

Clowne for almost a year when an event occurred which, though of trifling significance in itself, yet influenced the whole of my future life.

Let me relate it to you in detail.

It happened on one of madame's "At Home" days—a special one, I think, because ices had been ordered from Gunter's and cakes from Buzzard's. Madame's dress for the occasion was the cause of much comment amongst the servants. Mary Anne described it as an "adorable confection," and Sarah, the kitchenmaid, said that "her mistress's hands and neck looked white as the dribbling snow in contrast against the 'eavenly 'ue of the bodice.'"

During the afternoon, when the festivities were at their height, I was suddenly called upon to settle a quarrel between the girls and Jim. It had arisen, as usual, over some bonbons; and Jim, regardless of the company present, had given his sister a kick which had caused her to shriek at the top of her voice.

I soon made peace, and was about to leave the room when I distinctly heard one of the gentlemen present inquire my name of madame.

I looked up suddenly and caught the speaker's eye. His face seemed faintly familiar, but when and where I had seen it before did not dawn upon me.

Madame told him my name and then said in an undertone—

"She is a sadly plain creature to look after my pretty ones, is she not?"

He evidently did not assent, for the next moment he said kindly—

"I should like her also to be included in the picnic. I am sure a holiday would do her good!"

Madame said "Indeed!" in a very depreciating tone of voice, and I heard no more.

That same evening, however, when the last guest had departed, madame called me to her and told me that I might put on my best clothes the following morning, as Mr. Hamilton had invited me to join his picnic.

Now this particular "picnic" had been much talked about for some weeks past. It was to be a fashionable assemblage, and was to take place in the woods of Abbotsford, adjoining Mr. Hamilton's country seat.

Nothing could equal my astonishment at the invitation, unless it were the astonishment of others, who seemed to resent my intrusion into their select circle.

The servants were furious at my preference, and mortified me at table by asking me such questions as to whether I intended wearing my sprigged silk or rose-coloured muslin on the morrow.

Early next morning we took the train to Herne, and from thence carriages were awaiting us to conduct us to Abbotsford. As we drove along I forgot my ugliness, forgot my poor apparel, forgot everything in my rapture at the exquisite scenery through which we were driving.

Now we passed a little brown stream in a wood brimming over the grass and giving birth to myriads of wild flowers; now we drove through orchards where the luscious fruit glowed on the bending branches of the trees; and now amid darksome fir trees that waved their heads above us. We arrived at the Hall about mid-day. It looked to me like some quaint and picturesque old abbey with its lattices and casements peeping above the trees.

We had dinner almost immediately after our arrival. It was a wonderful meal, with dishes of rare concoction, and for dessert there were creams and ices and piles of strawberries and pineapples.

I ate little. I was too excited with the novelty of my situation to be hungry.

Nobody addressed a syllable to me nor took the slightest notice of my presence, except the host, who in the midst of his exacting duties occasionally looked towards me and greeted me with a smile.

After dinner, coffee and cakes were served upon the lawn. The ladies partook of these whilst the gentlemen strolled about and smoked.

Finding myself alone and not caring to partake of the coffee, I strolled away from the fashionable group and wandered into a forest of pine trees whose dark waving branches seemed to be calling on me to admire them. I walked through this forest as one in a dream. It seemed to me like some dim and vast cathedral, with the stems of the trees for columns, the dark branches overhead forming a Gothic roof.

I had not left the forest two minutes before I came upon another picture even more beautiful and in glorious contrast to the first. It was an old garden hedged in by a wall, a sort of ancient pleasance, I suppose, where in bygone times ladies with whooped petticoats had walked about accompanied by powdered cavaliers. Roses grew here by the thousands, nodding their perfumed heads in the strong and brilliant sunshine. A water fountain with a dragon's head for spout and two moss-grown goddesses threw a delicious shadow on the pathway, and there was a sun-dial in the corner up and down which the green lizards and bright-coloured beetles darted to and fro.

I was gazing at this exquisite picture and peopling it with dames and cavaliers, when I was startled by the sound of a footstep, and looking round met my kind host face to face.

"Are you enjoying yourself?" he asked in his cheery tones.

I turned my head hastily aside, but did not answer. Those were the first kind words that had ever been addressed to me, and they called forth two large tears.

He made a few ordinary remarks, waiting until my emotion had subsided.

"What do you think of this spot?" was his next question.

I told him my thoughts as simply as I could, but I think my simplicity must have pleased him, for he encouraged me to go on, and listened as attentively as if I had been a person of judgment and authority.

After a moment's pause he said—

"Miss Clair, this garden has great historical renown and is particularly dear to me, because it was my mother's favourite place. I wish for a painting of it. Will you accept the commission?"

I blushed and stammered. I thought at first that he was laughing at me, and the blood rose to my temples.

"I—I cannot paint," I said with faltering accents; "at least I—I shall never paint again!"

"That is not true," he said firmly.

"How, sir? How do you know?" I stammered, now utterly bewildered.

"Because I have already in my possession a sketch of yours which is very, very charming."

"A sketch?"

"A red geranium with one graceful festoon of bright green creeper round it."

"Oh!" I exclaimed; and looking up at him recognised at once the man who had stood outside the judgment hall and taken my part when I had crept home worn and miserable.

"It was a failure," I said dejectedly.

"No," he replied; "it was a success, a great success, and it would easily have won the contest had worth alone been considered. But, unfortunately, in these days the gaudiness and show which strike at once have greater

worth than that subtle grace and charm which conquers by degrees."

His praise abashed me and I answered humbly enough—

"It is your kindness, sir, which prompts you to attribute worth to my poor endeavours. I thank you for it."

"Your endeavour has genius in it," he insisted—"a genius with which you can make a reputation for yourself."

I—the half-starved beggar girl who had passed nearly all her life in a damp garret—might one day be famous! The idea struck me as ludicrous and I laughed aloud.

"Will you accept this commission?" he asked again, and I knew that he was serious. I thought for one moment and my thoughts were troubled and humiliating, in the next I answered firmly—

"No, sir! It is impossible!"

"What prevents you? Come," he said—"tell me the truth. Do you dislike painting?"

"Oh, no!" I caught my breath and my eyes gleamed. "I love it. It is my passion!"

"Then why do you refuse to oblige me?"

"I have no money with which to buy paints and canvas."

"But have you not your wages as governess?"

"No."

"Do you gain nothing in return for your hard, I might almost say brutal, work at 'Wee Nestie'?"

"I have my board and lodging."

"I never remember to have seen you at table, although I have called many times at 'Wee Nestie'?"

"I board with the servants and lodge in the new wing."

"You lodge in that cold, damp quarter of the house where all the rooms are so vast and so unfinished? It is shameful!"

His mouth quivered, his eyes seemed full of anger, and for some moments a silence reigned between us.

"If," he then said, recurring to the former topic, "you will be so good as to accept the commission to paint my garden, the money necessary for the expenses of production can be advanced to you, and you will, of course, lodge for the time being at Abbotsford."

I opened my eyes wide with astonishment; I could not for the moment realise his offer.

"I am going abroad for some weeks," he continued, "and my aunt, who is alone in the abbey, will be glad to have you with her as a companion."

Again no answer came from my lips. He was proposing for me schemes so wonderful that I could only show my gratitude by flushed cheeks and gleaming eyes.

Then suddenly, just as I was beginning to realise my happiness, I remembered my duties at "Wee Nestie," and I felt a sickening conviction that Madame Clowne would object to my leaving her, if only for a week. I recounted my doubts to Mr. Hamilton, who promised to intercede for me himself.

He must have been eloquent, for when I again saw my mistress, she shook hands with me before all the guests and wished me success in my enterprise.

Something in her voice, however, told me she was displeased, so just as she was about to leave I ran up to her and begged her not to be vexed with me, as I should return to her as speedily as possible.

She was alone and herself again.

"The idea of a thing like you being able to paint!" she cried. "If you don't return within the fortnight, you shall never enter my home again!"

(To be continued.)