

"The owners of the place is coming of age. Did you not notice the triumphal arches they are putting up all along the road from the village?"

"No; I came across the fields from the village. My landlord told me there was a right-of-way, even for such tramps as I."

"I am sure mine host of the 'Stag's Head' did not say anything so uncivil. What should you have done if you had not met me here to-day?"

"Loafed about the vicarage till I did meet you," he answers, with a gleam of the old boyish fun in his hollow eyes.

His manner would have saddened me if I did not know now he would laugh at his want of faith in me to-morrow.

"I must go," I say at last, thinking how Olive will wonder what has become of me; "but you will be sure to come to-morrow?"

"I will come," he promises looking at me with the sad eyes which trouble me. "I shall see you to-morrow, Allie, and after that—the Deluge."

But that is not the programme I arrange for myself, as I run up the path through the vicarage garden, between the cabbages and rows of currant and gooseberry bushes.

CHAPTER VII.

"Allie, you have an amazing power of adaptability."

"How do you mean?"

"Why, to-day you look as if you had been acting the Lady Bountiful all your life."

"Because a set of old men and women and school-children don't make me nervous?"

"But, when the band struck up and they began to cheer, I declare it nearly made me cry! And you were as cool as a block of Wenham Lake ice—you never even changed color, while I was trembling like a leaf."

"Ever, one is not such a goose as you are, Olive."

Uncle Tod has just returned thanks, in my name, for the congratulatory speech which Mr. Prout, the steward, has delivered, and the welcome and good wishes for my future happiness which he has expressed on behalf of himself and of my tenantry, who have emphasized each carefully-prepared compliment and labored pleasantry with rather indiscriminating cheers and laughter. But, if they are amused, I am satisfied, and only anxious to get it all over as quickly as I can.

I am standing with Uncle Tod on the low balcony or terrace before the hall-door, at the top of the wide shallow flight of stone steps leading down to the drive. A crowd of well dressed people stand behind us, Olive nearest to me. Aunt Rosa is in the open drawing room window with a whole party of elderly ladies; there are faces at every window of the picturesque old red-brick house. But they are nothing to the sea of faces in front of us; the whole village—and not only the village, but the country-side—seems to have turned out to welcome my father's child to the house from which they had seen his coffin carried—those of them who were old enough to remember—followed by the tears and lamentations of a tenantry which idolized him as, I am afraid, they will never idolize me.

I stand quite quietly at Uncle Tod's elbow, looking down at the crowd, while the dear old man, bareheaded, his silver locks glistening in the June sunshine, says his few pleasant fatherly words to the people, and receives a hearty cheer or two, at which he smiles, glancing at me. Then the crowd scatter away to the various amusements prepared for them, which are to occupy the time before the great dinner in the marquees on the lawn.

"Come and see the children dance!" Olive says; and she and I and half a dozen others—Gus Dean and young Algy Dufferin and Mr. Lockhart among them—make our way to the old croquet-ground, where the children, rich and poor, are dancing merrily to the music of the village brass-band.

"What are you looking for?" Gus Dean asks, standing beside me.

"Looking for?"

"You seem to be searching in the crowd for some one or something."

"Oh, I expected a friend here to-day!" I answer carelessly. "I dare say he is here somewhere in the crowd."

"Will he not come up and speak to you?" Gus questions, surprised.

"Of course—by-and-by."

I stand up, very tall and straight, in the clear space that is left for me erever I move to-day. The sunshine gilds my birthday gloriously—all the woods are bathed in it; it dreams on the smooth lawns; it lights up the green triumphal arches and the red and white flags fluttering in long festoons against the cloudless blue of the sky. Olive thinks me very cool and quiet; but she does not know how my heart is beating under my cream-colored bodice slashed with soft sky-blue—not beating because I am the centre of attraction here to-day, not beating at the sound of the music or the cheering, but because I am watching for an opportunity to steal away to meet my lover in the greenwood—my lover who is waiting there for me.

I love him, poor and shabby and haggard and unfortunate—I love him as perhaps I should never have loved him if he had been well-dressed and rich and prosperous—as I could never have loved any of the rich and prosperous young men who are crowding about me to-day. Some women love best what most excites their pity—what is most dependent upon them for comfort and care and help. I love this boy because I am everything to him—because, unless I stoop to save him, he is lost. I long to take him by the hand, to say to him, "All mine is thine." He shall suffer no more poverty, poor lad; he shall not fight hand to hand with want and disappointment and discouragement any more! I will help him to be famous; he need not sell his beautiful pictures for half their value because he must have bread to eat. So I think triumphantly, as I stand looking at the children dancing on the greensward, and wondering impatiently when I shall be able to shake off Gus Deane and escape to my woodland tryst.

To be Continued.)

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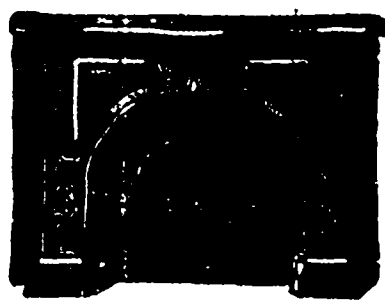
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