Chapter V
Mail Day

“I am very sorry, Martin—I am indeed,” Jeanette said genuinely; “after your bothering to run her up, especially for me, I should really like to do as you wish, and try her at once; for I am pleased with the looks of her—all but the long tail. Yet I can’t come, and I mustn’t think about it! Mr Debenham says—”

“Who cares what Debenham says?” Martin interrupted, in a tone loud enough to reach that young gentleman, who was saddling his blameless mare at the other side of the horse-yard: Martin and the girls were standing by the slip-rails: it was Jeanette’s second morning. “If Debenham has been saying anything against the filly, he’d better come round to the wood-heap and take his coat off!”

Now this was purely a jest; but it would have been a prettier jest if Martin had not happened to possess a rather celebrated pair of fists, and if Debenham, who was thin and weak, had been a match for him even in appearance. Fortu-
nately, however, Debenham was not sensitive, and verbal blows did him good, though they left no mark.

"Mr Debenham never mentioned the filly," said Jeanette, loftily. "What he did say was that the mail would be made up this afternoon. So I shall have to stay at home and write my letter, there is no getting out of it."

"But that won’t take you all the morning?" persisted Martin, between pleading and argument. "I thought you’d like to see the rabbiters’ camp I’m going to, and that we could all three ride together; but it isn’t so very far away, I’m in no violent hurry, I could wait an hour or two easily."

Jeanette shook her head. "You are very good indeed; but I am afraid it will take me the whole morning, and as much of the afternoon as I can have, to get my letter ready in time. You don’t know what it is to be so far from home and to have so much to say. I have only written one stupid little letter, from Melbourne; but I promised them a good one from here; so, you see, I can’t possibly come out today. It was very good of you to get in the filly for me, and I am quite grieved not to come, but—it simply can’t be helped. Indeed, I ought to be writing now." And Jeanette saved further debate by going.

"I never did suppose she could ride," said Martin, turning the filly out of the yard with a cut from his stock-whip. "Now I jolly well see she can’t!"

"Then I’ll bet you she can," retorted Daisy, "and it was quite absurd of you to bother her so."
“Oh, I wasn’t particularly keen for her to come; I only thought she might like it, that’s all,” said Martin, with supreme indifference. “But now I see what’s the matter.”

“You’re absurdly m-mistaken,” said Daisy compassionately. “It was her letter that made her refuse, and nothing else—as you know as well as I do. Goodbye!”

“As if she would take all day writing her blessed letter! She can’t ride, that’s what it is, and we shall just have to teach her.” But there was no one to contradict Martin this time; for Daisy had followed Jeanette.

She met Jeanette coming out of her room with writing materials.

“Where should I write, Day?”

“I’d write in the sitting-room—where you were playing last night. It is cooler now, before the roof gets heated through, than at any other time of the day; and in the veranda you will find the wind a nuisance. I will come and look you up when I have been my rounds.”

That was an hour later. Daisy, who loved to be busy, took her work-box with her to the sitting-room. The blinds were down; a soft grey light filled the room, touching everything with a soft grey tint, as of smoke—everything but Jeanette’s white dress, which hung down before the book-case in one corner as lifelessly as from a peg. Yet Jeanette was not in it.
Jeanette was standing quite motionless, with an open book in her hands.

“Not writing after all!”

Jeanette looked up with a start.

“You’re a n-nice one!” pursued Daisy good-humouredly. “I see you haven’t opened your ink-bottle. I only wish Martin were here: you would have a fair old quarrel, I can assure you!”

Jeanette laughed, but with some confusion.

“I know it is very wrong of me; I really didn’t mean to do it; but I have a mania for exploring strange book-shelves, and—and I fell in with something interesting.”

“Let me see it,” said Daisy. She crossed to the corner where Jeanette was standing, and took the book from her hands: next instant she was regarding Jeanette as one examines a curiosity. “Why, you extraordinary girl! Owen Almeric of all the books in the world! If ever I tried to read a book, it was Owen Almeric. I b-bought it because I rather liked the name, and there seemed to be plenty of conversations in it; and I tried to read it between Hobart Town and here, so you may think that I gave it a fair chance; but no! I couldn’t! I don’t believe it is readable! Let’s see who it’s by—I quite forget, but you’ll never catch me reading anything else of his, so I ought to know, or I might go buying him again. Ah, Edmund Hattersley!”
“And a very clever man he is,” said Jeanette, speaking up at last for David Auburn’s friend—whom she had never seen in her life—whom she had never before tried to read. “You are too sweet, Daisy. He is thought a good deal of in London, though his books are not exactly popular.”

“His books are all I care about,” said Daisy, with scorn; “and about them I care less than nothing—if this is a sample. Take it back, do! You’re quite welcome to it, my dear. As for Edmund Hattersley, I owe him a p-personal grudge for boring me to death on a long journey which he might have made delightful; and you can t-tell him so if you know him!”

“I don’t know him,” said Jeanette quickly; “nor did I ever read him before; but I like this book and I’m going to try to read every word of it. I’m glad you came in, though, Daisy, for of course I ought to have been writing all [this time]. I was so absorbed, I quite forgot.”

She sat down resolutely, as she spoke, and opened the spring of her ink-bottle.

“Well, I simply can’t understand it,” said Daisy honestly, also sitting down, with her work-basket. “I suppose it’s my b-bad taste, that’s all!”

Jeanette was already writing, though, at the moment, quite mechanically; and the first sheets—though she had been full of the notes for the letter—were pursued only by dint of will, laboriously and slowly; but at last she found the sure reward of the determined writer—she had written
herself “into the swing.” It was all Hattersley’s doing. Surely he had never held a reader so before! But it was not the kind of hold to make an author arrogant, if he knew all. Jeanette was interested; but the interest was not intrinsic. She had seen the name of Hattersley on the back of his book with that thrill which we all know when we chance upon old friends in strange places. Hattersley was an old friend; she had never seen him; she had never even read him; but was he not the guide, philosopher, and friend of David Auburn? So, then, he was Jeanette’s friend too. Her hand trembled a little as she took down the book. It was so strange to find it here! At the opposite end of the earth, she felt quite near to the man she hopelessly loved, only by happening upon a novel by his faithful Achates! She should read it for David’s sake, and she dipped into it then and there in the most appreciative spirit—though not in a spirit one would wish to inspire in one’s readers. She read, in fact, as you read your young brother’s earliest efforts: with a hawk’s eye for the merits and a bat’s for the defects, and personal prejudice enough to make you like a blue-book, if you tackled it in the same way. Hattersley, read thus, was an Olympian; Jeanette laid him down with regret; and he and David Auburn, between them, preoccupied her mind during the first portion of her long letter to England. But she gradually detached herself. She fell into the swing by and by. The words fell thickly from her pen, her pen raced over the paper, sheet after sheet was filled. She depicted elaborately her journey up country and
her surroundings at Gunbar—animate and inanimate: for the latter she was never at a loss for a simile, good or bad—her newspapered bedroom was likened to the inside of a servant’s trunk, and so on. There were too many similies, perhaps, and too much detail; but the letter was undeniably graphic. And it cost eighteen pence for postage.

Moreover it left Jeanette very limp; for the day had been excessively hot. Unfortunately, too, Master Joy was no reader of the feminine signs. He came in early, and found Jeanette resting in the verandah, with her eyes half closed. In her lap lay the swollen envelope, all ready for Debenham when he chose to come for it. Martin dropped upon it a disdainful eye, and propped himself against a verandah post.

“Well, I’m bothered! You must have been pulling us to pieces, Cousin Jeanette.”

“Perhaps I have,” said Jeanette, with a tired smile.

“Really! Now I wonder what you’ve been saying,” said Martin, in a tone of satirical—but quite good-natured—speculation. “You ought to tell us: it might do us such good to know how we strike the Home eyes. I just wonder, for instance, what you’ve been saying about me.”

Jeanette’s smile had gone. She gazed at him with frank, friendly eyes. “Would you like to know?” said she.

“I mightn’t like it,” he returned, with the same rough, well-meaning irony, “but it would be sure to do me good.”
She took him at his word. “Then I’ve been saying—in effect—that you’re an inveterate tease, Martin.”

“Go on,” said Martin, not ill pleased: for she had hesitated. “My back’s broad! Let me have it!”

“Well, then,” said Jeanette, in her kindest voice, “I added that I didn’t think you always teased quite wisely.”

For the rest of that day Martin Joy was profoundly contemplative.