

Mehitabel's Love Story

By Pauline Carrington Bouvé

MISS MEHITABEL sat gazing into the deep heart of the fire, with her feet on the grate tender and her thoughts far away. Now and then the jangle of sleigh bells penetrated the serene silence of the little room, where for twenty years Miss Mehitabel had lived her unobtrusive, placid life. Now and then a peal of laughter or the catch of a gay song made its way into the fire lighted twilight as some gay party of young people dashed by through the smiling snow.

Captain Kidd sat gazing into the deep heart of the fire, and he too was reminiscent, for he blinked his eyes reflectively as he gazed and twitched his whiskers now and then with an obviously retrospective twitch.

"The young people are gay to-night, Captain Kidd. It's beautiful to be young and happy, isn't it?"

A sudden shower of sparks crackled up the chimney, and Captain Kidd drew back with a start.

"Happiness and beauty are for the young, and we are old, you and I, Kiddy. Let me see—it's twelve years since your mother left you in the coal bin in the cellar, and it's twenty years to-morrow since I came here to live. No, we are not young any more, and it's foolish for us to think or to talk about it. We are just an old maid and her old cat, aren't we? But we can be useful enough still for all that; only sometimes, Captain Kidd, I wish we had company—a cheery little home with little feet pattering over the floor and— Never mind, an old maid and an old cat have dreams sometimes, don't they, Captain Kidd?—beautiful dreams that can never come true; but they hurt nobody but just a foolish old woman and a foolish old cat."

Miss Mehitabel's hand was stroking Captain Kidd's soft fur as she spoke, and Captain Kidd was rubbing his head against her knee with sympathetic and acquiescent purrs.

"Do you know I am forty years old to-night? Forty years old! An old woman! Isn't it strange, Captain Kidd, that one isn't old at forty if she has a husband and children treading on her toes? But if there is no husband, no children—if one doesn't belong to somebody, why then she is old, old, old, when forty years have slipped by!"

"Purr! You are all right as to looks," expostulated Captain Kidd. "There are pinkish spots on your cheeks, and your eyes have got a nice soft shine in them that makes even that flighty Angora across the street feel amiable when you look at her. Plain looking! Don't talk nonsense!" Or that is what his purrs might have been translated into.

Miss Mehitabel understood, for she knew his purr language from his earliest kittenhood. "There was once upon a time when I might have believed you, but that was a long time ago—years before you were left in the coal bin, in fact—and I have learned better." Miss Mehitabel sighed as she drew Captain Kidd's rusty black tail through her thin fingers.

"He was tall and broad shouldered, Kiddy, and had honest gray eyes that looked at you straight and couldn't tell lies, and I—it was all my own fault—I thought they said something to me that was meant for some one else and—and that was all. He was brave and true all the time. It was I who was blind. How could he help it? I was little and plain and quiet, and my cousin Marian, you see, was tall and fair and saucy. There wasn't anybody to blame. It was just according to nature."

"And one night—a night just like this, Kiddy—with the snow coming down in a great white swirl, Uncle Abner Philbrick came by with his big hay wagon on runners. I'm giving the young folks a ride," he called to mother. "Where's Mettie?"

"Mehitabel doesn't care much for sleighing, but I'll tell her, Abner," said mother. All the time I was peeping through the blinds, and when I saw a pair of broad shoulders loom up out of the darkness as Uncle Abner held up his lantern, my heart gave a great thump.

"Tell him I'm coming, mother!" I cried, and then with trembling fingers I put on my cloak and hood and mittens and ran to the door. Uncle Abner put me in with a laugh. "You can get into Anson's pocket if you get crowded for room," he said, and then Joe Littlefield cracked his whip and away we went, the soft white snow under and around and above us.

"I was warm and safe and happy, Kiddy; for it's happiness to a woman to be near the man she loves, to feel the protection of his presence, to be proud of his strength, to be satisfied by his nearness."

"Well, by and by the snow stopped falling and a yellow moon flooded the sky, and all the world lay wrapped in whiteness, and my heart within me was full too of a strange, beautiful light; for, Kiddy, I



Captain Kidd Too Was Reminiscent.

had no thought of anything except just my own unspoken, unasked love for Anson. I was foolish, Kiddy, maybe, but one is not very wise at nineteen when she is little and quiet and plain. The others laughed and jested, and I only was silent—silent and happy."

"Are you cold, little one?" whispered Anson, and then under the buffalo robe he took both of my trembling hands in his strong warm clasp. "They are fluttering like little frightened birds," he said in my ear. "You aren't afraid, Mettie?"

"And I whispered 'No, Anson,' and turned my face away, for I dared not let him see the look in my eyes."

"And then when the ride was over and he lifted me down as our door, he slipped a letter into my hand. 'Who is it for, Anson?' I asked, trying to steady my voice."

"For my sweetheart," he answered, looking down into my eyes, with a smile. "I'll come to-morrow for my answer," and then he climbed up beside Joe, the horses started, and he was gone—yes, gone, Kiddy, gone out of my life forever!" There was a pause.

"Men don't remember twenty-one years, Kiddy, even where they love deepest, and he didn't. It was all a mistake—my mistake, you know. My cousin Marian was stopping with us for the winter, and when Eben Banks helped her down from the wagon she had come up behind me."

"What's the matter with you, Mettie?" she asked me sharply. "Why, actually, Mehitabel Markham, you look pretty!"

"I laughed. I knew why I looked pretty. It was love that transfigured my plain little face—I was happy. 'You are always pretty, Cousin Marian,' I said lightly. 'My beauty isn't a night old yet,' and I laughed. She followed me up into my little attic room and sat down on the cot bed."

"You are queer to-night, Mettie. I never saw you look or do like this before."

"Yes, I am queer and I do look pretty," I said as I stood before the little mirror that hung above my dimly curtained dressing table. "It is nice to be pretty, Cousin Marian. I wonder if it will last."

"She got up from the cot and stood beside me. 'Take off your cloak,' she said. 'You stand there like one in a dream,' and she unclasped my cloak and hood. Then it was she spied the letter in my hand."

"For My Sweetheart" she read with a mocking laugh, and then she opened the sheet and began to read.

"Stop!" I cried. "Stop! How dare you read my letter?" and I sprang forward, my heart on fire.

"Your letter!" she said with a sneer. "You

little fool! can't you see it was meant for me? Listen," and she read:

"DEAREST—I have loved you ever since you came into my life, just six weeks ago to-night. Don't you remember the quilting party at Beeman's Cove, sweetheart? Since that night my heart has been utterly yours. Have you not read the love for you that I could not keep out of my heart and my eyes, dear? I do not know yet how this will reach you, but you will get it. Will you be my wife, my darling? To-morrow I will come to hear your answer."

"ANSON BURCHARD."

"I suppose you notice that he mentions the quilting party at the Cove that you did not go to," she remarked as she slipped the fatal letter into her pocket. "Your letter, indeed! It's lucky for everybody that I got hold of my own property before you openly accepted a lover who did not offer himself!" And, Kiddy, she laughed such a cruel laugh I think I could almost have killed her for it.

"Yes, it was clearly for her, not me. I remembered the quilting party, and how I had stayed away to take care of old Peter Foy who had been run over by the train and who wanted me. I remembered how Anson had asked me to go, and how I had told him I could not because poor old Peter would not let anyone but me stay by him when the surgeon from Boston came. I remembered how hard it was to say no to him. Yes, it was all clear now. I had put out my hand to take another's happiness. I think my heart died then, Kiddy. It seemed to me that the world had suddenly stopped. The ticking of the clock in the corner seemed loud and discordant."

"I put out my hand and steadied myself on the dressing table. The face reflected in the little mirror was no longer pretty. It was drawn and old and thin."

"Take your letter, Cousin Marian," I said steadily. "I've found out your little secret by a clever trick. I guess I'm not the only fool the moon is shining on to-night. You and Anson have my best wishes. I hope you will forgive my little ruse. Now go to bed, please, for I am very tired and sleepy."

"Good night, Mettie," she said rather shamefacedly. "Do you know, five minutes ago I could have sworn you loved Anson Burchard? You are the queerest girl I ever saw. Good night."

"She went out and closed the door, and I— I knelt down and prayed to God to let me die. But He didn't. He knew best. The next day mother came to me and said, 'Anson Burchard wants to see you, Mehitabel.'"

"You tell Marian to go in, mother," I answered. "He just wants to know about a note he gave me to give her. Tell him I'm too busy to see him now. How well I remember that day!"

Miss Mehitabel shivered as she spoke, and Captain Kidd rubbed his face with his right front paw vigorously.

"Then," continued Miss Mehitabel, "two weeks later he went away to college, and I never saw him again. Marian? Marian married and went West. All the old set have passed on, Kiddy; only you and I are left. But we won't be lonely and selfish, will we? I can look back now and see how it had been different, and I had had the warmth and the sunshine, I might not have been so useful as I've been. Old maids have their places too, though the world has a jest at them—good natured, but a jest, you know, for the woman who has never had husband or child. We know differently about them, Kiddy, don't we? We know it is beautiful to have kept oneself pure and true to one's ideal love all through the lonesome years— That was just a tear, Kiddy, that fell down on your fur. Sometimes I can't help thinking of the pain and then the dreariness of all these long years; but I am just a foolish old woman of forty, and—"

A knock at the door interrupted Miss Mehitabel's story, and Captain Kidd stood with his back up defiantly as she opened the door. Mrs. Baxter the landlady stood on the threshold.

"There's been an accident, Miss Mehitabel," she said excitedly, "and a young lady's been pitched out of the sleigh right here by the door. They are fetching her into the living room down stairs. The new doctor's coming, and please won't you come down and help me out? I am flustered."

Mrs. Baxter did indeed appear flustered as she paused for lack of breath. "Maiden ladies ain't much use in accidents," she continued; "but you're nice and quiet like and can talk to the doctor. I am that flustered, my mind's a blank."

Miss Mehitabel walked down into Mrs. Baxter's little parlor, where the injured girl lay on Mrs. Baxter's bed, that did duty as a bookcase by day and served as a place of repose for Mrs. Baxter's ample person by night.

"Oh, please let me go! I am only just a little shaken up!" and the young woman raised herself