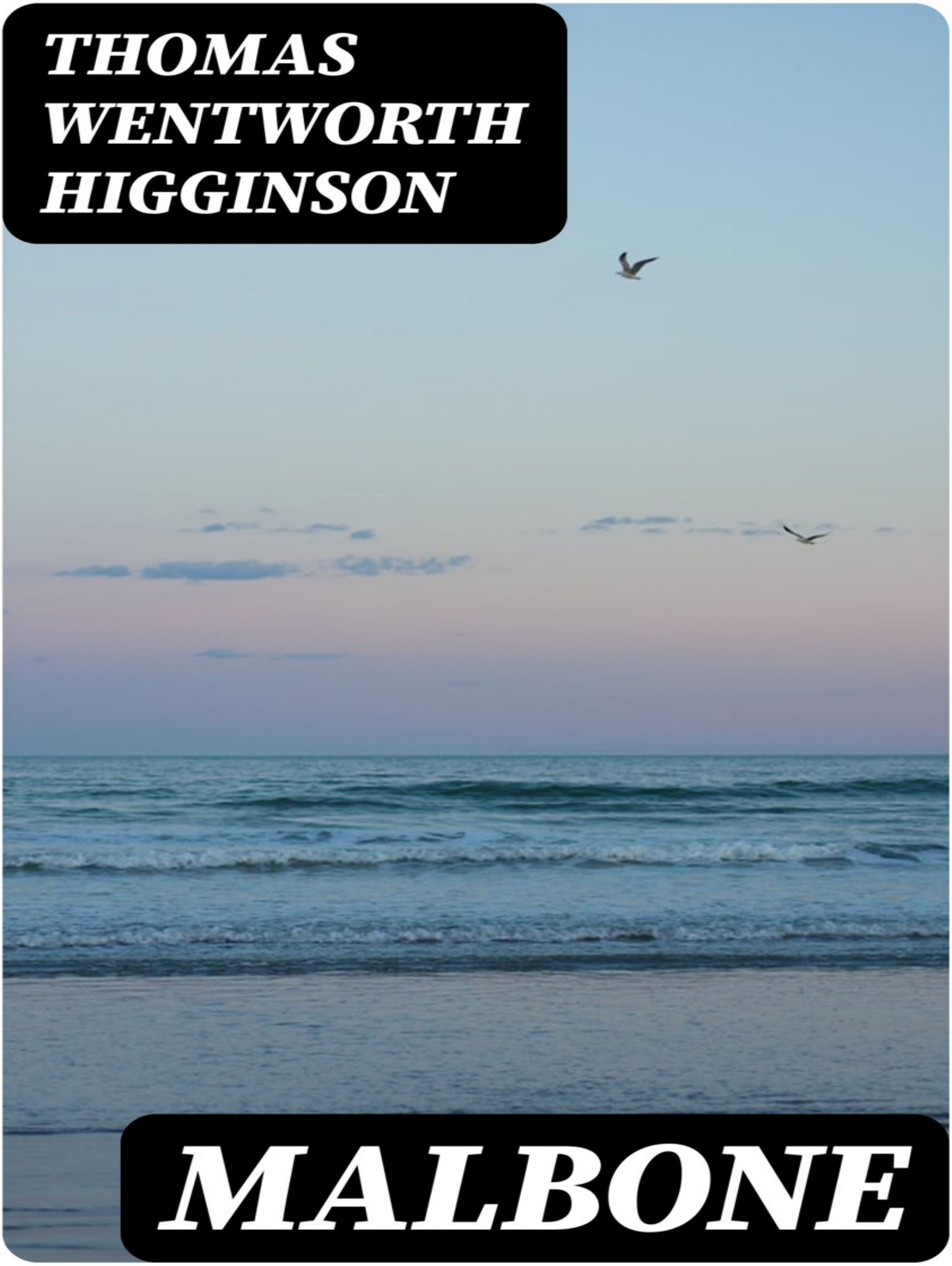

THOMAS WENTWORTH HIGGINSON

MALBONE

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Malbone

An Oldport Romance

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PRELUDE.

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AS one wanders along this southwestern promontory of the Isle of Peace, and looks down upon the green translucent water which forever bathes the marble slopes of the Pirates' Cave, it is natural to think of the ten wrecks with which the past winter has strewn this shore. Though almost all trace of their presence is already gone, yet their mere memory lends to these cliffs a human interest. Where a stranded vessel lies, thither all steps converge, so long as one plank remains upon another. There centres the emotion. All else is but the setting, and the eye sweeps with indifference the line of unpeopled rocks. They are barren, till the imagination has tenanted them with possibilities of danger and dismay. The ocean provides the scenery and properties of a perpetual tragedy, but the interest arrives with the performers. Till then the shores remain vacant, like the great conventional armchairs of the French drama, that wait for Rachel to come and die.

Yet as I ride along this fashionable avenue in August, and watch the procession of the young and fair,—as I look at

stately houses, from each of which has gone forth almost within my memory a funeral or a bride,—then every thoroughfare of human life becomes in fancy but an ocean shore, with its ripples and its wrecks. One learns, in growing older, that no fiction can be so strange nor appear so improbable as would the simple truth; and that doubtless even Shakespeare did but timidly transcribe a few of the deeds and passions he had personally known. For no man of middle age can dare trust himself to portray life in its full intensity, as he has studied or shared it; he must resolutely set aside as indescribable the things most worth describing, and must expect to be charged with exaggeration, even when he tells the rest.

I. AN ARRIVAL.

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IT was one of the changing days of our Oldport midsummer. In the morning it had rained in rather a dismal way, and Aunt Jane had said she should put it in her diary. It was a very serious thing for the elements when they got into Aunt Jane’s diary. By noon the sun came out as clear and sultry as if there had never been a cloud, the northeast wind died away, the bay was motionless, the first locust of the summer shrilled from the elms, and the robins seemed to be serving up butterflies hot for their insatiable second brood, while nothing seemed desirable for a human

luncheon except ice-cream and fans. In the afternoon the southwest wind came up the bay, with its line of dark-blue ripple and its delicious coolness; while the hue of the water grew more and more intense, till we seemed to be living in the heart of a sapphire.

The household sat beneath the large western doorway of the old Maxwell House,—he rear door, which looks on the water. The house had just been reoccupied by my Aunt Jane, whose great-grandfather had built it, though it had for several generations been out of the family. I know no finer specimen of those large colonial dwellings in which the genius of Sir Christopher Wren bequeathed traditions of stateliness to our democratic days. Its central hall has a carved archway; most of the rooms have painted tiles and are wainscoted to the ceiling; the sashes are red-cedar, the great staircase mahogany; there are pilasters with delicate Corinthian capitals; there are cherubs' heads and wings that go astray and lose themselves in closets and behind glass doors; there are curling acanthus-leaves that cluster over shelves and ledges, and there are those graceful shell-patterns which one often sees on old furniture, but rarely in houses. The high front door still retains its Ionic cornice; and the western entrance, looking on the bay, is surmounted by carved fruit and flowers, and is crowned, as is the roof, with that pineapple in whose symbolic wealth the rich merchants of the last century delighted.

Like most of the statelier houses in that region of Oldport, this abode had its rumors of a ghost and of secret chambers. The ghost had never been properly lionized nor laid, for Aunt Jane, the neatest of housekeepers, had

discouraged all silly explorations, had at once required all barred windows to be opened, all superfluous partitions to be taken down, and several highly eligible dark-closets to be nailed up. If there was anything she hated, it was nooks and odd corners. Yet there had been times that year, when the household would have been glad to find a few more such hiding-places; for during the first few weeks the house had been crammed with guests so closely that the very mice had been ill-accommodated and obliged to sit up all night, which had caused them much discomfort and many audible disagreements.

But this first tumult had passed away; and now there remained only the various nephews and nieces of the house, including a due proportion of small children. Two final guests were to arrive that day, bringing the latest breath of Europe on their wings,—Philip Malbone, Hope’s betrothed; and little Emilia, Hope’s half-sister.

None of the family had seen Emilia since her wandering mother had taken her abroad, a fascinating spoiled child of four, and they were all eager to see in how many ways the succeeding twelve years had completed or corrected the spoiling. As for Philip, he had been spoiled, as Aunt Jane declared, from the day of his birth, by the joint effort of all friends and neighbors. Everybody had conspired to carry on the process except Aunt Jane herself, who directed toward him one of her honest, steady, immovable dislikes, which may be said to have dated back to the time when his father and mother were married, some years before he personally entered on the scene.

The New York steamer, detained by the heavy fog of the night before, now came in unwonted daylight up the bay. At the first glimpse, Harry and the boys pushed off in the row-boat; for, as one of the children said, anybody who had been to Venice would naturally wish to come to the very house in a gondola. In another half-hour there was a great entanglement of embraces at the water-side, for the guests had landed.

Malbone's self-poised easy grace was the same as ever; his chestnut-brown eyes were as winning, his features as handsome; his complexion, too clearly pink for a man, had a sea bronze upon it: he was the same Philip who had left home, though with some added lines of care. But in the brilliant little fairy beside him all looked in vain for the Emilia they remembered as a child. Her eyes were more beautiful than ever,—the darkest violet eyes, that grew luminous with thought and almost black with sorrow. Her gypsy taste, as everybody used to call it, still showed itself in the scarlet and dark blue of her dress; but the clouded gypsy tint had gone from her cheek, and in its place shone a deep carnation, so hard and brilliant that it appeared to be enamelled on the surface, yet so firm and deep-dyed that it seemed as if not even death could ever blanch it. There is a kind of beauty that seems made to be painted on ivory, and such was hers. Only the microscopic pencil of a miniature-painter could portray those slender eyebrows, that arched caressingly over the beautiful eyes,—or the silky hair of darkest chestnut that crept in a wavy line along the temples, as if longing to meet the brows,—or those unequalled lashes! "Unnecessarily long," Aunt Jane

afterwards pronounced them; while Kate had to admit that they did indeed give Emilia an overdressed look at breakfast, and that she ought to have a less showy set to match her morning costume.

But what was most irresistible about Emilia,—that which we all noticed in this interview, and which haunted us all thenceforward,—was a certain wild, entangled look she wore, as of some untamed out-door thing, and a kind of pathetic lost sweetness in her voice, which made her at once and forever a heroine of romance with the children. Yet she scarcely seemed to heed their existence, and only submitted to the kisses of Hope and Kate as if that were a part of the price of coming home, and she must pay it.

Had she been alone, there might have been an awkward pause; for if you expect a cousin, and there alights a butterfly of the tropics, what hospitality can you offer? But no sense of embarrassment ever came near Malbone, especially with the children to swarm over him and claim him for their own. Moreover, little Helen got in the first remark in the way of serious conversation.

“Let me tell him something!” said the child. “Philip! that doll of mine that you used to know, only think! she was sick and died last summer, and went into the rag-bag. And the other split down the back, so there was an end of her.”

Polar ice would have been thawed by this reopening of communication. Philip soon had the little maid on his shoulder,—the natural throne of all children,—and they went in together to greet Aunt Jane.

Aunt Jane was the head of the house,—a lady who had spent more than fifty years in educating her brains and

battling with her ailments. She had received from her parents a considerable inheritance in the way of whims, and had nursed it up into a handsome fortune. Being one of the most impulsive of human beings, she was naturally one of the most entertaining; and behind all her eccentricities there was a fund of the soundest sense and the tenderest affection. She had seen much and varied society, had been greatly admired in her youth, but had chosen to remain unmarried. Obliged by her physical condition to make herself the first object, she was saved from utter selfishness by sympathies as democratic as her personal habits were exclusive. Unexpected and commonly fantastic in her doings, often dismayed by small difficulties, but never by large ones, she sagaciously administered the affairs of all those around her,—planned their dinners and their marriages, fought out their bargains and their feuds.

She hated everything irresolute or vague; people might play at cat's-cradle or study Spinoza, just as they pleased; but, whatever they did, they must give their minds to it. She kept house from an easy-chair, and ruled her dependants with severity tempered by wit, and by the very sweetest voice in which reproof was ever uttered. She never praised them, but if they did anything particularly well, rebuked them retrospectively, asking why they had never done it well before? But she treated them munificently, made all manner of plans for their comfort, and they all thought her the wisest and wittiest of the human race. So did the youths and maidens of her large circle; they all came to see her, and she counselled, admired, scolded, and petted them all. She had the gayest spirits, and an unerring eye for the

ludicrous, and she spoke her mind with absolute plainness to all comers. Her intuitions were instantaneous as lightning, and, like that, struck very often in the wrong place. She was thus extremely unreasonable and altogether charming.

Such was the lady whom Emilia and Malbone went up to greet,—the one shyly, the other with an easy assurance, such as she always disliked. Emilia submitted to another kiss, while Philip pressed Aunt Jane's hand, as he pressed all women's, and they sat down.

"Now begin to tell your adventures," said Kate. "People always tell their adventures till tea is ready."

"Who can have any adventures left," said Philip, "after such letters as I wrote you all?"

"Of which we got precisely one!" said Kate. "That made it such an event, after we had wondered in what part of the globe you might be looking for the post-office! It was like finding a letter in a bottle, or disentangling a person from the Dark Ages."

"I was at Neuchatel two months; but I had no adventures. I lodged with a good Pasteur, who taught me geology and German."

"That is suspicious," said Kate. "Had he a daughter passing fair?"

"Indeed he had."

"And you taught her English? That is what these beguiling youths always do in novels."

"Yes."

"What was her name?"

"Lili."

"What a pretty name! How old was she?"

“She was six.”

“O Philip!” cried Kate; “but I might have known it. Did she love you very much?”

Hope looked up, her eyes full of mild reproach at the possibility of doubting any child’s love for Philip. He had been her betrothed for more than a year, during which time she had habitually seen him wooing every child he had met as if it were a woman,—which, for Philip, was saying a great deal. Happily they had in common the one trait of perfect amiability, and she knew no more how to be jealous than he to be constant.

“Lili was easily won,” he said. “Other things being equal, people of six prefer that man who is tallest.”

“Philip is not so very tall,” said the eldest of the boys, who was listening eagerly, and growing rapidly.

“No,” said Philip, meekly. “But then the Pasteur was short, and his brother was a dwarf.”

“When Lili found that she could reach the ceiling from Mr. Malbone’s shoulder,” said Emilia, “she asked no more.”

“Then you knew the pastor’s family also, my child,” said Aunt Jane, looking at her kindly and a little keenly.

“I was allowed to go there sometimes,” she began, timidly.

“To meet her American Cousin,” interrupted Philip. “I got some relaxation in the rules of the school. But, Aunt Jane, you have told us nothing about your health.”

“There is nothing to tell,” she answered. “I should like, if it were convenient, to be a little better. But in this life, if one can walk across the floor, and not be an idiot, it is something. That is all I aim at.”

“Isn’t it rather tiresome?” said Emilia, as the elder lady happened to look at her.

“Not at all,” said Aunt Jane, composedly. “I naturally fall back into happiness, when left to myself.”

“So you have returned to the house of your fathers,” said Philip. “I hope you like it.”

“It is commonplace in one respect,” said Aunt Jane. “General Washington once slept here.”

“Oh!” said Philip. “It is one of that class of houses?”

“Yes,” said she. “There is not a village in America that has not half a dozen of them, not counting those where he only breakfasted. Did ever man sleep like that man? What else could he ever have done? Who governed, I wonder, while he was asleep? How he must have travelled! The swiftest horse could scarcely have carried him from one of these houses to another.”

“I never was attached to the memory of Washington,” meditated Philip; “but I always thought it was the pear-tree. It must have been that he was such a very unsettled person.”

“He certainly was not what is called a domestic character,” said Aunt Jane.

“I suppose you are, Miss Maxwell,” said Philip. “Do you often go out?”

“Sometimes, to drive,” said Aunt Jane. “Yesterday I went shopping with Kate, and sat in the carriage while she bought under-sleeves enough for a centipede. It is always so with that child. People talk about the trouble of getting a daughter ready to be married; but it is like being married once a month to live with her.”

“I wonder that you take her to drive with you,” suggested Philip, sympathetically.

“It is a great deal worse to drive without her,” said the impetuous lady. “She is the only person who lets me enjoy things, and now I cannot enjoy them in her absence. Yesterday I drove alone over the three beaches, and left her at home with a dress-maker. Never did I see so many lines of surf; but they only seemed to me like some of Kate’s ball-dresses, with the prevailing flounces, six deep. I was so enraged that she was not there, I wished to cover my face with my handkerchief. By the third beach I was ready for the madhouse.”

“Is Oldport a pleasant place to live in?” asked Emilia, eagerly.

“It is amusing in the summer,” said Aunt Jane, “though the society is nothing but a pack of visiting-cards. In winter it is too dull for young people, and only suits quiet old women like me, who merely live here to keep the Ten Commandments and darn their stockings.”

Meantime the children were aiming at Emilia, whose butterfly looks amazed and charmed them, but who evidently did not know what to do with their eager affection.

“I know about you,” said little Helen; “I know what you said when you were little.”

“Did I say anything?” asked Emilia, carelessly.

“Yes,” replied the child, and began to repeat the oft-told domestic tradition in an accurate way, as if it were a school lesson. “Once you had been naughty, and your papa thought it his duty to slap you, and you cried; and he told you in French, because he always spoke French with you,

that he did not punish you for his own pleasure. Then you stopped crying, and asked, ‘Pour le plaisir de qui alors?’ That means ‘For whose pleasure then?’ Hope said it was a droll question for a little girl to ask.”

“I do not think it was Emilia who asked that remarkable question, little girl,” said Kate.

“I dare say it was,” said Emilia; “I have been asking it all my life.” Her eyes grew very moist, what with fatigue and excitement. But just then, as is apt to happen in this world, they were all suddenly recalled from tears to tea, and the children smothered their curiosity in strawberries and cream.

They sat again beside the western door, after tea. The young moon came from a cloud and dropped a broad path of glory upon the bay; a black yacht glided noiselessly in, and anchored amid this tract of splendor. The shadow of its masts was on the luminous surface, while their reflection lay at a different angle, and seemed to penetrate far below. Then the departing steamer went flashing across this bright realm with gorgeous lustre; its red and green lights were doubled in the paler waves, its four reflected chimneys chased each other among the reflected masts. This jewelled wonder passing, a single fishing-boat drifted silently by, with its one dark sail; and then the moon and the anchored yacht were left alone.

Presently some of the luggage came from the wharf. Malbone brought out presents for everybody; then all the family went to Europe in photographs, and with some reluctance came back to America for bed.

II. PLACE AUX DAMES!

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IN every town there is one young maiden who is the universal favorite, who belongs to all sets and is made an exception to all family feuds, who is the confidante of all girls and the adopted sister of all young men, up to the time when they respectively offer themselves to her, and again after they are rejected. This post was filled in Oldport, in those days, by my cousin Kate.

Born into the world with many other gifts, this last and least definable gift of popularity was added to complete them all. Nobody criticised her, nobody was jealous of her, her very rivals lent her their new music and their lovers; and her own discarded wooers always sought her to be a bridesmaid when they married somebody else.

She was one of those persons who seem to have come into the world well-dressed. There was an atmosphere of elegance around her, like a costume; every attitude implied a presence-chamber or a ball-room. The girls complained that in private theatricals no combination of disguises could reduce Kate to the ranks, nor give her the “make-up” of a waiting-maid. Yet as her father was a New York merchant of the precarious or spasmodic description, she had been used from childhood to the wildest fluctuations of wardrobe;—a year of Paris dresses,—then another year spent in making over ancient finery, that never looked like either finery or antiquity when it came from her magic hands. Without a