

I can't make John out. At dinner he said that if nothing had happened, but at all events I'm glad I've refused Mr. Haycock; and I shall read Frank's note over, once more, and then go to bed.

CHAPTER XIV.

I need quote no more from my diary, as the next few days offered no incident worthy recording to break the monotony of our life at Dangerfield Hall. Drearier than ever it was, and more especially to me; for I felt that, with a home broken, there was 'war to the knife' between myself, my aunt, and Deborah. The latter scarcely spoke to me at all, and my aunt, whose defeat was rankling bitterly in her heart, merely took such sullen notice of me as was absolutely necessitated by the laws of hospitality and the usages of society. Poor Aunt Deborah required to be kept very quiet, and free from all worries and annoyances. There were she slept, the next day, she would get well enough to move to London for further advice, so I had not even her to talk to—there was no hunting—the frost got harder and harder—that obstinate weather-cock over the stables kept veering from north to north-east—the grooms went to exercise wrapped up in great coats and shawl handkerchiefs, and stayed out as short a time as was compatible with the mildest stable discipline: there would be no change of the moon for a week, and it was obvious that I should have but little use for Brilliant and White Stockings before our return to town.

Oh! the boyishness of a real bitter black frost coming so early in the season, especially when you are not at your own home, and your time is wasted; to get up morning after morning with the faint hope that the change may have come at last; to see the dry slates, and the clear horizon, and the iron-bound earth, and to ascertain in your own proper person that the water gets colder and colder every day. You puzzle over the almanac till your eyes ache, and study the thermometer till you get a crick in your neck. You watch the smoke from every farm house and cottage within your ken, and still, after curling high up into the pure, rarefied atmosphere, it floats hopelessly away to the southward, and corroborates the odious dog vane that you fondly imagined might have got stuck in its northerly direction. You walk out and ask every labourer you meet, whether he does not think we are going to have a change? The man looks up from his work, wonders at your solicitude, opines 'the gentry folks have queer ways, but answers honestly enough, according to his convictions, in the negative—perhaps giving some local reasons for his opinion, which if an old man, he will tell you he has never known to fail. Lastly, you quarrel with every one of your non-hunting friends, whose unfeeling observations on 'fine seasonable weather, and 'healthy bracing frosts,' you feel to be brutal as the extreme.

How I hate the frost at Dangerfield! My only chance of meeting with Frank Lovell was out hunting. I had written him an answer to his note. I have often heard Aunt Horsingham say, that nothing is so inexcusable as not to answer a letter, and I had no possible means of delivering it. I could not put it in the bag, for my aunt keeps the key. I did not like to intrust it to any of the servants, and my own maid is the last person in whose power I should choose to place myself. I did not think of asking Cousin John to give it. Frank and throwing myself on kind, good John's generosity, and confessing everything to him, and asking for his advice; but somehow I could not bring myself to it: if he had been my brother, nothing would have been easier; but John is only a cousin, and the two little things of late had made me suspicious that he liked me even better than I could really do: so altogether I thought I would have it done—besides, John was going off to shoot pheasants in Wales. The third morning of the frost he came down to

again? Where could he be? Perhaps at the inn at Muddlebury. I could see the smoke of the town from the breakfast-room windows, and used to watch it with a painful interest. Every time a servant came into the room, I thought something impossible was going to happen. If a carriage drove up to the house—if a horse's tramp was heard in the approach—if the door-bell rung, I fancied it must be Captain Lovell coming to call—perhaps to explain everything—possibly to request an interview with my aunt, such as Squire Haycock had undergone, but, as I said to myself with a beating heart, 'to have a very different result.' If the dwelling solely on one idea by a species of madness, then was I undoubtedly mad—nothing was so wild and extravagant as to appear impossible to my heated fancy. I was always expected, and always disappointed.

The fourth morning I got a letter from Mrs. Lumley, which did not add much to my composure or comfort. Why is it ladies have such a knack of making each other miserable equally by letter as by word of mouth? I give the epistle of Mr. Lumley *verbatim*, omitting only that the dashes and notes of admiration with which it was studied:—

MY DEAREST DEAR KATE.—

'Here we are, settled comfortably at Brighton, much to the benefit of my poor dear husband, whom you have never seen, but who knows you well by name, and having everything, even the weather, all we can wish. The only drawback to me is the loss of your charming society, and the absence of your dear merry face.

I am leading a highly virtuous and praiseworthy life, and have not done the least bit of mischief since I came here, except making the dean's wife jealous, which I can hardly call a crime, as she is a vulgar little woman with a red nose and a yellow bonnet—the dean is a fat, good-natured man, and calls here nearly every day. His wife abuses me in all societies, and tries to pass me without speaking. You know how I always return good for evil, so I go up and shake hands with her, and ask after her dear children, and patronise her till I make her so angry she don't know which way to look—it's rather good fun in such a slow place as this. My time is fully occupied nursing "my old man," who was very ill before we came here, and can only go out in a pony-carriage for an hour or two at a time, so I have brought the ponies down and drive him myself.

The only chance the brown mare has of a gallop is in the mornings, though next week I mean to have a day with the harriers; indeed, they have appointed them at a good place on purpose for me. I inspected the regiment of Dragoons quartered here, yesterday morning; they were at exercise on the Downs, and as the *Gitana* (my brown mare) always behaves well with troops, which my enemies would affirm is more than can be said of her mistress, I am able to report upon their general appearance and efficiency. Such a set of "gigs, my dear, I never saw in my life; large under-bred horses, and not a good-looking man amongst them. The officers are, if possible, more hideous than the privates, and they never give balls, or theatricals, or anything, so we need waste no more words upon them.

I am improving my mind, though, vastly, picking up shells for my little cousins, and perfecting my education besides by learning to swim. I wish you were here—what fun we would have enacting the part of mermaids! though I fear the cold will now put a stop to my aquatic exploits. The other morning I swam nearly two hundred yards on a stretch; and the tide having taken me out of my reckoning, I brought up, as the sailors say, opposite the gentlemen's bathing-machines. What could I do? It was as impossible to walk along the beach as to fight back against the current. Presence of mind, Kate, is the salient point of the heroic character; the door of a machine was open, and I popped in. My dear, there were all his clothes, his hair-brush, his button-hook,

hundred yards along the beach. As I shall not get rid of him under an hour, and the post will by that time be gone out, I must wish you good-bye. Ever my dearest Kate's most affectionate,
'M. L.'

I throw the letter on the floor, and stamped upon it with my feet. And was this the end of all? To have brooded and pined, and made myself miserable and well-nigh broken my heart, day by day, for a man that was to prove so utterly unworthy as this. To have been thrown over for a Lady Scapegrace! or, worse still, to have allowed, even to myself, that I cared for one who was ready and willing to be sold to a Miss Molasses.

'Too degrading! I thought; 'no, I'll never care for him again, the dream is over, what a fool I've been! and yet—why did he send his horses down to Muddlebury? Why did he serenade me that night from the Park? Why is he not now with his Lady Scapegrace at Scamperly, where, I see by the Morning Post, Sir Guy is "entertaining a party of fashionables during the frost?" No! I will not give him up quite yet.'

On reading her letter over again, which I did many times during the day, I found a ray of comfort in my voluble correspondent's own opinion that Frank did not himself care a pin for either of the ladies, to both of whom the world gave him so unhesitatingly. Well, that was something, at any rate. As for his wildness, and his debts, and his recklessness, and many escapades, I liked him none the worse for these—what woman ever did? I thought it all over during the whole day; and by the time that I opened my window for my usual look-out into the night before going to bed, I am afraid I felt more inclined than ever to forgive him all that had gone before, and more determined to find some means of forwarding him the answer I had written to his note, and which I had been so many times on the point of burning during the day.

What a better cold night it was!—yet the keen north wind felt pleasant and refreshing on my fevered forehead. There had been a sprinkling of snow, too, since sunset, and the open surface of the Park was completely whitened over—how cheerless and desolate it looked! I hadn't the heart to stay very long at the window, it reminded me too much of the pleasant evening one short week ago. I felt weary and desponding and drowsy with uncertainty and unhappiness, so I was in the act of shutting down the window, when I saw a dark figure moving rapidly across the snow in the direction of the house. Not for an instant did I mistake it for a deer, or a gamekeeper, or a poacher, or a house-breaker. From the moment I set my eyes on it, something told me it must be Frank Lovell; and though I shrank back that he might not see me, I watched him with painful anxiety and a beating heart. He seemed to know his way quite well, he came straight to the moat, felt his way cautiously for a step or two, and finding the ice would bear him, crossed at once, and took up a position under my window, not twenty feet from where I was standing.

He must have seen my shadow across the candle light, for he whispered my name.

Miss Coventry, Kate, only one word. What could I do? Poor fellow, he had walked all that distance in the cold and the snow for only one word—and this was the man I had been doubting and misjudging all day. Why, of course, though I knew it was very wrong and improper and all that, of course I spoke to him, and listened to what he had to say, and carried on a long conversation, the effect of which was somewhat ludicrous, in consequence of the distance between the parties, question and answer requiring to be shouted, as it were, in a whisper. The night, too, was clouding over, more snow was falling, and it was getting so dark, I could not see Frank, even at the distance of twelve or fourteen feet, and it could not have been much more between my bedroom window and the ground.

'Did you get my note?' said he, with sundry complimentary expressions.

thought of alarming the house, but I had not courage, so I followed my aunt to her room, and lay awake that live-long night in such a state of agony and suspense as I hope I may never have to endure again.

CHAPTER XV.

It may easily be believed that I took an early walk next morning before breakfast. No sooner had I made my escape from Aunt Horsingham's room, than, in utter defiance of the cold thaw just commencing, I put my bonnet on and made the best of my way to the moat. Sure enough, large fragments of ice were floating about where the surface had been broken, close to the side furthest from the Hall. There were footprints on the snow though, leading away through the Park in the direction of Muddleburgh, and I came back to breakfast with a heart lightened of at least half its load. We were to return to London immediately. Aunt Deborah, pale and reduced, but undoubtedly better, was able to appear at breakfast; and Lady Horsingham, now that we were really about to take leave of her, seemed to value our society, and to be sorry to part with us.

'My dear Deborah, I trust you are well wrapped up for this cold raw day,' said our hostess, pressing on her departing guests all kinds of provision for the journey. 'I have ordered them to put up a paper of sandwiches and some sherry, and a few biscuits, and a bottle of peppermint-water.'

'And Aunt Deborah,' put in Cousin Amelia, 'here's a comforter I've made you myself, and a box of cayenne lozenges for your throat; and don't forget the stone-jug of hot water for your poor feet; and mind you write directly you arrive—you or Kate,' she added, turning to address me almost for the first time since the memorable mistake about Squire Haycock.

Aunt Deborah was completely overpowered by so much kindness.

'You'd better have the carriage all to yourself—you and your maid'—persisted Lady Horsingham. 'I'll drive Kate as far as the station in the pony-carriage. Kate, you're not afraid to trust yourself with me in the pony-carriage?'

'Not I, indeed, aunt,' was my reply, nor with anybody else, for that matter. I've pretty good nerves—there are few things that I am afraid of.'

'Indeed, Kate, I fear it is so,' was my aunt's reply. 'I own I should like to see you a little more of a coward.'

So it was settled that Aunt Deborah and Gertrude being safely packed up in the close carriage, I should accompany Lady Horsingham, who was rather proud of her charioteering skill, and drove stiff and upright, as if she had swallowed the poker—never looking to the right or left, or allowing her attention to wander for an instant from the ponies she had undertaken to control.

Now these said ponies had been doing nothing during the frost, except consuming their three leads a day with vigorous appetite, and a considerable accession of high spirits. Consequently, they were, what is termed in stable language, very much 'above themselves'—a state of self-exaltation which they demonstrated by sundry unbecoming squeaks and gambols as soon as they found themselves fairly started on their journey. Tiny, the youngest and handsomest, would persist in shying, plunging, and swerving against the pole, much to the demoralization of his comrade, Mouse, a stiff-built little fellow with a thick neck, who was ordinarily extremely well-behaved, but apt, on occasions like the present, to lower his rebellious little head and defy all control.

Lady Horsingham was tolerably courageous, but totally destitute of what is termed 'hand,' a quality as necessary in driving as in riding, particularly with fractious or high spirited horses. The seat of a pony-carriage,

my proposal was met with derision and contempt.

'I should have thought such a masculine lady as yourself, Kate, would have been above requiring any assistance. I am always in the habit of driving these ponies quite by myself; but, of course, if you're afraid, I'll have a groom to go with us immediately.'

Afraid, indeed! I scouted the idea; my blood was up, and I almost hoped something would happen, that I might fling the word in my aunt's teeth, and ask her, 'Who's afraid now?' It came sooner than I bargained for.

The ponies were pulling hard, and had got their mouths so thoroughly set against aunt's iron hand, that she might as well have been driving with a pair of halters for now power she had over them, when a rush of colts in an adjoining paddock on one side of the lane, and a covey of partridges whirring up out of a turnip-field on the other, started them both at the same moment. My aunt gave a slight scream, clutched at her reins with a jerk; down went the ponies' heads, and we were off, as hard as ever they could lay legs to the ground, along a deep rutted narrow lane, with innumerable twistings and turnings in front of us, for a certainty, and the off-chance of a waggon and bell team blocking up the whole passage before we could emerge upon the high-road.

'Lay hold, Kate!' vociferated my aunt, pulling for her very life, with the reins on her bare wrists swelling up like whipcord. 'Gracious goodness! can't you stop 'em! there's a gravel-pit not half a mile further on! I'll jump out! I'll jump out!'

My aunt began kicking her feet clear of the sundry wraps and shawls, and the leather apron that kept our knees warm, though I must do her the justice to say that she still tugged hard at the reins. I saw such an expedient would be certain death, and I wound one arm round her waist, and held her torribly down in her seat, while with the other I endeavoured to assist her in the hopeless task of stopping the runaway ponies. Everything was against us; the ground was slightly on the decline; the thaw had not yet reached the sheltered road we were travelling, and the wheels rung against its frozen surface as they spun round with a velocity that seemed to add to the excitement of our flying steeds. Ever and anon we bounded and bumped over some rut or inequality that was deeper than usual. Twice we were within an inch of the ditch; once, for an awful hundred yards, we were balancing on two wheels; and still we went faster and faster than ever. The trees and hedges wheeled by us; the gravel road streamed away behind us. I began to get giddy, and to lose my strength. I could hardly hope to hold my aunt in much longer, and now she began to struggle frightfully, for we were nearing the gravel-pit turn! Ahead of us was a comfortable fat farmer, jogging drowsily to market in his gig. I can see his broad well-to-do back, now. What would I have given to be seated, I had almost said enthroned, by his side. What a smash if we had touched him! I pulled frantically at the off-rein, and just cleared his wheel. He said something I could not make out what. I was nearly exhausted, and shut my eyes, resigning myself to my fate, but still clinging to my aunt. I think that if ever that austere was next fainting, it was on this occasion. I just caught a glimpse of her white stony face and fixed eyes; her terror even gave me a certain confidence. A figure in front of us commenced gesticulating, and shouting, and waving his hat. The ponies slackened their pace, and my courage began to revive.

(To be Continued.)

Samuel G. Robinson, who died a few days ago at Augusta, Maine, at the age of seventy years, was the best player upon the fife, piccolo and clarinet in that region, and could play one thousand tunes from memory.