

# The Bloomfield Times.

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### Phebe's Mystery.

BY ELIZABETH BIGELOW.

PHEBE sat on the doorstep, with the afternoon sunshine glinting in her hair and playing about the tangle of bright-colored worsteds that lay in her lap. Her forehead was wrinkled up, and her blue, babyish eyes had a perplexed, almost a despairing look in them; for it was a very intricate piece of work that Phebe was engaged upon, and her worsteds were getting hopelessly tangled up together. It was a crocheted tidy, the pattern of which Semantha Staples had brought home with her from Ipswich, where she had been at school, and whose like had never been seen on the Cape before. At first it had seemed easy enough, and Phebe had worked on gayly, knitting in hopes and fancies brighter than the wools; but now it was so vexing that her face grew really distressed, and she heaved a great sigh from the very bottom of her heart that brought Aunt Jane to the door.

"Umph! when I was young girls didn't waste their time over such foolishness," said Aunt Jane. "Spoiling your eyesight and crooking your back, too if you were at the spinning-wheel!"

"But, Aunt Jane, this is so lovely! And—and it's for the cabin of the Lapwing!" And a bright, rosy flush came over Phebe's face as she looked up cunningly into her aunt's. "I want it to look just as pretty and homelike as possible, you know."

Aunt Jane sniffed contemptuously, but her puckered-up mouth relaxed a little.

"You had better be a mending your stockings. There's a whole basketful of 'em on the sitting-room table."

"I forgot them, aunty. I'll go and mend them right away," said Phebe.

"O, you needn't hurry, now. I couldn't bear to see them setting there all day—I never did hold with such shiftless ways—so I mended 'em myself."

"What a dear, good, old aunty it is!" said Phebe, throwing her arm around her neck, "and what in the world shall I do without her?"

"There, there, child! don't hug me!" said Aunt Jane, smoothing her ruffled collar. "There's Gilbert coming down the road," and she vanished into the house.

"Poor Aunt Jane!" said Phebe to herself with a little sigh. She never minded if Aunt Jane was a little cross, for she knew what a faithful, tender heart she had, and she always remembered the great disappointment of her life, which people said had "soured" her. Long ago, before Phebe was born, Aunt Jane's lover had sailed, out of that very harbor that was in sight from the doorway where Phebe sat, and had never come back again. "Ah, what should I do," said Phebe to herself, "if—" and then she did give one glance up the road at the tall, manly figure that was coming that way, though before she had kept her eyes coquettishly averted.

"It wasn't his gait. Phebe saw it with a pang of disappointment, though a moment before you would have thought from her face and attitude that she was perfectly indifferent as to who might be coming down the road.

But who could it be? Such tall, handsome young men were not very plentiful in

Rockport. He must be a stranger. "But I have seen him before," said Phebe to herself, and then suddenly remembered when a ship, bound on a foreign voyage, had put in the harbor for repairs the day before, and one of the village girls had pointed out this young man, whom they had met in the street, as its captain—Captain Matthews, but what could he be coming here for?

He leaned over the gate and lifted his hat, with a very graceful bow for a sailor.

"This is Miss Hanson?" he said, as Phebe went towards him, with wonder in her eyes.

Phebe made a demure little bow.

"Can I see you alone for a few moments?" he said, in a voice that sounded strange and husky, and impressed Phebe with a sudden fancy that she had, somewhere, heard it before.

Phebe looked back towards the house. Aunt Jane was not in sight; she had gone to the kitchen to make biscuits for tea.

"We are quite alone, sir," said Phebe, with dignity, yet not without a little tremor in her voice, for she was a little afraid of this man whose manner was so strange.

He glanced furtively around him until quite sure that no one was in sight. Then he removed his cap and a wig of jet black hair that had covered his head, next a false mustache and whiskers of the same color and a fair-haired smooth-faced young man was revealed.

Phebe grew white, and started back.

"Phebe, don't you remember?" he said holding his arms out towards her; and his voice was very different. Phebe drew near him again, with her blue eyes fixed like one in a dream. She touched his hand with a sort of curious wonder, as if to discover if it were real flesh and blood.

"O Joe, Joe! I can't believe it is you!" she cried, then, falling into his arms. He folded her tightly to his heart, and kissed her bright hair tenderly. "But, Joe, tell me how you escaped—how it all happened for I feel as if I were dreaming!" said Phebe.

He cast a quick, cautious glance around again—he was used, evidently, to keeping always on his guard—and put on his false hair and beard.

Phebe started away from him again.

"I don't like to see you with those on. I don't believe that it is you when I see them!" she said.

But he gathered her into his arms again, laughing, and began to talk, low and earnestly, and in her eagerness to hear his explanations Phebe forgot his unnatural look.

As they stood there, his arm around Phebe's waist, her hand resting on his shoulder, a young man came around the turn in the road, in full view, though they were too much occupied with each other to see him. But he saw them, and started at the sight, while a dark flush overspread his handsome, sunburnt face.

He had almost reached her side before Phebe saw him; when she did see him she stepped suddenly away from Captain Matthews, her cheeks flaming.

"Let me introduce you to Captain Drew Matthews," she said, with an evident struggle for composure. "Captain Matthews is an old friend of mine, Gilbert."

"I should judge so," said Captain Gilbert Drew, shortly, making a little, curt bow to Captain Matthews, but ignoring his proffered hand.

He was honest and straightforward, this young sailor, and could not dissemble his anger. He would not shake hands with a man who a moment previous, had had his arm around his sweetheart's waist.

"I think I may as well bid you good-by, Phebe," said Captain Matthews, and held Phebe's hand in a long and close pressure bowed profoundly to Gilbert Drew, who regarded him with something very like a scowl, and took his departure.

"Well?" said the irate young captain looking steadily into Phebe's face.

She was watching the retreating figure

with anxious, it seemed to Gilbert Drew with tender eyes, and did not heed his angry tone; but when she caught sight of his stern, set face and flashing eyes a deep flush flickered over her face.

She looked relieved when Aunt Jane uttered a shrill summons to tea.

"You'll stay to tea, Gilbert," she said, coaxingly, laying her hand on his arm. "You like Aunt Jane's biscuit so much, you know, and—and I'll forgive you for being so rude to me just now if you'll come."

"It seems to me Phebe," said Gilbert, softened, in spite of himself, by the touch of her hand, "that I am not the one who needs forgiveness. I should like an explanation of the scene I witnessed a few moments ago."

"I can't give you an explanation," said Phebe, quickly, dropping her hand from his arm, and her face grew very grave and stern under Gilbert's searching eyes, but did not change color in the least.

The young man looked perplexed. Phebe was always so frank and true, he hardly knew how to doubt her, but then there was the evidence of his own eyes.

Phebe looked up in his face very humbly and beseechingly.

"I can't tell you anything more, now, than that he is an old friend, and I was so glad and so surprised to see him that perhaps I wasn't quite so—so ceremonious as I should have been."

Gilbert's brow darkened, and Phebe saw plainly that she was not mending matters. She tucked her little white hand inside his large, brown one, and her baby-blue eyes looked pleadingly up into his face.

"Gilbert, won't you trust me?" she said, softly. "There is something that I keep back that I can't tell you now, though some time I may. But you know, Gilbert, that there is nobody in the wide world that I—" and her eyes dropped, and shy pink blushes chased each other over her face, her voice was very low, and faltering, and sweet—"that I love-like you."

It was the first time that Phebe had ever confessed so much, and Gilbert caught her in his arms and kissed her, and drove the last shadow away from his brow, and allowed himself to be led into the house, where Aunt Jane awaited them in a fever of anxiety lest the biscuit were cold.

Gilbert was no great favorite with Aunt Jane. She had always been determined that Phebe should not marry a seafaring man, and then the knowledge that Phebe might have done better, as far as money and position were concerned, harassed her continually. For there was Gerald Bayne, the great man of Rockport, the owner of nobody knew how many ships, and warehouses and stock, and lands, who had been in love with Phebe ever since she wore pinafores, and who might have won her, Aunt Jane was continually saying to herself if it had not been for Gilbert Drew.

Not that Phebe had ever manifested the least liking for Gerald Bayne, but she could not have been insensible to such attractions as his, Aunt Jane was sure, if Gilbert Drew, with his handsome face had not come in the way, and coaxed her into fancying herself in love with him. But Phebe was the apple of her eye, and she hadn't the heart to try to thwart her; perhaps, too, she was conscious that it would not be of much use to try, for Phebe was a determined little being when she had once made up her mind.

Willfulness was a family trait. Aunt Jane well remembered how being thwarted in his will had been the ruin of one member of it. That was Phebe's brother; from childhood all his dreams had been of the sea, every ship that sailed out of the port he followed with longing eyes, and all his hopes and fancies flew forward to the time when he should be able to go.

But his mother was a widow, and the sea had swallowed up so many of her kindred—her husband among them—that she had a dread and horror of it, and absolutely refused to let the boy go. She kept an unceasing watch over him, and when, in his

sixteenth year, he attempted to run away he was caught and brought back, and sent to the city to work his way up, his mother fondly hoped, to honor and wealth in a mercantile house. But news of his recklessness and ill-conduct came continually, until, at last, three years from the time he left home, the blow came that broke his mother's heart. He had been concerned in an extensive bank robbery and sentenced to a long term of imprisonment, and had committed suicide to escape it.

Poor Mrs. Hanson died in three months afterwards, and Phebe was left to Aunt Jane's care; and they had lived together ever since, in that little gray stone house by the sea. And Aunt Jane, remembering her nephew's fate, had an almost morbid dread of crossing Phebe in anything; if it had not been for that it is very unlikely that Gilbert Drew would have been seated so cozily at their tea-table, with Aunt Jane's cherished strawberry preserves put on for his express benefit. For Aunt Jane was ambitious, and that she was not to see Phebe Mrs. Gerald Bayne was the great disappointment of her life.

But not the lightness of Aunt Jane's biscuit, nor the sweetness of her preserves, nor even Phebe's society, was able to dispel the cloud that still lingered on Gilbert's brow. He had perfect faith in Phebe, he said to himself, over and over again, but still it was not a pleasant sight that he had witnessed. And Phebe seemed so strangely nervous and excited, so unlike herself; she talked perfectly at random, and even when he reminded her that in just three weeks the Lapwing would be ready for sea, she seemed scarcely to hear him, but was listening intently as if for a footstep on the gravel walk, and she started and grew pale at every slight sound. And when Gilbert arose to take his leave, at least an hour earlier than his wont, she did not ask him to stay, but seemed rather relieved at his going. Yet she stood in the door and watched him out of sight, with a wistful, anxious look on her face.

"I'm going to bed," said Aunt Jane, "and you had better go, too. What is the matter between you and Gilbert. Haven't had a falling out, have you?"

"No, no indeed! nothing is the matter," said Phebe, faintly. "Don't wait for me, Aunt Jane. I am not going to bed quite yet."

Aunt Jane was quite sure that everything was not right, but she was too wise to say anything; she went her way up stairs, and left Phebe sitting alone on the door-stone. The village clock struck nine just as the echo of her footsteps died away, and Phebe rose, with a great sigh of relief, wrapped herself in her cloak and drew the hood over her head, ran lightly down the road, climbed the stone wall and crossed the pasture, then sped lightly over the rocks to the seashore.

It was almost as light as day, and the moon made a glittering wake upon the sea in which two or three ships rested, with gleaming sails, like great, white, hovering birds.

A man started up from one of the rocks at the sound of her footsteps—Captain Matthews.

"I am late, I know Joe, but I couldn't get away before; and now I mustn't stay long, for Aunt Jane may call me, and she would be frightened to death to find I was not in the house."

They sat down together on a rock, his arm around her waist, her eyes looking up into his. Ah! if Gilbert Drew could have seen her then his face would have worn a darker cloud than it did now. He was a fool to have faith in her after what he had seen, you think? Well, he thought so himself afterwards. Only once in their long talk—for Phebe forgot that she ought not to stay—did they mention his name.

"You are going to marry Gilbert Drew?" the young man said.

"Yes," said Phebe, simply.

"Not if he knew, I fancy, Phebe!"

And the man's tone was hard and bitter.

"I think sometimes that he must have

heard it from some of the village gossips; there are so many who would enjoy telling him," said Phebe. "But of course he cannot know all."

"He never shall know all, Phebe. I've made you wretched enough! You shall never be troubled by me again."

"But I couldn't live without seeing you, Joe," cried Phebe; "and there may yet come a time when we can see each other openly, without fear or disgrace."

The young man shook his head hopelessly.

"We will wait and hope, Joe," she whispered. "Now I must go. No, no, you must not go home with me! You might be seen; it was very dangerous for you to come to-day; and I am not afraid. I shall wait to see you in your boat before I go."

The young man got into a row-boat, whose rope he had fastened to a stone, and was soon rowing away to where his ship, the Winged Rover, lay at anchor, looking like a great, black shadow in the moonlight.

Phebe turned towards the house. There was no light to be seen in any of the windows; it was evident that Aunt Jane was sleeping the sleep of the just, unconscious of her niece's absence. So Phebe walked leisurely along, now and then casting a backward glance at the Winged Rover. But when she came within a few feet of the pasture bars she started back with a low cry of alarm; a man stood leaning over them in careless attitude, watching her intently.

"Pray don't let me alarm you, Miss Phebe," he said, reassuringly, and as he lifted his hat Phebe recognized Mr. Gerald Bayne.

Never agreeable in its expression, his face now wore a look of malicious triumph that made it positively repulsive to Phebe; she saw at once that he had witnessed her meeting with Captain Matthews; she remembered with a thrill of terror that he might have heard all their conversation.

"Will you allow me to accompany you home? It is not safe for you to be out so late alone," he said quietly.

Phebe drew herself up haughtily. His tone and manner deceived her. He had not heard, or he would not be so calm, she thought.

"I don't need any escort for so short a distance, thank you," she said, coldly, attempting to pass him.

He stepped before her and whispered a few words in her ear. A low, half-stifled cry broke from her lips, and her face grew white.

"And you listened! I wouldn't have believed that, even of you!" she cried.

"No, I didn't listen. I didn't need to. I knew it before," he answered coolly.

"And you will use your knowledge?—You will bring disgrace and ruin upon him and me?"

"Isn't it my duty?—unless I have my pay for keeping your secret?"

Phebe's lip curled contemptuously.

"And your pay?" she asked, haughtily, in spite of her terror.

"Can you ask? Don't you know the one treasure without which the whole world is valueless to me?" And he took in his, one of the hands that hung limp and nerveless at Phebe's side.

"O, how can you be so cruel? What have I ever done to you that you should persecute me so!" cried Phebe passionately.

"Cruel to you, Phebe? If you could only understand how much more my love is worth to you than Gilbert Drew's, how much happier you must be as my wife!—Why, his is only a boy's fancy that he will forget in a twelvemonth, while I will cherish you so tenderly, always, Phebe!"

Phebe drew her hand away.

"I will never be your wife," she said, firmly, emboldened by his softened tone.—Surely one who professed to love her so much could never persist in bringing such sorrow upon her as he had threatened!

CONCLUDED NEXT WEEK.