

# MY AUSTRALIAN COUSIN.

(Continued.)

"Don't you really like lawn-tennis, Jim?" she says one afternoon, as we are sitting under a magnificent beech waiting for some neighbouring lunatics to arrive and exhaust themselves.

I am going to say I detest it, but one has to be cautious, so I suavely murmur that, though a charming relaxation, literature takes up so many hours—and I certainly do spend a great deal of time in the club reading-room—that I have never had any opportunity of practising.

She is interested.

"I thought all Englishmen were lawn-tennismaniaus," she says. "But you are literary. Do tell me all about it!"

"It is a very large subject," I reply, vaguely remembering Mr. Pickwick's remark to Count Stryker.

"Well, tell me something about a bit of it," she answers, and I rather think there is a satirical gleam under her long eyelashes.

"What shall I tell you?" I say, looking as intellectual as possible.

"Tell me your own experiences."

My experiences have chiefly been comprised in publishing one volume of poems at my own expense which didn't sell, and in writing verses for various newly-started periodicals which didn't pay. But this bare statement of fact would be simply repulsive, so I draw on my imagination and greatly interest my cousin.

"And do you write some of the articles in the papers?" she says.

This is safe ground, thanks to the anonymous system in England. So I boldly avouch myself a daily and weekly leader writer, mysteriously remarking that it is a rule not to identify one's productions, but that she often reads mine without knowing it.

"Oh, how delightful, Jim! I had no idea," she says, her eyes sparkling with enthusiasm, "that I had a great English *litterateur* as my cousin! I must tell papa; he'll be so interested!"

This is awkward. To ask her not to tell my uncle will look as if I did not confide in him, to let her tell him gives the chance of his pursuing the subject too zealously, and he is a painfully literal man, I find, with very little imagination about him. However, on the whole I decide to let events take their course. Besides, even if she said she wouldn't tell him, of course she would.

"It must be a fine thing to have a talent for writing," says Amy meditatively. I think inwardly it is a far finer thing to have good pay for it; but I say nothing, only contemplate earnestly and æsthetically a rosebud she has given me as a "buttonhole."

"What are you studying in that rosebud so intently?" she says at last, as I intended she should.

"Many things, my pretty cousin," I say dreamily (now is the time to commence my wooing); "particularly the charms of the girl who gave it to me."

She doesn't blush or droop her face. No, she laughs—rather loudly too.

"Oh, Jim, how sentimental you are!"

"It is a sentimental hour," I answer, "and the genius of the place and time is sitting beside me. Do you think, my cousin Amy—"

"Here we all are!" is bawled behind me, and the tennis-party come into view.

Amy rises to greet her friends. I am introduced, bow very coldly, and resume my place on the seat, while my cousin and the other players range themselves for the fatiguing pastime. The good-looking local doctor, who is a crack player, is at Amy's side. What idiots they all look, rushing about in that way! And Amy is as mad as any of them. I hope Mactavish is wrong, but it certainly seems as if she valued physical more than mental gifts. But I have great faith in my own powers of persuasion, and we shall see. Meanwhile I recline gracefully under the beech and look poetical.

My uncle strides up. He always walks like a dragoon.

"Good news, Jim! The horses will be here by midday train to-morrow. So you and Amy can explore our Devon lanes!"

Good news! I shudder as I make a ghastly attempt at a smile of enjoyment. Well, I have ridden, and I can, I suppose, do so again if I can pick out one of the brutes that is enfeebled and fatigued by his railway journey.

"Don't you play lawn-tennis? Thought all you English youngsters did," continues my uncle, eyeing me somewhat curiously.

"No, I never practised it," I answer.

"Fine healthy exercise—braces every muscle; I like to see it," he rejoins, lighting a very full flavoured cigar, and taking a seat; "but for exercise, my boy, you should come to Australia; be in the saddle from dawn to dark; ride seventy miles to visit a neighbour. Ah, we should have made a man of you there," he adds good-naturedly, as he, I suppose, thinks.

I consider it impertinence. But what can you say to a rich uncle when you want to marry his daughter?

Darkness ends the match. High-tea—which is barbarous, as I think—and a good deal of rustic mirth follow. Then we adjourn to the billiard-room, the ladies looking on. The doctor and the lawyer think they can play. They've both got money, and I determine to ease them of a little. I "play dark" accordingly, as a preliminary, then say carelessly:

"What shall we play for?"

"For love," says my uncle decisively. "It may be prejudice, but I don't like either card or billiard playing for money—in my house, at any rate. You agree with me, Jim, I know, as I remember the other day you

spoke as they deserved of the billiard-sharpers in London, and very properly expressed your hatred of making a gain of the game."

Confound him! what a memory he has.

## CHAPTER III.

Some weeks have passed. I have had terrific experiences. I have ridden about the country with my cousin on a chestnut mare of most uncertain temper and fiend-like treachery. Somehow I have managed, in general, to stick on. But on one afternoon the mare took to kicking near a duck-pond, and ultimately shot me over her head into it. Amy screamed—not with sympathy, but with laughter. But I have endured this and the dogs—when I'm master at Beechlands we'll pretty soon have an altercation there in that respect—which are like so many demons, and the lawn-tennis, in which I have sprained my tendons as it seems to me *en masse*, and the pigs, bullocks, and poultry, and I have reaped the reward of my perseverance. Amy and I are engaged, and as far as a few judicious enquiries go, I think, even during my uncle's lifetime, we shall have a very nice income. Moreover, he has agreed with me that though we are to live with him, a London house for the season is a necessity. And my literary labours—for, I, of course, lay much stress on the self-respect which will not permit me to live idle on my wife's money—will afford me plenty of opportunities of running up to town.

One immediate good results from the engagement. I can go and triumphantly crow over Mactavish. So I look in again at his rooms, find him as usual smoking and reading one of his stupid athletic papers, and astonish him by my news so much that he drops his pipe.

"You're a fortunate man," he says dryly. The Scotch and whisky stage has not yet set in, and Mactavish is a sarcastic Southern of the most conventional type. "A particularly fortunate man."

"I venture to think that Amy is also a fortunate woman," I remark, somewhat complacently.

"Undoubtedly she is," he replies coolly, "if she be as pretty and as well dowered as you describe," as if she had no other reason whatever for being so considered. "It appears to me that the young lady has made rather a hurried choice, but perhaps its range was limited in Devonshire."

"If it had been unlimited," I say warmly, "the result, I flatter myself, would have been the same."

"Ah, I dare say you do," says Mactavish, mixing himself some whisky, and passing the bottle to me. He takes a mighty gulp, and reiterates: "I dare say you do." Then meditatively: "Did you say your uncle's name was Ferdinand?"

"Ferdinand Wilson, the Beechlands, South Devon."

"Then an old chum of mine, Fred Hillerton, was in Australia some years ago, and was very thick with him."

"Indeed," I reply, somewhat superciliously. "I dare say he had many colonial friends."

"But this is not a colonial friend. Fred Hillerton's in the Civil Service, like myself, but tried his hand first in the colonies. And his brother, the literary swell, you've of course heard of, seeing you're all in the swim—or say you are."

Disregarding the nasty insinuation that lies in that last remark, I answer that Hillerton's name seems familiar, though I cannot at that moment identify it.

"Why, ye gomer!—he is now getting disagreeable and whiskified, also Scotch—" ye gowh! George Hillerton, Ned's elder brother, is editor of *The Slasher*; everybody, I should think, knew that, and surely you, who are always jawing about your intellectual pursuits, know it well. I must tell Hillerton where his Mr. Wilson's to be found."

I don't pay much attention to this. If I had, probably the result of this story would have been different. But I begin to think I hate Alister Mactavish, and wonder how our intimacy began. Great, red moustached, clumsy giant! with no poetry in his soul. But he had lost a good many sovereigns, which I had won at pool, and hence, perhaps, I have regarded him in a different light.

"You won't see much of me, young man, when I'm married," I mentally soliloquise, "and precious good care I'll take Beechlands don't harbour you as a visitor."

"I suppose there's good partridge shooting round Beechlands?" he resumes, after he had filled the room with a cloud of horribly strong Cavendish.

I understand this remark, but no, Mactavish, I'm not quite so green as you suppose.

"Very little, so my uncle said," I answer carelessly.

This is—well, not quite correct, but all is fair in love and war.

"Indeed," he says, with as much interest as I should feel in a new gem in blue china. "Why, I've heard that the shooting is fine—fine, sir, all round there."

"I don't know; I have higher pursuits," I say coldly.

He doesn't "spoil" for an invitation; I'm not going to introduce him to my cousin, who has so much admiration for open-air accomplishments.

"Bah!" he roars with a brutal concentration of scorn in his strident voice. "Look here, Jimmy Wilson, what'll you bet you don't see me at Beechlands in September. Lay you ten to one in sovereigns I'm there."

This is too good an opportunity to lose, seeing my influence is, of course, sufficient to prevent the bet being won.

"Done," I say, and book it.

I have more whisky, which loosens my tongue, and I rally the big Scotchman playfully on my triumph, pointing out to him that the men of brains usually beat the men of muscle after all.

"Bah! ye claverin' loon!" he roars out again, after he has heard me