

THREE THANKSGIVING KISSES

E. P. Roe

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It was the day before Thanksgiving. The brief cloudy November afternoon was fast merging into early twilight. The trees, now gaunt and bare, creaked and groaned in the passing gale, clashing their icy branches together with sounds sadly unlike the slumberous rustle of their foliage in June. And that same foliage was now flying before the wind, swept hither and thither, like exiles driven by disaster from the moorings of home, at times finding a brief abiding-place, and then carried forward to parts unknown by circumstances beyond control. The street leading into the village was almost deserted; and the few who came and went hastened on with fluttering garments, head bent down, and a shivering sense of discomfort. The fields were bare and brown; and the landscape on the uplands rising in the distance would have been utterly sombre had not green fields of grain, like childlike faith in wintry age, relieved the gloomy outlook and prophesied of the sunshine and golden harvest of a new year and life.

But bleak November found no admittance in Mrs. Alford's cosey parlor. Though, as usual, it was kept as the room for state occasions, it was not a stately room. It was furnished with elegance and good taste; but what was better, the genial home atmosphere from the rest of the house had invaded it, and one did not feel, on entering it from the free-and-easy sitting-room, as if passing from a sunny climate to the icebergs of the Pole. Therefore I am sure my reader will follow me gladly out of the biting, bolsterous wind into the homelike apartment, and as we stand in fancy before the glowing grate, we will make the acquaintance of the May-day creature who is its sole occupant.

Elsie Alford, just turning seventeen, appeared younger than her years warranted. Some girls carry the child far into their teens, and head the mirthful innocence of infancy with the richer, fuller life of budding womanhood. This was true of Elsie. Hers was not the forced exotic bloom of fashionable life; but rather one of the native blossoms of her New England home, having all the delicacy and at the same time hardiness of the windflower. She was also as shy and easily agitated, and yet, like the flower she resembled, well rooted among the rocks of principle and truth. She was the youngest and the pet of the household, and yet the "petting" was not of that kind that develops selfishness and wilfulness, but rather a genial sunlight of love falling upon her as a focus from the entire family. They always spoke of her as "little Sis," or the "child." And a child it seemed she would ever be, with her kittenish ways, quick impulses, and swiftly alternating moods. As she developed into womanly proportions, her grave, businesslike father began to have misgivings. After one of her wild sallies at the table, where she kept every one on the qui vive by her unrestrained chatter, Mr. Alford said:

"Elsie, will you ever learn to be a woman?"

Looking mischievously at him through her curls, she replied, "Yes; I might if I became as old as Mrs. Methuselah."

They finally concluded to leave Elsie's cure to care and trouble—two certain elements of earthly life; and yet her experience of either would be slight indeed, could their love shield her.

But it would not be exactly care or trouble that would sober Elsie into a thoughtful woman, as our story will show.

Some of the November wind seemed in her curling hair upon this fateful day; but her fresh young April face was a pleasant contrast to the scene presented from the window, to which she kept flitting with increasing frequency. It certainly was not the dismal and darkening landscape that so intensely interested her. The light of a great and coming pleasure was in her face, and her manner was one of restless, eager expectancy. Little wonder. Her pet brother, the one next older than herself, a promising young theologian, was coming home to spend Thanksgiving. It was time he appeared. The shriek of the locomotive had announced the arrival of the train; and

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her ardent little spirit could scarcely endure the moments intervening before she would almost concentrate herself into a rapturous kiss and embrace of welcome, for the favorite brother had been absent several long months.

Her mother called her away for a few moments, for the good old lady was busy indeed, knowing well that merely full hearts would not answer for a New England Thanksgiving. But the moment Elsie was free she darted back to the window, just in time to catch a glimpse, as she supposed, of her brother's well-remembered dark-gray overcoat, as he was ascending the front steps.

A tall, grave-looking young man, an utter stranger to the place and family, had his hand upon the doorbell; but before he could ring it, the door flew open, and a lovely young creature precipitated herself on his neck, like a missile fired from heavenly battlements, and a kiss was pressed upon his lips that he afterward admitted to have felt even to the "toes of his boots."

But his startled manner caused her to lift her face from under his side-whiskers; and though the dusk was deepening, she could see that her arms were around an utter stranger. She recoiled from him with a bound, and trembling like a windflower indeed, her large blue eyes dilating at the intruder with a dismay beyond words. How the awkward scene would have ended it were hard to tell had not the hearty voice of one coming up the path called out:

"Hi, there, you witch! who is that you are kissing, and then standing off to see the effect?"

There was no mistake this time; so, impelled by love, shame, and fear of "that horrid man," she fled, half sobbing, to his arms.

"No, he isn't a 'horrid man,' either," whispered her brother, laughing. "He is a classmate of mine. Why, Stanhope, how are you? I did not know that you and my sister were so well acquainted," he added, half bantering and half curiously, for as yet he did not fully understand the scene.

The hall-lamp, shining through the open door, had revealed the features of the young man (whom we must now call Mr. Stanhope), so that his classmate had recognized him. His first impulse had been to slip away in the darkness, and so escape from his awkward predicament; but George Alford's prompt address prevented this and brought him to bay. He was painfully embarrassed, but managed to stammer: "I was taken for you, I think. I never had the pleasure—honor of meeting your sister."

"Oh, ho! I see now. My wild little sister kissed before she looked. Well, that was your good-fortune. I could keep two Thanksgiving days on the strength of such a kiss as that," cried the light-hearted student, shaking the diffident, shrinking Mr. Stanhope warmly by the hand. "You will hardly need a formal introduction now. But, bless me, where is she? Has the November wind blown her away?"

"I think your sist—the lady passed around to the side entrance. I fear I have annoyed her sadly."

"Nonsense! A good joke—something to tease the little witch about. But come in. I'm forgetting the sacred rites."

And before the bewildered Mr. Stanhope could help himself, he was half dragged into the lighted hall, and the door shut between him and escape.

In the meantime, Elsie, like a whirlwind, had burst into the kitchen, where Mrs. Alford was superintending some savory dishes.

"Oh, mother, George has come and has a horrid man with him, who nearly devoured me."

And, with this rather feminine mode of stating the case, she darted into the dusky, fire-lighted parlor, from whence, unseen, she could reconnoitre the hall. Mr. Stanhope was just saying:

"Please let me go. I have stood between you and your welcome long enough. I shall only be an intruder; and besides, as an utter stranger, I have no right to stay." To all of which Elsie devoutly whispered to herself, "Amen."

But Mrs. Alford now appeared, and after a warm, motherly greeting to her son, turned in genial courtesy to welcome his friend, as she supposed.

George was so happy that he wished every one else to be the same. The comical episode attending Mr. Stanhope's unexpected appearance just hit his frolicsome mood, and promised to be a source of endless merriment if he could only keep his classmate over the coming holiday. Moreover, he long had wished to become better acquainted with this young man, whose manner at the seminary had deeply interested him. So he said:

"Mother, this is Mr. Stanhope, a classmate of mine. I wish you would help me persuade him to stay."

"Why, certainly, I supposed you expected to stay with us, of course," said Mrs. Alford, heartily.

Mr. Stanhope looked ready to sink through the floor, his face crimson with vexation.

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"I do assure you, madam," he urged, "it is all a mistake. I am not an invited guest. I was merely calling on a little matter of business, when—" and there he stopped. George exploded into a hearty, uncontrollable laugh; while Elsie, in the darkness, shook her little fist at the stranger, who hastened to add, "Please let me bid you good-evening, I have not the slightest claim on your hospitality."

"Where are you staying?" asked Mrs. Alford, a little mystified. "We would like you to spend at least part of the time with us."

"I do not expect to be here very long. I have a room at the hotel."

"Now, look here, Stanhope," cried George, barring all egress by planting his back against the door, "do you take me, a half-fledged theologian, for a heathen? Do you suppose that I could be such a churl as to let a classmate stay at our dingy, forlorn little tavern and eat hash on Thanksgiving Day? I could never look you in the face at recitation again. Have some consideration for my peace of mind, and I am sure you will find our home quite as endurable as anything Mr. Starks can provide."

"Oh! as to that, from even the slight glimpse that I have had, this seems more like a home than anything I have known for many years; but I cannot feel it right that I, an unexpected stranger—"

"Come, come! No more of that! You know what is written about 'entertaining strangers;' so that is your strongest claim. Moreover, that text works both ways sometimes, and the stranger angel finds himself among angels. My old mother here, if she does weigh well on toward two hundred, is more like one than anything I have yet seen, and Elsie, if not an angel, is at least part witch and part fairy. But you need not fear ghostly entertainment from mother's larder. As you are a Christian, and not a Pagan, no more of this reluctance. Indeed, nolens volens, I shall not permit you to go out into this November storm to-night;" and Elsie, to her dismay, saw the new-comer led up to the "spare room" with a sort of hospitable violence.

With flaming cheeks and eyes half full of indignant tears, she now made onslaught on her mother, who had returned to the kitchen, where she was making preparations for a supper that might almost answer for the dinner the next day.

"Mother, mother," she exclaimed, "how could you keep that disagreeable stranger! He will spoil our Thanksgiving."

"Why, child, what is the matter?" said Mrs. Alford, raising her eyes in surprise to her daughter's face, that looked like a red moon through the mist of savory vapors rising from the ample cooking-stove. "I don't understand you. Why should not your brother's classmate add to the pleasure of our Thanksgiving?"

"Well, perhaps if we had expected him, if he had come in some other way, and we knew more about him—"

"Bless you, child, what a formalist you have become. You stand on a fine point of etiquette, as if it were the broad foundation of hospitality; while only last week you wanted a ragged tramp, who had every appearance of being a thief, to stay all night. Your brother thinks it a special providence that his friend should have turned up so unexpectedly."

"Oh, dear!" sighed Elsie. "If that is what the doctrine of special providence means, I shall need a new confession of faith." Then, a sudden thought occurring to her, she vanished, while her mother smiled, saying:

"What a queer child she is, to be sure!"

A moment later Elsie gave a sharp knock at the spare room door, and in a second was in the further end of the dark hall. George put his head out.

"Come here," she whispered. "Are you sure it's you?" she added, holding him off at arm's-length.

His response was such a tempest of kisses and embraces that in her nervous state she was quite panic-stricken.

"George," she gasped, "have mercy on me!"

"I only wished to show you how he felt, so you would have some sympathy for him."

"If you don't stop," said the almost desperate girl, "I will shut myself up and not appear till he is gone. I will any way, if you don't make me a solemn promise."

"Leave out the 'solemn.'"

"No, I won't. Upon your word and honor, promise never to tell what has happened—my mistake, I mean."

"Oh, Elsie, it's too good to keep," laughed George.

"Now, George, if you tell," sobbed Elsie, "you'll spoil my holiday, your visit, and everything."

"If you feel that way, you foolish child, of course I won't tell. Indeed, I suppose I should not, for Stanhope

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seems half frightened out of his wits also."

"Serves him right, though I doubt whether he has many to lose," said Elsie, spitefully.

"Well, I will do my best to keep in," said George, soothingly, and stroking her curls. "But you will let it all out; you see. The idea of your keeping anything with your April face!"

Elsie acted upon the hint, and went to her room in order to remove all traces of agitation before the supper-bell should summon her to meet the dreaded stranger.

In the meantime, Mr. Alford and James, the second son, had come up from the village, where they had a thriving business. They greeted George's friend so cordially that it went some way toward putting the diffident youth at his ease; but he dreaded meeting Elsie again quite as much as she dreaded meeting him.

"Who is this Mr. Stanhope?" his parents asked, as they drew George aside for a little private talk after his long absence.

"Well, he is a classmate with whom I have long wished to get better acquainted; but he is so shy and retiring that I have made little progress. He came from another seminary, and entered our class in this the middle year. No one seems to know much about him; and indeed he has shunned all intimacies and devotes himself wholly to his books. The recitation-room is the one place where he appears well—for there he speaks out, as if forgetting himself, or rather, losing himself in some truth under contemplation. Sometimes he will ask a question that wakes up both class and professor; but at other times it seems difficult to pierce the shell of his reserve or diffidence. And yet, from little things I have seen, I know that he has a good warm heart; and the working of his mind in the recitation-room fascinates me. Further than this I know little about him, but have just learned, from his explanation as to his unexpected appearance at our door, that he is very poor, and purposed to spend his holiday vacation as agent for a new magazine that is offering liberal premiums. I think his poverty is one of the reasons why he has so shrunk from companionship with the other students. He thinks he ought to go out and continue his efforts tonight."

"This stormy night!" ejaculated kind Mrs. Alford. "It would be barbarous."

"Certainly it would, mother. We must not let him. But you must all be considerate, for he seems excessively diffident and sensitive; and besides—but no matter."

"No fear but that we will soon make him at home. And it's a pleasure to entertain people who are not surfeited with attention. I don't understand Elsie, however, for she seems to have formed a violent prejudice against him. From the nature of her announcement of his presence I gathered that he was a rather forward young man."

There was a twinkle in George's eye; but he merely said:

"Elsie is full of moods and tenses; but her kind little heart is always the same, and that will bring her around all right."

They were soon after marshalled to the supper-room. Elsie slipped in among the others, but was so stately and demure, and with her curls brushed down so straight that you would scarcely have known her. Her father caught his pet around the waist, and was about to introduce her, when George hastened to say with the solemnity of an undertaker that Elsie and Mr. Stanhope had met before.

Elsie repented the promise she had wrung from her brother, for any amount of badinage would be better than this depressing formality. She took her seat, not daring to look at the obnoxious guest; and the family noticed with surprise that they had never seen the little maiden so quenched and abashed before. But George good-naturedly tried to make the conversation general, so as to give them time to recover themselves.

Elsie soon ventured to steal shy looks at Mr. Stanhope, and with her usual quickness discovered that he was more in terror of her than she of him, and she exulted in the fact.

"I'll punish him well, if I get a chance," she thought with a certain phase of the feminine sense of justice. But the sadness of his face quite disarmed her when her mother, in well-meant kindness, asked:

"Where is your home located, Mr. Stanhope?"

"In the seminary," he answered in rather a low tone.

"You don't mean to say that you have no better one than a forlorn cell in Dogma Hall?" exclaimed George, earnestly.

Mr. Stanhope crimsoned, and then grew pale, but tried to say lightly, "An orphan of my size and years is not a very moving object of sympathy; but one might well find it difficult not to break the Tenth Commandment while seeing how you are surrounded."

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Elsie was vexed at her disposition to relent toward him; she so hardened her face, however, that James rallied her:

"Why, Puss, what is the matter? Yours is the most unpromising Thanksgiving phiz I have seen today. 'Count your marcies.'"

Elsie blushed so violently, and Mr. Stanhope looked so distressed that James finished his supper in puzzled silence, thinking, however, "What has come over the little witch? For a wonder, she seems to have met a man that she is afraid of: but the joke is, he seems even more afraid of her."

In the social parlor some of the stiffness wore off; but Elsie and Mr. Stanhope kept on opposite sides of the room and had very little to say to each other. Motherly Mrs. Alford drew the young man out sufficiently, however, to become deeply interested in him.

By the next morning time for thought had led him to feel that he must trespass on their hospitality no longer. Moreover, he plainly recognized that his presence was an oppression and restraint upon Elsie; and he was very sorry that he had stayed at all. But when he made known his purpose the family would not listen to it.

"I should feel dreadfully hurt if you left us now," said Mrs. Alford, so decidedly that he was in a dilemma, and stole a timid look toward Elsie, who at once guessed his motive in going away. Her kind heart got the better of her; and her face relented in a sudden reassuring smile. Then she turned hastily away. Only George saw and understood the little side scene and the reason Mr. Stanhope was induced to remain. Then Elsie, in her quickly varying moods, was vexed at herself, and became more cold and distant than ever. "He will regard me as only a pert, forward miss, but I will teach him better," she thought; and she astonished the family more and more by a stateliness utterly unlike herself. Mr. Stanhope sincerely regretted that he had not broken away, in spite of the others; but in order not to seem vacillating he resolved to stay till the following morning, even though he departed burdened with the thought that he had spoiled the day for one of the family. Things had now gone so far that leaving might only lead to explanations and more general annoyances, for George had intimated that the little mistake of the previous evening should remain a secret.

And yet he sincerely wished she would relent toward him, for she could not make her sweet little face repellent. The kiss she had given him still seemed to tingle in his very soul, while her last smile was like a ray of warmest sunshine. But her face, never designed to be severe, was averted.

After having heard the affairs of the nation discussed in a sound, scriptural manner, they all sat down to a dinner such as had never blessed poor Mr. Stanhope's vision before. A married son and daughter returned after church, and half a dozen grandchildren enlivened the gathering. There was need of them, for Elsie, usually in a state of wild effervescence upon such occasions, was now demure and comparatively silent. The children, with whom she was accustomed to romp like one of them, were perplexed indeed; and only the intense excitement of a Thanksgiving dinner diverted their minds from Aunt Elsie, so sadly changed. She was conscious that all were noting her absent manner, and this embarrassed and vexed her more; and yet she seemed under a miserable paralysis that she could neither explain nor escape.

"If we had only laughed it off at first," she groaned to herself; "but now the whole thing grows more absurd and disagreeable every moment."

"Why, Elsie," said her father, banteringly, "you doubted the other day whether Mrs. Methuselah's age would ever sober you; and yet I think that good old lady would have looked more genial on Thanksgiving Day. What is the matter?"

"I was thinking of the sermon," she said.

Amid the comic elevation of eyebrows, George said slyly:

"Tell us the text."

Overwhelmed with confusion, she darted a reproachful glance at him and muttered:

"I did not say anything about the text."

"Well, tell us about the sermon then," laughed James.

"No," said Elsie, sharply. "I'll quote you a text: 'Eat, drink, and be merry,' and let me alone."

They saw that for some reason she could not bear teasing, and that such badinage troubled Mr. Stanhope also. George came gallantly to the rescue, and the dinner-party grew so merry that Elsie thawed perceptibly and Stanhope was beguiled into several witty speeches. At each one Elsie opened her eyes in wider and growing appreciation. At last, when they rose from their coffee, she came to the surprising conclusion—

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"Why, he is not stupid and bad-looking after all."

George was bent on breaking the ice between them, and so proposed that the younger members of the family party should go up a swollen stream and see the fall. But Elsie flanked herself with a sister-in-law on one side and a niece on the other, while Stanhope was so diffident that nothing but downright encouragement would bring him to her side. So George was almost in despair. Elsie's eyes had been conveying favorable impressions to her reluctant mind throughout the walk. She sincerely regretted that such an absurd barrier had grown up between her and Stanhope, but could not for the life of her, especially before others, do anything to break the awkward spell.

At last they were on their return, and were all grouped together on a little bluff, watching the water pour foamingly through a narrow gorge.

"Oh, see," cried Elsie, suddenly pointing to the opposite bank, "what beautiful moss that is over there! It is just the kind I have been wanting. Oh, dear! there isn't a bridge within half a mile."

Stanhope glanced around a moment, and then said gallantly, "I will get you the moss, Miss Alford." They saw that in some inconceivable way he intended crossing where they stood. The gorge was much too wide for the most vigorous leap, so Elsie exclaimed eagerly:

"Oh, please don't take any risk! What is a little moss?"

"I say, Stanhope," remonstrated George, seriously, "it would be no laughing matter if you should fall in there."

But Stanhope only smiled, threw off his overcoat, and buttoned his undercoat closely around him. George groaned to himself, "This will be worse than the kissing scrape," and was about to lay a restraining grasp upon his friend. But he slipped away, and lightly went up hand-over-hand a tall, slender sapling on the edge of the bank, the whole party gathering round in breathless expectation. Having reached its slender, swaying top, he threw himself out on the land side. The tree bent at once to the ground with his weight, but without snapping, showing that it was tough and fibrous. Holding firmly to the top, he gave a strong spring, which, with the spring of the bent sapling, sent him well over the gorge on the firm ground beyond.

There was a round of applause from the little group he had just left, in which Elsie joined heartily. Her eyes were glowing with admiration, for when was not power and daring captivating to a woman? Then, in sudden alarm and forgetfulness of her former coolness, she exclaimed:

"But how will you get back?"

"This is my bridge," he replied, smiling brightly across to her, and holding on to the slender young tree. "You perceive that I was brought up in the country."

So saying, he tied the sapling down to a root with a handkerchief, and then proceeded to fill another with moss.

As George saw Elsie's face while she watched Stanhope gather the coveted trifle, he chuckled to himself—

"The ice is broken between them now."

But Stanhope had insecurely fastened the sapling down. The strain upon the knot was too severe, and suddenly the young tree flew up and stood erect but quivering, with his handkerchief fluttering in its top as a symbol of defeat. There was an exclamation of dismay and Elsie again asked with real anxiety in her tone:

"How will you get back now?"

Stanhope shrugged his shoulders.

"I confess I am defeated, for there is no like sapling on this side; but I have the moss, and can join you at the bridge below, if nothing better offers."

"George," said Elsie, indignantly, "don't go away and leave Mr. Stanhope's handkerchief in that tree."

"Bless you, child," cried George, mischievously, and leading the way down the path, "I can't climb anymore than a pumpkin. You will have to go back with him after it, or let it wave as a memento of his gallantry on your behalf."

"If I can only manage to throw them together without any embarrassing third parties present, the ridiculous restraint they are under will soon vanish," he thought; and so he hastened his steps. The rest trooped after him, while Stanhope made his way with difficulty on the opposite bank, where there was no path. His progress therefore was slow; and Elsie saw that if she did not linger he would be left behind. Common politeness forbade this, and so she soon found herself alone, carrying his overcoat on one bank, and he keeping pace with her on the other. She comforted herself at first with the thought that with the brawling, deafening stream between them, there would be no chance for embarrassing conversation. But soon her sympathies became aroused, as she saw him

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toilsomely making his way over the rocks and through the tangled thickets: and as she could not speak to him, she smiled her encouragement so often that she felt it would be impossible to go back to her old reserve.

Stanhope now came to a little opening in the brush. The cleared ground sloped evenly down to the stream, and its current was divided by a large rock. He hailed the opportunity here offered with delight, for he was very anxious to speak to her before they should join the others. So he startled Elsie by walking out into the clearing, away from the stream.

"Well, I declare; that's cool, to go and leave me alone without a word," she thought.

But she was almost terror-stricken to see him turn and dart to the torrent like an arrow. With a long flying leap, he landed on the rock in the midst of the stream, and then, without a second's hesitation, with the impetus already acquired, sprang for the solid ground where she stood, struck it, wavered, and would have fallen backward into the water had not she, quick as thought, stepped forward and given him her hand.

"You have saved me from a ducking, if not worse," he said, giving the little rescuing hand a warm pressure.

"Oh!" exclaimed she, panting, "please don't do any more dreadful things. I shall be careful how I make any wishes in your hearing again."

"I am sorry to hear you say that," he replied. And then there was an awkward silence.

Elsie could think of nothing better than to refer to the handkerchief they had left behind.

"Will you wait for me till I run and get it?" he asked.

"I will go back with you, if you will permit me," she said timidly.

"Indeed, I could not ask so much of you as that."

"And yet you could do about the same as risk your neck to gratify a whim of mine," she said more gratefully than she intended.

"Please do not think," he replied earnestly, "that I have been practicing cheap heroics. As I said, I was a country boy, and in my early home thought nothing of doing such things." But even the brief reference to that vanished home caused him to sigh deeply, and Elsie gave him a wistful look of sympathy.

For a few moments they walked on in silence. Then Mr. Stanhope turned, and with some hesitation said:

"Miss Alford, I did very wrong to stay after—after last evening. But my better judgment was borne down by invitations so cordial that I hardly knew how to resist them. At the same time I now realize that I should have done so. Indeed, I would go away at once, would not such a course only make matters worse. And yet, after receiving so much kindness from your family, more than has blessed me for many long years—for since my dear mother died I have been quite alone in the world—I feel I cannot go away without some assurance or proof that you will forgive me for being such a kill-joy in your holiday."

Elsie's vexation with herself now knew no bounds. She stopped in the path, determining that she would clear up matters, cost what it might.

"Mr. Stanhope," she said, "will you grant a request that will contain such assurance, or rather, will show you that I am heartily ashamed of my foolish course? Will you not spend next Thanksgiving with us, and give me a chance to retrieve myself from first to last?"

His face brightened wonderfully as he replied, "I will only be too glad to do so, if you truly wish it."

"I do wish it," she said earnestly. "What must you think of me?" (His eyes then expressed much admiration; but hers were fixed on the ground and half filled with tears of vexation.) Then, with a pretty humility that was exquisite in its simplicity and artlessness, she added:

"You have noticed at home that they call me 'child'—and indeed, I am little more than one—and now see that I have behaved like a very silly and naughty one toward you. I have trampled on every principle of hospitality, kindness, and good-breeding. I have no patience with myself, and I wish another chance to show that I can do better. I—"

"Oh, Miss Alford, please do not judge yourself so harshly and unjustly," interrupted Stanhope.

"Oh, dear!" sighed Elsie, "I'm so sorry for what happened last night. We all might have had such a good time."

"Well, then," said Stanhope, demurely, "I suppose I ought to be also."

"And do you mean to say that you are not?" she asked, turning suddenly upon him.

"Oh, well, certainly, for your sake," he said with rising color.

"But not for your own?" she asked with almost the naivete of a child.

He turned away with a perplexed laugh and replied: "Really, Miss Alford, you are worse than the Catechism."

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She looked at him with a half-amused, half-surprised expression, the thought occurring to her for the first time that it might not have been so disagreeable to him after all; and somehow this thought was quite a relief to her. But she said: "I thought you would regard me as a hoyden of the worst species."

"Because you kissed your brother? I have never for a moment forgotten that it was only your misfortune that I was not he."

"I should have remembered that it was not your fault. But here is your handkerchief, flying like a flag of truce; so let bygones be bygones. My terms are that you come again another year, and give me a chance to entertain my brother's friend as a sister ought."

"I am only too glad to submit to them," he eagerly replied, and then added, so ardently as to deepen the roses already in her cheeks, "If such are your punishments, Miss Alford, how delicious must be your favors!"

By common consent the subject was dropped; and with tongues released from awkward restraint, they chatted freely together, till in the early twilight they reached her home. The moment they entered George exultingly saw that the skies were serene.

But Elsie would never be the frolicsome child of the past again. As she surprised the family at dinner, so now at supper they could scarcely believe that the elegant, graceful young lady was the witch of yesterday. She had resolved with all her soul to try to win some place in Mr. Stanhope's respect before he departed, and never did a little maiden succeed better.

In the evening they had music; and Mr. Stanhope pleased them all with his fine tenor, while Elsie delighted him by her clear, birdlike voice. So the hours fled away.

"You think better of the 'horrid man,' little Sis," said George, as he kissed her good-night.

"I was the horrid one," said Elsie, penitently. "I can never forgive myself my absurd conduct. But he has promised to come again next Thanksgiving, and give me a chance to do better; so don't you fail to bring him."

George gave a long, low whistle, and then said: "Oh! ah! Seems to me you are coming on, for an innocent. Are we to get mixed up again in the twilight?"

"Nonsense!" said Elsie, with a peony face, and she slammed her door upon him.

The next morning the young man took his leave, and Elsie's last words were:

"Mr. Stanhope, remember your promise."

And he did remember more than that, for this brief visit had enshrined a sweet, girlish face within his heart of hearts, and he no longer felt lonely and orphaned. He and George became the closest friends, and messages from the New England home came to him with increasing frequency, which he returned with prodigal interest. It also transpired that he occasionally wrote for the papers, and Elsie insisted that these should be sent to her; while he of course wrote much better with the certainty that she would be his critic. Thus, though separated, they daily became better acquainted, and during the year George found it not very difficult to induce his friend to make several visits.

But it was with joy that seemed almost too rich for earthly experience that he found himself walking up the village street with George the ensuing Thanksgiving Eve. Elsie was at the door; and he pretended to be disconsolate that his reception was not the same as on the previous year. Indeed she had to endure not a little chaffing, for her mistake was a family joke now.

It was a peerless Thanksgiving eve and day—one of the sun-lighted heights of human happiness.

After dinner they all again took a walk up the brawling stream, and Stanhope and Elsie became separated from the rest, though not so innocently as on the former occasion.

"See!" cried Elsie, pointing to the well-remembered sapling, which she had often visited. "There fluttered our flag of truce last year."

Stanhope seized her hand and said eagerly: "And here I again break the truce, and renew the theme we dropped at this place. Oh, Elsie, I have felt that kiss in the depths of my heart every hour since; and in that it led to my knowing and loving you, it has made every day from that time one of thanksgiving. If you could return my love, as I have dared to hope, it would be a happiness beyond words. If I could venture to take one more kiss, as a token that it is returned, I could keep Thanksgiving forever."

Her hand trembled in his, but was not withdrawn. Her blushing face was turned away toward the brawling stream; but she saw not its foam, she heard not its hoarse murmurs. A sweeter music was in her ears. She seemed under a delicious spell, but soon became conscious that a pair of dark eyes were looking down eagerly, anxiously

THREE THANKSGIVING KISSES

for her answer. Shyly raising hers, that now were like dewy violets, she said, with a little of her old witchery:

"I suppose you will have to kiss me this Thanksgiving, to make things even."

Stanhope needed no broader hint.

"I owe you a heavy grudge," said Mr. Alford, in the evening. "A year ago you robbed me of my child, for little, kittenish Elsie became a thoughtful woman from the day you were here; and now you are going to take away the daughter of my old age."

"Yes, indeed, husband. Now you know how my father felt," said Mrs. Alford, at the same time wiping something from the corner of her eye.

"Bless me, are you here?" said the old gentleman, wheeling round to his wife. "Mr. Stanhope, I have nothing more to say."

"I declare," exulted George, "that 'horrid man' will devour Elsie yet."

"Haw! haw! haw!" laughed big-voiced, big-hearted James. "The idea of our little witch of an Elsie being a minister's wife!"

* * * * *

It is again Thanksgiving Eve. The trees are gaunt, the fields bare and brown, with dead leaves whirling across them; but a sweeter than June sunshine seems filling the cosey parlor where Elsie, a radiant bride, is receiving her husband's first kiss almost on the moment that she with her lips so unexpectedly kindled the sacred fire, three years before.