

THE COUNTRY COUSIN.

CHAPTER II.

(Continued.)

Primula pouted and hung her head. "The young lady is not unprotected," said the gentleman, smiling. "And pray, sir, who are you?"

"I am her nearest masculine friend," said Anthony, wrathfully; "I stand here at present in her father's place."

The gentleman laughed. "You are too young to be her father," he said. "Go away, young man, and I will bring her safely to her home when she wishes to go."

"Primula," said Anthony, white with anger, "go yonder directly to the tree, and wait there till I join you." The girl, terrified out of her senses, turned and fled as she was bidden; the gentleman raised his stick to strike this insolent tradesman who had dared to defy him; but, before it could descend, Anthony had grappled with him. There was a struggle, and Primula's admirer lay stretched on the green.

Anthony brought home the truant in silence, and for many days he came in and out of the house, and did not speak to her. Primula sulked and fretted and was miserable because Anthony looked so cross at her. Anthony was moody and dull, and Hetty, with a vague sense of coming trouble, wondered what it all could mean.

CHAPTER III.

Old Tony Spence was taken ill that spring, and Hetty was a good deal occupied in attending on him. Anthony came as usual in the evenings, but he did not expect to see Hetty much, and Primula and he amused themselves together. Hetty's face got paler during this time, and she fell into a habit of indulging in reveries which were not happy ones, if one might judge by the knotted clasp of her hands, and the deep lines of pain between her brows. Her housekeeping duties were hurried over, she fetched the wrong book from the bookshelves for customers, her sewing was thrown aside, her only wish seemed to be to sit behind her father's bed-curtain, with her head leaned against the wall and her eyes closed to the world. Sorrow was coming to seek for her, and she hid from it as long as she could.

One night old Spence asked to have a particular volume brought him from the shop, and Hetty took her lamp in hand and went down to fetch it for him. There was a faint light already burning in the place, which Hetty did not at first perceive, as she opened the door at the top of the staircase, and put her foot on the first step to descend. She went down a little way, but was stopped by the sound of voices. Anthony and Primula were there.

"Yes," Primula was saying, in her soft cooing voice, "I love you better than any one. You fought for me, and I love you."

"Hetty —," murmured Anthony.

"Hetty won't mind," whispered Primula. "She gives me her money and her ribbons. She won't refuse to give me you too—I'm sure of that."

They moved a little from behind the screen of a projecting stand of books, and saw Hetty standing on the stairs, gazing straight before her and looking like a sleep-walker. Primula gave a little cry, and covered her face. Hetty started, turned and fled up into the sitting-room, shutting the door behind her.

She sat down at the table, and leaned her head heavily upon her hands. The blow which she had been half dreading, half believing to be an impossibility, had fallen and crushed her; Anthony loved her no more. He had taken away his love from her, and given it to Primula; who with pleading eyes and craving hands had robbed and cheated her. The greediness which she had tried to satisfy with ribbons and shillings, had not scrupled to grasp the only thing she would have kept, and held till death as her very own. Hetty's thoughts spun round and round in the whirl of new and uncomprehended agony. She had no thought of doing or saying anything, no wish to take revenge nor to give reproach. She was stunned, bruised, benighted, and willing to die.

Primula came creeping up the staircase, after crying for an hour all alone among the old books. Life was very troublesome, thought Primula; everybody was selfish and cross, and everything was either wrong or disagreeable. People petted and loved her one moment, and were angry with her the next. Anthony had rushed away from her in a fit of grief, although she had told him she loved him, and had given up a fine gentleman for his sake. Hetty, who used to be so tender with her, and so ready to give her everything, had looked so dreadfully there on that step of the stairs that she, Primula, was afraid to go up, though she was tired and longing to be in bed. Sobbing and fretting, she crept up the staircase, and her desire to be comfortable overcoming her fear, she opened the door of the sitting-room and came in. Hetty was sitting quietly at the table, with her head leaned on her hands, and she did not look up. "That is a good thing," thought Primula. "How dreadful if she were to scold me! 'Tis well it is not her way to make a talk about things." And she stole across the floor and shut herself up in the bed-room.

It was quite late at night when Hetty followed her into the bed-room, and then Primula was fast asleep, with the sheet pulled over her head and face, as if she would hide herself from the glance of Hetty's anger, even while she was happily unconscious of it. Hetty's lamp burned itself out, and she knelt down in the dark to say her prayers. Her knees bent themselves mechanically in a certain corner of the room, but no words would come to Hetty's lips, and no clear thoughts to her mind. She only remembered that she ought to pray, and stretched out her arms, dumbly hoping vaguely that God would know what she meant. Nothing would come into her mind but pictures of the happy hours that Anthony and she had spent together in their love. She fell asleep stupidly dwelling on these memories, and unable to realize that Anthony had given her up; then she dreamed that she had wakened out of a terrible dream, in which Anthony had seemed to have forgotten her for Primula. How joyful she was in that dream! How she laughed and sang for ecstasy, and chattered about the foolish fancies that will come into people's minds when they are asleep! And then she wakened, and saw the dawn-light shining on Primula's golden head, and sweetly-tinted face, and she knew and remembered that Primula was the beloved one, and that she, Hetty, was an exile and an outcast from her paradise for evermore.

Then, in that moment of exquisite anguish, in the leisure of the quiet dawn, a terrible passion of anger and hatred broke out in her breast. Everything that the light revealed had something to tell of her lost happiness, every moment that sped was bringing her nearer to the hour when she must rise up and give Anthony to Primula, and stand aside and behold their bliss and accept their thanks. She dared not let that moment come, she would not have it, she could not confront it. She should do them some mischief if she were to see them together again before her as she had seen them last night. What, then, was she to do with herself? She dared not kill them, she could not wish them dead. It would not comfort her at all that they should suffer or be swept out of the world to atone for their sins. They had murdered her heart, and they could not by any suffering of theirs bring back the dead to life. What, then, must she do with herself? The only thing that remained for her was to get away, far out of their sight and out of their reach, never to behold them, nor to hear of them again, between this and the coming of her death.

She sprang out of bed and dressed herself hastily, keeping her back turned upon sleeping Primula, and, creeping down the stairs, she got out of the house. She felt no pang at leaving her home, and never once remembered her father; her only thought was to get away, away, where Anthony could never find her more. She hurried along the deserted streets and got out on the downs, and then she slackened her speed a little, quite out of breath. She knew that the path across the downs led to a little town, about ten miles away, in the direction of London. She had been too long accustomed to the practical management of her father's affairs, not to feel conscious, from mere habit and without reflection, that she must work when she got to London, in order to keep herself unknown. She would help in a shop somewhere or get sewing at a dress maker's. In the meantime her only difficulty was to get there.

The whirl of her passion had carried her five miles away from Smokeford, when she came to a little roadside inn. She was faint with exhaustion, feeling the waste caused by excitement, want of sleep and food, and by extraordinary exertion. She bought some bread and sat on a stone at the gate of a field to eat it. She saw the ploughman come into the field at a distant opening, and watched him coming towards her; a grey head and stooping figure, an old man meekly submitting his feebleness to the yoke of the day's labour, though knowing that time had deprived him of his fitness for it. Hetty watched him, her eyes followed him as if fascinated; the look in his face had drawn her out of herself somehow, and made her forget her trouble. She wanted to go and help him to hold the plough, to ask if he had had his breakfast; to put her hand on his shoulder and be kind to him. She did not know what it was about him that bewitched her. He turned his plough beside her, and as he did so, he noticed the pale girl sitting by the gate, and a smile lit up his rugged face.

Then it was that Hetty knew why she had watched him. He looked like her father. Her father! He was ill, and she had deserted him; had left him among those who would vex and neglect him! The untasted bread fell from Hetty's hands; the tears overflowed her eyes; she fell prone on the grass, and sobbed for her own wickedness, and for the grief and desolation of the sick old man at home.

"What is the matter, lass?" asked the old ploughman, kindly bending over her.

Hetty rose up ashamed.

"Sir," she said, humbly, "I was running away from my father, who is ill; but I am going back to him."

"That is right, lass. Stick by the poor old father. Maybe, he was hard on you."

"No, no, no; he never was hard on me. I have a sorrow of my own, sir, that made me mad. I forgot all about him until I saw his look in your face. I shall run back now, sir, and be in time to get him his breakfast."

The clock of the roadside inn struck six, and Hetty set off running back to Smokeford.

She ran so fast that she had not time to think of how she should act when she got home. When arrived there, she found she could have a long day to think of it, for Primula had gone to her work-room, and there was nobody about the house but Sib, and her father, and herself.

The old man had never missed her; but Sib met her on the threshold and looked at her dusty garments with a wondering face.

"Well, Hetty!" she said, "you did take an early start out of us this morning."

"I wanted a walk," said Hetty, throwing off her cloak, and making a change in her forlorn appearance. "Is my father's breakfast ready? I'm afraid I am late."

Old Tony Spence did not even remark that his daughter was unusually pale, nor that her dress was less neat than usual as she carried in his tea and toast. She was there, and that was everything for him. That she had been that morning flying like a hunted thing from Smokeford, sobbing in the grass five miles away from her home; that he had lost her forever, only for a strange old man following a plough in a distant field; of these things he never could know. Hetty was one of the people who do not complain of the rigour of the struggle that is past.

All day she sat by her father's side, in the old place behind the bed-curtain. He was getting better, and showed more lively interest in the world than she had seen in him since he first fell ill. Through the window he could see, as he lay, the little roof-garden which had been accustomed to look gay every summer for years. It was colourless now and untrimmed.

"Hetty dear," he said, "how is it that you have been neglecting your flowers? Perhaps, you think it isn't worth while to keep up the little garden any longer? You will be going off with Anthony. Is any day settled for the wedding?"

"No father," said Hetty, keeping her white, drawn face well behind the curtain. "We could not think of that until you are on your feet again."

In spite of her effort to save him the pain of an unhappy thought just now, something in her voice struck upon the old man strangely. He was silent for a while, and lay ruminating.

"Hetty, let me see your face."

Hetty looked forth from her hiding place unwillingly, but kept her face as much as possible from the light.

"What do you want with it, Daddy? You have seen it before."

"'Tis a comely face, Hetty; and others have thought so besides me. I don't like the look on it now, my girl. Child!

what's the matter with you? Out with it this minute! If he's going to fall you, it will be a black day for the man. I'll murder him!"

"Hush! hush! I have told you nothing of the kind."

"Deny it, then, this moment; and tell me no lie."

Hetty sat silent and scared.

"Is it that doll from Moor-edge that has taken his fancy?"

"He has not told me so."

"My lass! why do you play hide and seek with your old father? I know it is as I have said. Let me rise! Do not hold me; for I will horsewhip him to death!"

Hetty held him fast by the wrists.

"I will turn her out-of-doors without a character; and, though I am a weak, old man, I will punish him before the eyes of the town."

For a moment Hetty's angry heart declared in silence that they would deserve such punishment; and that she could bear to see it. But she said—

"Father, you know you will do neither of those cruel things. Listen to me, father. I am tired of Anthony! Let him go with—Primula. You and I will be happy here together when they are gone."

The old man fell back on his pillow exhausted. After a time, he drew his daughter toward him, took her face between his hands, and looked at it.

"Let it be as you say," he said, "only don't let me see them. You're a brave girl; and I'll never scold you again. We'll be happy when they're gone. We'll finish that little book of mine, and—and—and—"

His voice became indistinct, and he dropped suddenly asleep. Hetty sat on in her corner, thinking over her future, and thanking Heaven that she had at least this loving father left to her. After an hour or two had passed, she looked up and noticed a change in the old man's face. He was dead.

CHAPTER IV.

It was new and awful to Hetty to have neither father nor lover to turn to in her desolation. She got over one terrible week, and then when the old man was fairly under the clay she broke down and fell ill, and Sib nursed her. Primula hung about the house, feeling guilty and uncomfortable, and Anthony came sometime to ask how Hetty fared. He brought fruit and ice for her, offering them timidly, and Sib accepted them gladly and poured out her anxiety to him, all unconscious that there was anything wrong between the lovers. Primula sulked at Anthony, who seemed to be thinking much more of Hetty than of her. The old book-shop was closed for good, and the Spences' happy little home was already a thing of the past.

Hetty thought she would be glad to die; but people cannot die through mere wishing, and so she got better. When she was able to rise Sib carried her into the little sitting-room and placed her in her father's old arm-chair; and seated here, one warm summer evening, she sent to beg Anthony to come and speak with her.

Anthony's heart turned sick within him as he looked on the wreck of his once adored Hetty. Her wasted cheeks and hollow eyes made a striking contrast to Primula's fair smooth beauty. Yet in her spiritual gaze, and on her delicate lips, there still sat a charm which Anthony knew of old, and still felt; a charm which Primula never could possess.

"We are not going to talk about the past," said Hetty, when the first difficult moments were over. "I only want to tell you that Primula and you are not to look on me as an enemy. I am her only living friend, and this is her only home. She shall be married from here; and then we will separate and meet no more."

"You are too good," he stammered, "too thoughtful for us both. Hetty," he added, hesitatingly, "I dare not apologize for my conduct, nor ask your forgiveness. I can only say I did not intend it. I know not how it came about—she bewitched me."

Hetty bowed her head with a cold, stately little gesture, and Anthony backed out of the room, feeling himself rebuked, dismissed, forgiven. He went to Primula; and Hetty sat alone in the soft summer evening, just where they two had sat a year ago planning their future life.

"She is too good for me," thought Anthony, as he walked up the street. "Primula will vex me more, but she will suit me better."

Still he felt a bitter pang as he told himself that Hetty's love for him was completely gone. Of course it was better that it should be so, but still—he knew well that Primula could never be to him the sweet enduring wife that Hetty would have been. He knew also that his love for Primula was not of the kind that would last; whereas Hetty would have made his peace for all time. Well, the mischief was done now and could not be helped. He hardly knew himself how he had slipped into his present position.

When Hetty found that she had indeed got to go on with her life, she at once set about marking out her future. She had a cousin living on an American prairie with her husband and little children, who had often wished that Hetty would come out to her. And Hetty determined to go. She sold off the contents of the old book-shop, only keeping one or two volumes, which, with her father's unfinished manuscript, she stowed away carefully in her trunk. Primula had given up her work at the dress-maker's, and was busy making her clothing for her wedding. Hetty was engaged in getting ready for her journey. The two girls sat all day together sewing. They spoke little, and there was no pretence of cordiality between them. Hetty had strained herself to do her utmost for this friendless creature, who had wronged her, but she could find no smiles nor pleasant words to lighten the task. Pale and silent, she did her work with trembling fingers and a frozen heart. Primula, on her side, sulked at Hetty, as if Hetty had been the aggressor, and sighed and shed little tears between the fitting on and the trimming of her pretty garments. In the evenings, Primula was wont to fold up her sewing, and go out to walk; with Anthony supposed Hetty, who sometimes allowed herself to weep in the twilight, and sometimes walked about the darkening room, chafing for the hour to come which would carry her far away from these old walls, with their intolerable memories.

So Hetty endured the purgatory to which she had voluntarily condemned herself. Anthony came into the house no more; Primula had her walks with him, and sometimes it was very late when she came home. But Hetty never chid her now. Primula was her own mistress, and could come and go as she liked, from under this roof which her cousin's generosity was upholding over her head.