

"I suppose they are. When do you wish to go? I must send a note to the Blennerhasset."

"The day after to-morrow, if anybody else can go then."

"Thursday—of course they can; and if they couldn't they must," said Lotty, settling the doubt in an arbitrary manner.

Thursday dawned clear and cloudless, the park and shrubberies were glistening with the sheen of dew-drops, and the morning air was laden with fresh early fragrance, when Elma sprang out of bed, and throwing her window open, leant out and scanned the horizon.

Her survey was satisfactory. She revelled in the morning's fragrance. How beautiful the world looked, and how grand a thing it was to live in it and enjoy health and beauty, love and wealth!

She was a mere child in years, only verging on the teens, but her mental precocity was very great, although unsuspected by most people, for she retained her child-like simplicity of manner. Her affliction as yet had never caused her one moment's unhappiness; whatever drawbacks or heart-aches it might bring in after years, her life was one bright, dreamy summer day. And she was thankful for it, for she knew vaguely that the world possessed two sides, one all golden and sunlit, the other dark and sin-stained.

Her sister Lotty was no orthodox district visitor with a note-book wherein human beings were classified in lists, like so many specimens of plants, but she was well known in both of the villages upon her father's property. No one would have called her a Lady Bountiful, but every old woman knew where her winter's stock of tea would come from, and every young one, when a sorrow or a joy flooded her heart, found her way to the Chase, and poured it all out to Miss Lotty, upon whose sympathy they knew they could count. In her wanderings among the poor she often encountered much destitution and suffering, sometimes brought about by improvidence, often through unforeseen misfortune. She was in the habit of relating such instances to Elma, who, secure from any touch of want or lack of love, might otherwise have grown up in the fixed belief that the world was all rose-coloured.

"I must tell the angels," she would say, after listening to a sad tale pathetically told by Lotty; and sliding down from her sister's arms, she would go and shut herself up in her bedroom.

"How shall we divide?" asked Lotty, when they had all assembled upon the steps preparatory to starting. "Madame, you, and Stannie, and Alice and Lily had better go in the carriage; Tom and I will have the phaeton, and the rest can go in the waggonette."

"Suppose you and Tom go in the waggonette, and I drive Miss Ross in the phaeton?" suggested Gordon.

"Very well; I don't mind; bundle in, all of you."

"I'll drive the grays," said Bill, taking the coachman's place, and handling the reins lightly. "I don't often upset the trap, but accidents will happen now and then, you know. You must take your chance, Miss Blennerhasset. We are such an unselfish family, that we have settled it all our own way, without consulting you or your sister. Would you like to go in the phaeton, supposing I were to drive?" Gordon and Miss Ross will both resign their position in that marvellous construction, if you give a hint that way."

"I could not accept such a sacrifice on their part," answered Miss Blennerhasset. "I certainly have a great regard for you, and unbounded assurance in your driving, but I would rather sit beside Madame Berg on this particular occasion."

"Just as I expected," said Bill; "everyone is preferred to me."

The Misses Blennerhasset were pink-complexioned, pretty-looking girls, and so similar in feature and expression that strangers had difficulty in distinguishing one from the other. They were neither brilliant nor strong-minded, and their mother's advanced notions were as Greek to them. They were simply frank-mannered, pleasant girls, with no affectation or nonsense about them, and great favourites with the whole of the Hunter family.

The drive to the monastery, as far as it went, was along a shady, smooth highway. Colonel Hunter's fleet horses soon went over the ground, Bill's team being the first to arrive at the halting place. The rest of their way wound in and out by a narrow footpath through the woods.

"How pretty and foreign is all this," said Stannie, glancing down a long vista, which was gracefully hung with living green.

"Foreign!" echoed Eily Blennerhasset, opening her blue eyes in surprise.

"Yes; foreign to me. Where I come from we have only pine trees—whole forests of them, standing like sentinels. This is so light and pretty."

"Capital place to play at bare and hounds," said Bill. "Lotty and I have had many a race in the heyday of our bread-and-butter days; haven't we, Miss Charlotte?"

"Yes; and I raced better than he did."

"When do you wish the traps back, Elma?" asked Gordon.

She held up six tiny fingers.

"At six," he said to the servants. "Now, fairy, I've clad myself in gray tweed to insure my personal safety; so, if you'll take my hand, we will lead the way."

"It's like following an Indian trail," said Tom.

"Madame, are you equal to a longish walk—about a mile?" asked Gordon.

"Am I able to walk a mile! The first time you come to visit me I shall take you a few walks in my woods, and we shall see who gets tired first."

"Mamma says that you have a regular old feudal castle built upon a rock, with a port cullis and a watch-tower, and that the rooms are all hung with tapestry."

"Yes; our house was built in dangerous times, when a castle was a fortress. The port-cullis is still in working order; and not so very long ago an old retainer of mine wished to take advantage of it."

"During the late war?" asked Bill.

"Yes; but it was no invading army that came marching through our woods, but a detachment of our brave Uhlans. I failed, however, to re-assure poor old Otto; they were soldiers, and that was enough to make him lily-hearted. He locked himself into the chess-room, and remained trembling there for twenty-four hours, until the last one must have been a mile away from the place."

"What a German hero he must be!" said Tom, contemptuously.

"Men of eighty-five are not generally so brave as youths. The fire of chivalry dies out at last, however brightly it has once burned. You must not be too severe upon my old Otto."

"Is this the place? Is that the monastery?" cried Stannie, standing still, and pointing to the gruesome pile, which a bend in their path revealed about a hundred yards in advance.

"Such a place! it's the very embodiment of gloom!"

"Isn't it?" said Tom, jumping about as delightedly as if it had been an Oriental palace they were all beholding. "Isn't it a lively spot? Don't you feel as if a goose was walking over your grave?"

"Not one, but a whole flock of them, Elma. I can't bear this. What possible attraction can it have for you?"

"I know it's a little dull, but it's nice. Do you see any vampires?"

"Vampires!" exclaimed Stannie, in affright.

"No; but I have no doubt that there are hundreds within those walls."

"I think this river must be the Styx; or, at least, one of its tributaries," said Bill, approaching the edge of the stream. "It's very deep in some places, though narrow enough to jump across."

A strange quiet fell upon the party as they stood gazing, some upon the ruin, others on the river.

They seemed all at once to have left the bright day behind them, and to have plunged into darkening twilight.

The ruin stood frowning grimly, the river flowed on sullenly to the distant sea, while the sedges on its banks drooped their heads dejectedly; the trees moaned and rustled their leaves, but no chirp or trill of bird issued from their branches, only the hum of invisible insect life mingled with their weird sounds.

Verily the old monk's curse still held the place in its unholy thrall, and blighted all its beauty.

Long afterwards, that day and hour, with one exception, came back to everyone there with a painful reality.

In most of our lives there are scenes and moments indelibly stamped on our memories, and ever and anon they rise up unbidden in all their first freshness. Sometimes it is in the night when we toss restlessly on our couch; sometimes when we sit alone in the dusk, with the firelight playing fitfully upon the walls; sometimes when we are walking in the crowded streets.

"Shall we explore the place, Madame—the dungeons are very curious!" said Gordon.

"Oh, no!" interrupted Alice. "They are so dark and dismal; besides the place is very dangerous. If you take a step, a stone tumbles. You boys can go if you like; but no one else, not even Elma. Let us take a walk; or, no—let us kindle a great big fire. Even if we don't require to cook anything, it will make the place look more cheerful, and give us something to do."

Tom started off at once in search of fuel, glad of anything that promised a little diversion; for, try as they would to conceal it, the day's pleasure threatened to be a failure.

The Blennerhasset girls, and Lotty, and Bill soon joined him; while the others, after a little indecision, seated themselves near the river, at a respectful distance from the monastery.

"After dinner, will you and Stannie sing—I have never heard her!" asked Elma.

Madame handed the slate over to Stannie, and answered, "Yes, dear; we shall both sing to you. Do you often come to this strange old place?"

"I've only been here twice before. I shall come very often now. I shall think of you both when I come, and fancy I hear your voices."

"Will you not think of me as well?" asked Gordon.

"No; I shall have you at home. They will be far away. I like to get into a quiet place, to think about people who are a long way off."

"I may be a long way off, too, fairy. Madame, I think I shall go and study for a year in Rome."

"Very good; I see no reason why you should not."

"Is that frightful place Colonel Hunter's?" asked Stannie, pointing to the monastery.

"Yes; it is on his property."

"Why doesn't he pull it down, and build a poor-house with the stones?"

"On the same site? The paupers would all die in a week of mental depression."

"It need not be on the same spot—anywhere—only have it down."

"I suppose he never thought of it. Ruins are supposed to be picturesque."

"This one is not."

"Hullo! here are the men 'with the luncheon."

"What a lot of them! What are those planks for?" asked Bill.

"To erect a table; it's uncomfortable to dine on the ground, particularly when there are frogs hopping about. So I told the house carpenter to improvise a festive board for us, and bring seats as well."

"You do things magnificently in England," said Madame. "Did you also order silver plate and crystal?"

"Yes, I believe so," answered Gordon, carelessly. "The fact is, I wished to please the fairy. Look at her, superintending John's operations. What a bonfire those youngsters are making! Shall we go and encourage them?"

The bonfire crackled and sparkled, and threw a lurid glare around the sombre place. Tom was in his element, heaping on dead branches which he dragged in armfuls from the woods, and dancing wildly around the blazing pile. His merriment was infectious, and the place soon resounded with shouts and laughter.

The dignified footman, who never moved but with the air of a bishop, ran nimbly here and there, his shapely calves trembling like jellies; and his subordinates so far forgot themselves as to whistle "under the gentry's very ears" while they were arranging the eatables upon the hastily-constructed table.

Dinner disposed of, they gathered, camp-fashion, around the fire, and told tales, Tom magnanimously cracking nuts for everybody.

Then Madame rose to her feet, and sang one of her most brilliant airs, which was rapturously encored, particularly by the pit, as Tom termed the group of servants in the background.

"Do favour us again," said Tom. "If I might suggest, which of course I should never presume to do, my suggestion would be something like this:—

"There is not in the wide world a valley so sweet."

Touchingly appropriate, isn't it?"

"Very," said Madame, laughing. "I'll carry out the idea."

"Splendid!" shouted Tom, when the last note had died away on the still air.

"Miss Ross, if you please, will you kindly step to the front of the lyric stage?"

"Will you kindly make another suggestion?"

"Well, if I were to do so, it would be like this:—

"To the Lords of Convention 'twas Claverhouse spoke."

"Now I have a suggestion to make," said Stannie, when she had finished the rattling Scotch melody.

"Miss Ross's suggestion!" cried Bill.

"I wish Alice to recite one of her own poems."

"Oh, oh, oh!" burst from the lips of the three brothers.

"How can you be so rude?" said Eily Blennerhasset, warmly. "Her verses are lovely!"

"Oh, very much so!" groaned Bill. "Alice, human endurance has its limits, and 'The river runs below.' Shall I break the evil spell which hangs over the monastery?"

"William, be quiet!" said Madame, coming to the rescue. "We shall not take your opinion on the matter, valuable as we know it must be. Give us some pretty little thing, dear," she added, turning to Alice.

"Do you really all wish it, except Bill?" she asked, blushing a rosy red.

"Of course we do. Never mind him!" said Miss Blennerhasset. "I know what brothers are; they like to keep their sisters in subjection, for fear people should find out how much cleverer they are than ourselves."

"Stannie and I were at Wallbeach one day last week," commenced Alice.

"That sounds very like prose," remarked the incorrigible Bill.

"Hold your tongue!" said Lotty, sharply.

"And we went for a walk on the sands."

"Splendid rhyme!" murmured Bill.

"She kept stooping down to look for precious stones which might have been washed ashore in a storm, but found only some little shining pebbles. When we came home I wrote some verses, which I meant to give her, but have not had an opportunity. Shall I repeat them now?"

"Beautiful!" said Stannie. "Don't forget to give me a copy before I go away."

Bill's intended criticism was nipped in the bud by the footman announcing that tea was waiting.

An hour later Gordon looked at his watch, and discovered that it was close upon six.

"So soon?" said Miss Blennerhasset. "I am so sorry!"

"Are you contented, fairy?" asked Gordon, taking his little sister's hands within his own. No need for her to write her answer; he read it in her lovely, calm countenance.

CHAPTER XIV.

Madame Berg's visit to Cumrie Chase had come to an end, and she was back in London preparing for her journey home.

She had business matters to wind up, which she calculated would occupy her for three weeks. Then Mrs. Hunter, Stannie, and Lotty were to join her.

Mrs. Hunter, true to the trust reposed in her, had decided to see Stannie safely settled with some responsible person in Wirstadt, and herself superintend the arrangements which Madame Berg had decided upon.

Several letters relating to the said plans had passed between Madame and Professor Neil, and of course that gentleman acquiesced in all the details submitted to him, and in token of his approval sent handsome checks to carry them into execution.

Lotty was to accompany Madame to her home on the Danube, and remain there for an indefinite period.

At the last moment Gordon decided to cross over with them, and after returning to England with his mother, whose stay abroad must necessarily be a short one, run down to Scotland and give Professor Neil a verbal account of Stannie's new mode of life. Her parting with Elma was very painful for both of them.

Elma had slipped a gold bangle, curiously engraved by an Eastern artificer, over Stannie's left hand the night before she left, then handing her a folded slip of paper, the child glided from the room.

Stannie looked at the ornament with swimming eyes, then read the words scrawled on the torn leaf of a copy book:—

"Wear this bangle; it is put upon your arm with a prayer for your happiness. If you take it off, the charm will be broken. Think on Elma sometimes when you look at it. If she is with the angels when you come back to Cumrie Chase, don't cry, for she will be very happy."

Till the last day of her life Stannie Ross will wear that little band of gold. She is no friend to superstition—no believer in witch or fairy lore; but that shining circuit is as a sacred relic to her.

Tom presented Stannie with three dozen mole skins, cured and dressed by himself; an offering which rather embarrassed her, as she saw no opening for utilizing them, being the lucky possessor of a sealskin and a sable-trimmed velvet jacket. But she accepted them with profuse thanks all the same.

The last box was strapped and on its way to the station, and the carriage was at the door; but still Stannie lingered in the hall—it was so hard to leave her dear, kind friends.

"You will miss your train," said Colonel Hunter, at last. "Come again soon and see us all. You will always find a second home here. Consider yourself one of the family. Now, my dear, you must really say good-bye."

"The world is full of good-byes," she sobbed, when they were fairly off. "It's almost as hard to leave Cumrie Chase as it was to leave St. Breeda. And I was so miserable the first night I came here; now I am miserable when going away. Shall I ever be quite happy any more?"

"You are not unhappy, child," said Mrs. Hunter; "only a little sad. Don't let your thoughts dwell upon the partings and good-byes; rather look forward to your next meeting. Madame Berg says that if you are very home-sick you may come over for a few weeks next summer; but I think that would be a mistake. Your uncle will likely go and see you, and several of us will certainly be over. We are often in Germany, so why should you come back until your work is done?"

"What's this about your going to Rome, Gordon?" asked Lotty.

"I have only spoken vaguely of it as yet. I may go some day."

"Go this winter, and I'll come and see you on my way home."

"What a powerful inducement, Miss Charlotte! You are to stay a year in Italy, I believe, Miss Ross?"

"Yes; in Milan; but not for a long time yet. Madame Berg says I must remain two years in Wirstadt, at the Conservatoire there."

"The first night you sing I shall come and hear you, even if I have to journey all the way from Cumrie."

"Will you? I must try and do my best, then. I should not like you to feel disappointed after coming so far, but it is a long time to look forward to."

Once more Stannie hurried through London, not remaining there even a single night.

Madame Berg was ready to start immediately, so they went direct to Dover, crossed over to Ostend, through Belgium, and up the Rhine to Wirstadt.

There was something about the little foreign capital which reminded Stannie strongly of St. Breeda. "It must be the hills and woods," she said, to herself; "and yet they are quite different."

Madame Berg had several acquaintances in the place, whom she started out early next morning to visit, in the hope that one or other of them might be willing to receive Stannie as a boarder.

(To be continued.)

ONE of the new opera wraps looks almost as if it were taken off the outside of a great china jar, for its ground is of cream colour, and all over it swarm dragons in gilt and colour, and swarms of bees and strange birds, and one hardly realizes that it is silk. The bright coloured lace which makes the cascade down the front is also curiously unreal in appearance, and one would not be surprised if the garment should ring when rapped with the knuckles.