

"War-Time Cookery"

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CHAPTER XV.
A DAY WITH NATURE.

"EVERYONE is nature mad nowadays," remarks Len, a day or two later. "We may as well be in the fashion, and I have planned a day in the woods. Just a small party of you, you know, and absolutely informal. Of course, the Clitheroes will join us. I have already talked the matter over there, and they are enthusiastic about it. Come, girls, what do you say to it? Will you come? Gwen—Miss Clitheroe—will be desperately disappointed if you don't, and you'll lose no end of a treat for we're going to have a good time," he adds, with the eagerness of a schoolboy.

"Since when have you been so fond of picnics, Len? I always thought you detested all kinds of rural delights!" I reply significantly.

"But who is to be there?" Addie interrupts, looking up as she speaks from an interesting-critique on the last new novel.

"Oh, just ourselves; it isn't worth inviting people to, you know—a little impromptu, outing like that—Mr. Clitheroe and his two daughters, your girls, myself, and Warden—who has promised to bring that new friend of his, young Denton."

"And it is this afternoon?" Addie inquires, her face brightening unmistakably at the mention of Warden's name. "Rather short notice, is it not?"

"I don't very well see how it could have been longer, since the thing was not thought of until about an hour ago. It happened this way," Len explains: "Warden dropped in at the rectory while I was there on some business of the rector's, and, talking of the weather, expressed his opinion that it is a positive sin to stay in the house poring over books and parchments such a day as this, upon which somebody—I think it was Florence Clitheroe—started the proposal for this afternoon's outing—a proposal that was carried unanimously. There, girls, now you know all about it."

"What do you say, Lesley? Do you think we can get ready?" Addie inquires, with unmistakable interest. "Shall we go?"

"Of course you will go," exclaims Len, without waiting for my reply. "Why, it's all settled. The rectory servants are to be sent on in advance with the baskets of cake and things, under the charge of Mr. Smiles, the new curate, who has good-naturedly undertaken to see to the commissariat transfer. The rendezvous selected is one of the prettiest spots in Firley Wood; where we are to boil our own kettle over the orthodox rypsy fire; make our own tea with water nicely flavored with wood smoke, and drink it afterward sitting on the grass. After that there is to be strawberry picking in the woods, and a walk home by the ravine road in the cool of the evening, with as many unrehearsed adventures and incidents as chance and our own ingenuity can devise. What do you think of the program?"

"Very good indeed," I reply, conscious of certain reasons of my own for regarding the project more favorably than at first. "By the way, Len, who is this new friend of Ernest Warden's? I met the two together in Hand-

bury high street yesterday, and, to my surprise, recognized in Mr. Denton the hero of a certain little adventure of mine."

"Of yours!" is the amazed response. "Why, Lesley, what do you know of young Denton?" asks Len, with severity.

"Oh, you think I can't have adventures, I suppose?" I reply, preparing to make a virtue of necessity, and tell my story, though not at all averse to exciting as much curiosity as possible before I explain.

Mr. Denton is to be at the picnic this afternoon, it seems, and, unless I give an account of my escapade now, it may all come out more awkwardly still by and by, I decide, so, calling my utmost powers of narrative to my aid, I proceed to give as brisk and sang-froid a description of that ridiculous little reading of "Dark Deeds" in the buttercup meadow as I know how.

"Oh, come!" exclaims Len, with a remarkable broad grin, "there must be a strain of Irish blood in the family, somewhere or we couldn't possibly distinguish ourselves so grandly in blunders."

"Just like one of Lesley's scrapes!" smiles Addie. "Fancy that child attempting to write a novel! Why, your poor little thing, didn't it make your head ache?"

"Oh, dreadfully," I reply. "I found that the fearful strain was having a most injurious effect upon my brain, so I don't think I shall ever attempt it again."

"What a talent that child has for putting her foot into it," is Len's very fraternal remark. "Mr. Denton must have gone away with a remarkably high opinion of your literary abilities, my dear. He ought to have been deeply impressed by 'Dark Deeds.'"

"Oh, he was!" I return, preparing for any amount of badinage on the subject of Mr. Denton and novel writing, now that Len knows of it. "Nothing but my natural modesty prevents me from believing that I have made a complete conquest of that young man."

"But who and what is this Mr. Denton?" Adelaide inquires, with rather languid interest. Evidently Mr. Warden and Mr. Warden's friends are birds of a very different color in Addie's eyes.

"Oh, some new importation from the land of the Stars and Stripes, I believe," interposes Len. "An Englishman by birth, I think, though I did not find him very communicative on the subject of his nationality. He has traveled about a good deal, it

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seems, and has just come from California, where he has made a fortune in oil. Some fellows do have that sort of luck, you know," adds Len, rather ruefully. "I'm sorry to say I never fell to my lot, though. He is making a tour of Europe at present, it seems, though what should have brought a young fellow like that, with good looks and plenty of money, to an obscure little hole like Handbury, I can't conceive. But, come, girls, there is not much time to lose. Hadn't you better go and dress? They are to call for us at three. The rector and his daughters are to pick me up in the basket carriage, while Warden, with his friend, Denton, will call for you girls in the dogcart. We drive over to Firley Wood, but the traps are to be sent back, and the journey home accomplished on foot, with a stoppage at Forton rectory for a little music and supper."

Nothing averse to the prospect before me, I run upstairs with the resolute determination of making myself look as pretty as possible.

I may not be a genius, but as even Len admits, I am good to look at; and, for certain reasons of my own, I mean to look my very prettiest to-day.

Mr. Denton—since that is the name of my good-looking unknown—is to be there; and whatever he may think of me as an authoress, he shall see that I am not to be despised as a woman. I decide, as, attired in my pretty pink cambric, I fasten a big black bow over the coil of hair dressed low on my neck.

CHAPTER XVII.
HAUNTED BY A FACE.

PICNICS do not come every day in the week, and I am sure no one will blame me for spending rather more time than was necessary before my mirror. But at last I feel that I have

done all I can to make myself look pretty. Then, with a final peep, to see that my hat is arranged at the proper angle to display the wavy tresses that fall over my forehead, I go down to await the others.

At the appointed time, the rector, Mr. Clitheroe—a stout, easy-going man of sixty, whose still handsome face shows plainly whence his children derive their good looks—drives up with his two daughters in the basket carriage.

Florence, looking very pretty and fragile as usual in her pale-green muslin and picture hat with clusters of white daisies; and Gwendolen, more royally beautiful than ever in her fashionable but exquisite costume of pale blue, with a jaunty hat and snowy plume crowning her fair head.

Perfectly—faultlessly lovely, I admit, with a sigh, as I glance at the creamy skin, the violet eyes, and graceful head with its mass of shining gold. Ah, poor Len! What wonder that she should have bewitched him so completely, I think, as she gives him her hand, with her lovely smile, the sweet eyes drooping with becoming consciousness under the ardent gaze that tells but too plainly how well he loves her.

Dear old Len! How can any woman have the heart to look up into that kindly, loving face and deceive him? But is she deceiving him, I wonder? Perhaps I have misjudged her all along, and she is really learning to care for him, after all.

"Here they are!" cries Addie, as the dogcart turns the corner of the lane; and the next moment that well-appointed vehicle, with Mr. Warden and the hero of my adventure in the buttercup meadow, dashes up to the gate, and, amid a good deal of laughter and merriment, Adelaide and I are assisted to our seats, and the little cavalcade is in motion.

"Such a perfect day!—such a delightful spot!" are the exclamations with which, on our arrival at the rendezvous, we gather together, and hold a little council of war as to what is to be done next.

"But dreadfully warm! Think!" interposes the rector, taking off his hat and mopping the perspiration from his face and head, with an air of utter exhaustion. "Well, now, young people, I hope you don't expect me to assist in any of your culinary arrangements. I've come just to please you, but I give you my word that I don't know anything at all about kindling fires and boiling kettles. My forte rather inclines toward tea-drinking than tea-making, I think!"

"I believe that," laughs his daughter Flo; "but, do you know that, according to the laws of this community, those who do not work shall not eat?"

"Never mind, Mr. Clitheroe," I exclaim. "We know your weakness, so we will let you off easily. There are plenty of sticks lying about, and Mr. Denton is going to light the fire. He knows all about it, because he has camped out with the cowboys on the great prairies of the Far West. Adelaide and Mr. Warden are to assist Gwendolen and Leonard in unpacking the baskets. Florence and I will make ourselves useful in cutting up pound cake, while Mr. Smiles goes to see whether old Bell has gone to sleep on the road, or drowned himself in that pail of water he was sent to fetch from the spring."

A commission from which the curate is evidently not altogether sorry to be relieved by the tardy appearance of old Bell—a solemn-looking personage who performs the double function of sexton and gardener at the rectory—with the long-delayed pail of water.

Everybody is busy—everybody is happy. Even Mr. Clitheroe, stretched on the grass at a safe distance from the smoke of the fire, is evidently enjoying a lazy felicity that suits him admirably.

"How lovely it all looks!" exclaims Addie, pausing with a basket of wild strawberries in her hand to contemplate the group gathered about the banquet Flo and I have been so busily spreading. "Why, it is like a picture," she adds, looking like a picture herself in her white dress, the sunlight lighting up her sweet, grave face, with its perfect profile and dainty mouth, wreathed just now in a smile of pleased approval. "Oh, what a pity it is that life cannot be made up of just such days as this!"

"Never stop to think of that, dear," is Warden's whispered reply, drawing her to his side with an air of tender proprietorship. "Let us be happy while we can. Heaven alone can tell how long it will last!"

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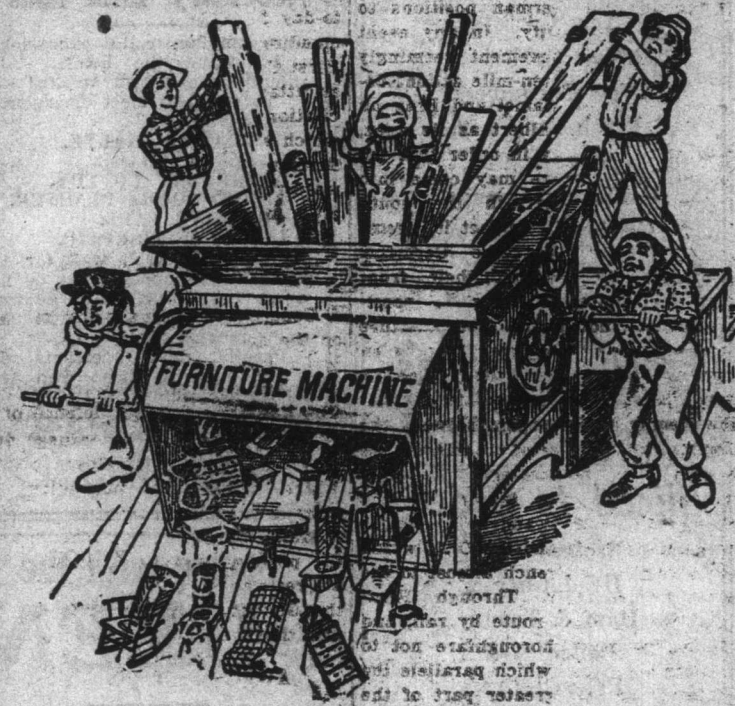
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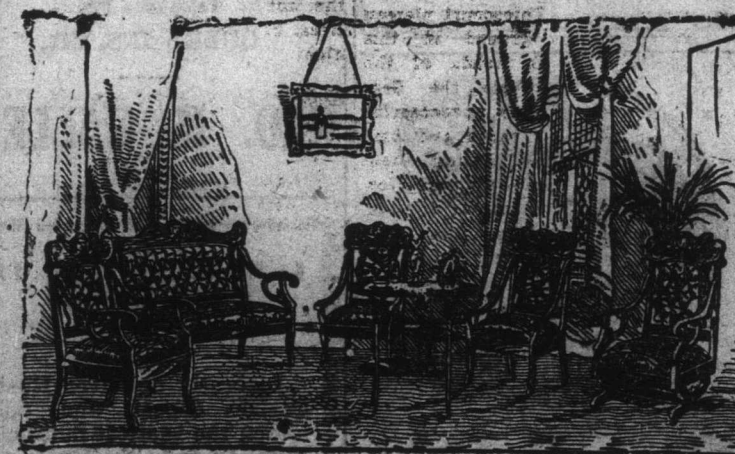
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