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The Knight of the Daisy Chain

STEADMAN swung himself down to the station platform and looked around. This was undoubtedly Hillside; the little rustic building bore the sign conspicuously in ornamental letters. But if it had not been for that, Steadman told himself as he walked up the main street, he would hardly have known the town. Such an air of thrift and prosperity! Such noise, even though it was Sunday, the day of all others that had been quiet in the Hillside of former years!

All the old landmarks seemed to have disappeared. A substantial brick building stood on the side of the old "Grocery and Meat Market," and in place of the "corner house" that had marked the extreme limit of his childhood world, was a set of modern flats. But as he turned the corner and walked up the narrow street, he realized that one part of the town, at least, was substantially unchanged. Here were the same drooping maples, the same broad lawns, and there, just beyond, the house in which he had spent more of his waking hours than in his own home. Coming down the walk were two figures in dainty summer gowns. After one glance at them, Steadman hurried forward with a boyish laugh and outstretched hands.

"Mrs. Atwood! Jean! You surely haven't forgotten me." Jean gave a little start and flushed a warm, rosy red; then she put out both hands, prayer-book and all. Mrs. Atwood greeted him less impulsively, but with no less evident pleasure.

"Well, Bob!" she said. "Who would ever have dreamed that you would come back, after all this time? We have often wondered how you were getting along, for we have heard nothing from your father since you first went away. How is he, Bob?"

"Fine! He says he is good for fifty years more. He's at the head of the business now, and we are opening up a new branch office near here. That is how I happen to be here—at least, that is part of the reason."

"Well?" Jean looked up at him with arched brows and laughing eyes.

"Oh! You want to know the rest? You never were satisfied with half of anything, Jean. I was looking through some old papers of Father's last week, and I found—this."

"This" was a kodak picture of a boy and a girl standing together in the middle of a sunny field. He wore a paper helmet and a great wooden
shield, both garlanded with daisies, and the little girl, who surveyed him with evident admiration, clasped a bunch of the blossoms in her arms.

"Question," he said, "find the hero."

"You were a knight," she said slowly, "and you were riding to the lists."

"With your favor on my shield," he added.

"And you unhorsed—how many did you vanquish that time? But Mr. Steadman, whether you realize it or not, this town is progressing. We no longer stand on the street-corner and gossip as we used to do. Besides, we shall be late to church."

It is to be feared that Steadman did not derive much spiritual benefit from the morning prayer and sermon that Sabbath day. He rose and knelt with the congregation; he joined mechanically in the responses and hymns; but he was conscious all the time of Jean—Jean, as she sang the chants in her sweet, clear voice, as she knelt, with her head reverently bowed, as she sat beside him, her eyes fixed on the rector's face. The sweet, warm June air came in through the open window and stirred the ruffles on her dress and the little curls at her neck. Steadman wondered if she remembered the day that he had pulled her curls until she cried.

Dinner at the Atwood's consisted largely of reminiscences—how they had gone coasting on his bobsled, and how, one time when the snow was particularly deep, he had tipped her over head foremost into a drift—how they had made themselves sick on "Uncle Billy's" cherries—how they had hunted violets and gathered blackberries—and how Steadman had once killed a snake in Larkin's pasture.

"But I wasn't afraid," said Jean. "I defy you to say that I ran, or even screamed."

"You were plucky, all right," said Bob. "If you hadn't been I shouldn't have taken you along; that's certain." And Jean raised her eyebrows and surveyed the center-piece with a quizzical smile.

"Don't you want to go out and take a walk?" asked Mrs. Atwood, after dinner was over. "You will probably find a good many interesting things. Just think what stories you can tell your father of the growth of the city—for we are a city now—and the advance in real estate, and the elaborate system of public works that we have."

"Yes indeed, I should like it, if you and Jean are willing."

"I? Oh, Jeanie can go. We old people like to stay at home and rest in the afternoons. Yes, Bob, I think that is one of the first signs of advancing age. I have developed the habit, lately, of growing unbearably
sleepy after lunch, and the only thing that does me any good is a half hour's nap. But, you two may go—only don't stay out too late, children."

There was much to see, though few of the old scenes remained. There was a row of neat frame cottages in the old walnut grove, and a model dairy where the best persimmons had grown. Old houses had disappeared, and new ones had taken their places. But every sight, even those that were most changed, awakened memories. Indeed, there were so many places to visit, and so much to talk about, that before they realized it, the afternoon was almost gone.

"Let me see," said Steadman, stopping at a corner. "Do we have to go clear around? Don't I remember a short cut home?"

"We might go down the lane and through the field. That will save about a block."

"The same old field? And bars, upon my word, just as though you didn't live in a progressive town! Jean, you and your mother and your place are the most satisfactory things that I have seen."

"Thank you," she curtsied. "Mother and I, I suppose, were born thus, and as for the field, the land is quite worthless, you know."

"Except to grow daisies on," said Steadman.

"Ah yes! The daisies!" she said, with the laughter all gone from her face, and a sudden wistfulness there instead.

The daisies bloomed in scattered clusters near the fence, and in great patches of white and gold further on. The stalks bent aside to let them pass, but even then a few blossoms reached up from the ground, to touch Jean's dress as she moved along.

"Do you remember," he asked, "how I used to bring 'King Arthur' down here and read you stories while you made daisy-chains? That was the gallant knight for you, taking his ease while the fair maiden worked her fingers to the bone."

"The fair maiden didn't mind," she said. "And you usually helped gather the flowers at least."

"By the same token, you ought to be willing to make a chain for me now, if I pick all the flowers." He laid a bunch of the blossoms in her lap. "But wasn't 'King Arthur' great?" he went on, as she twined the stems together. "And Launcelot! Do you remember the time that I went to Camelot in disguise?"

"And shut me up in the barn loft, and wouldn't even let me peep out, because you said I was guarding your shield? Yes, I remember. Oh, don't look so remorseful. You did release me after a while, and you
didn’t make me die every time that you fought—which was fortunate, for lying on a barge was far from pleasant.”

“There was another time when I used to lock you up, wasn’t there? What was your name then? Oh yes! You were Dame Lyonesse and I was Beauvais, and I slew about a dozen knights to set you free.”

“And the tournaments! And the days that we rode a-maying. Doesn’t it all seem like ages ago? And here I am, making daisy-chains, just the same as ever. There, it is all done now.” She shook off the loose leaves and held up the wreath.

But her eyes were caught and held by his, as he bent toward her, the memory of that old time still strong in his face, but mingled with it a new, eager tenderness.

“Is it all over, Jeanie? Won’t you let me be your knight always—now and forever?”

With a little laugh that ended in something suspiciously like a sob, she rose and slipped the daisy-chain over his head.

“In the name of God, St. George and St. Michael,” she whispered, “I dub thee knight. Be brave, bold and loyal.”

C. C. C.
When I leave her in '07
And with sorrow from her part,
She shall still remain my idol,
H ave her shrine within my heart.

In these years I've learned to love her;
Ever shall that love grow cold;
Lady will I sing her praises
'ill my voice is weak and old.

Oh! Immortal be her name!
Ever perish her fair fame!