall see! Almighty now, but that girl shall marry me! She shall see the day that she will be only too glad to do it."

Tom, after recovering from her swoon, crept away to her own little bed and soon had cried herself to sleep.

Days and weeks passed—days of suffering, days of hardship and toil for the brave girl, days that had transformed the careless, light-hearted, head-strong little Tom into a thoughtful, industrious and patient little woman. "The man of the family," as her father loved to call her. Even Aunt Jane had repented of her cruel word and, with tears, had besought Tom's forgiveness.

Tom had become now to devote all of her spare moments, in fact nearly all her time to painting—an accomplishment which she possessed to a very high degree—and her rare gems of art had become almost the sole dependance of the unfortunate family.

Every day she could be seen wandering about the country on her sketching tours and looking wishfully away toward the distant mountains.

"Oh, how I would like to go up into the hills and mountains," she said, "if I only dared; I could find such beautiful scenery up there. Oh, if I only had some one to go with me." But, in that wild, half savage, half civilized country, situated as it was upon the border be-

tween civilization and savagery, it was not safe—she dared not venture far.

And then there was Loffden—Silas Loffden, whose handsome face and evil eyes haunted her dreams day and night.

He was still a constant visitor at Aunt Jane's. Many times and oft had Tom caught his eye devouring her, as it were, with such a strange, significant expression in them that it sent a chill of terror to her poor little heart.

"Oh, I don't know what makes me be such a little coward—I'm so afraid. 'Chicken-hearted,' everybody calls me, and so bashful—oh, I wish I was brave like Lucy and the other girls; they can all have good times at parties and balls, at boating and riding, while I have to work all day and am so 'bashful and awkward,' as Lucy says, that nobody cares for me. But I don't care!" she declared, with a stamp of her little foot, "If I can't have Harry, I won't have anybody! O, how I hate that wicked Loffden!" Yet, to keep peace in the family, she dared not express her feelings. She avoided him, that was all she could do. But in doing this she had unintentionally, avoided every one else as well, till she had, so everybody said, "become so bashful that she would faint if a young man was to ask her for her company" to some of the many parties and picnics.

"Dear me!" exclaimed Lucy, upon one of the occasions. "Why Tom would faint dead away if some young fellow should kiss her at a game of forfeit. She runs away and hides when any one comes there."

It was about this time that Harry Lovejoy paid his

first visit to the Winterstine's after their great misfortune.

He was welcomed by all in the most cordial manner. Even bashful, little Tom sat in her corner by the fireplace and listened to the story of his wanderings among the hills and mountains in search of fortune. Many were the questions asked and answered—ah, yes, and many were the admiring glances cast in the direction of the sweet-faced little Tom as she sat so quietly and as far back in the shadow of her corner as she possibly could.

That evening, some two hours after Harry's arrival, Loffden paid his usual visit; but when he saw young Lovejoy there, a dark frown clouded his handsome face and his manner became cold, his conversation, usually free and easy, became constrained and uninteresting.

Harry did not like the man—to say that he hated, loathed, abhorred him, would but feebly express the feeling of utter contempt and loathing toward him; for, he knew the story of poor Gretchen, and it was he that had sent her to warn little Tom, satisfied in his own mind that Tom Winterstine would never wed other than a true, honorable man. He had a suspicion, too, of that awful tragedy at the bridge, yet he could not say for sure—he could not swear to it. Satisfied in own mind, in his own heart, yet he could not bring sufficient evidence to convict Loffden.

In a few minutes after the entrance of Silas Loffden, Tom went out—she always crept away, generally to her little room in the attic; but upon this night chance, perhaps, decreed it that Silas Loffden should bar this avenue of escape against her, perhaps he designed it him-

self, at any rate he sat with his back against the door that led to the chamber and Tom, "chicken-hearted Tom," could not muster up sufficient courage to ask him to move, and as he showed no disposition to allow her to pass, she choose the only means of escape and so, quietly, she slipped from the room and went out into the garden.

Harry had noted the act and soon after she had gone out, as was natural, he followed her. Going out into the garden, he soon found her out; and, though she tried to slip away and make her escape back to the house, he soon stood before her. Cornered at last, she was compelled to surrender—an unconditional surrender, too. How her faint, guileless little heart fluttered, as if to escape from the throbbing bosom, as she looked up into the plain honest face and deep, gray eyes of this great, big fellow, towering a whole head shoulders above her.

"Ah, Tom," he said, in his deep, kindly voice, "may I come, may I speak with you?" and there was such a tone of pleading in his low, soft words.

"If you wish," murmured Tom, with a desperate effort to choke down her sobs. For, after all her brave resolutions to meet him and show him by her indifference and composure that she was a woman not to trifled with, she saw that her courage was failing her, that her good resolutions had vanished and she stood completely at his mercy, completely in the power of his strong will. She had felt that feeling of utter helplessness before, and she realized that she was perfectly powerless to resist; but she did not fear him. There was that in those honest, gray eyes that told her that she need have no fear.

"O Tom!" cried Harry, in a low, passionate tone, "Oh, why have you treated me so cruelly? I—"

"Stop! stop!" cried Tom, all her old self returning, "stop!" and raised her delicate little hand threateningly.

"Don't, please don't strike me with that little hand, I never could survive the blow; indeed, I would rather be kicked by an ostrich!" he exclaimed, looking down into her wide, blue eyes.

"O Harry!" she murmured, burying her blushing face in her hands and bursting into tears; for she remembered their first meeting; she remembered when he had spoken those same words to her once before; she remembered the many happy days which they had passed together—days of bliss, days that brought the first awakening of love's young dream, days that she never expected to see again. But now, as she stood beside him—the loved, ideal image of her maidenly dreams—her heart was filled with hope.

"Can it be that it was my fault? that it is me and not Lucy that he wants? O Harry!" she cried, "forgive me if I have done wrong, if I have been cruel, for I didn't mean to—O, I didn't! I thought—I didn't—"

But she could say no more, for she found herself clasped in Harry's strong arms, while his passionate kisses closed her lips.

For one blissful moment she yielded to his close, passionate embrace. So closely folded in those strong arms, that it seemed to little Tom that he was bent upon ending her life then and there. But the Allwise, fore-seeing the necessity, had built little Tom of the finest material, and each and every rib was warranted to stand all needful pressure.

Happy, happy little Tom.