

The Professor's Darling.

AN ORIGINAL NOVEL.

CHAPTER XII.

THE HUNTERS AT HOME.

"May I come in for a few minutes?" asked Stannie, hesitatingly, still standing in the window. "This is such a pretty room! I have only once before been here."

"Yes; come in, Miss Ross. You will treat me civilly on my own ground. A thing no one could accuse Lotty of doing. How do you like Elma's dress?"

Stannie looked at it thoughtfully for a few minutes, and then replied, "It's gorgeous! She puts me in mind of a tropical bird! How well red and purple blend together! Don't you like it, Lotty?"

"It's not ugly," answered Lotty, who was busy collecting the scattered papers. "Gordon, if you really object to remarks which I can't help making, you should lock the door and bar the window! I don't mean to be unfeeling! Am you very angry with me?"

"Nothing in the world is worth being very angry about, but I am going to suggest that you keep your own opinion to yourself respecting this particular picture until it is finished. I don't consider myself a genius, but this is to be a good portrait, if I can manage it. You would discourage Rubens himself if he were in the flesh, and had the misfortune to know you."

"No, I wouldn't: I would give him all the praise he deserved. He gets enough to this day, in all conscience! Stannie, what do you think of the aesthetic furnishing of this room?"

"It's beautiful! Are those dishes ever used?" she asked, pointing to the china-laden walls.

"No; those old cracked things are sacred relics of an enlightened age. I am going to design a few neat shelves to be put in the drawing-room for the best dinner set; the soup tureens will look quite touching flanked with the pudding-dishes."

A figure came gliding silently in at the open window, and laid a reproving hand upon the lap full of papers.

"Caught in the act!" said Lotty. "Alice, it's unladylike to surprise people so!"

"You have no business here—in my desk, too! Lotty, you must not! I never go and rummage in your drawers!"

"You may if you like. I am about to read some of your ideas aloud. You are willing, I suppose?"

"I am very unwilling!" said Alice, thrusting her MSS. into a drawer, and turning the key in the lock.

"Don't you think we have a good deal to put up with?" Alice said, with a smile, turning to Stannie.

"Yes, I do; she laughs at everything. I should like to hear some of your poetry very much, though. May I?"

"Some time, perhaps, but not in her company. She has no idea of what is poetry; consequently she makes some envious remarks on mine."

"Oh, Miss Hunter!" groaned Lotty. "Envious! How frightfully some people are misunderstood! Gordon will say that I am envious of him next! Well, perhaps I shall be in India or Jerusalem some day, and then you will regret bitterly having been so unkind to me. Alice, why will you persist in wearing those dressing gowns, with puffs like balloons upon your shoulders. Are they considered classical?"

"They are quite a different cut from a dressing-gown. I wear them because they are pretty and becoming."

"Ah, none so blind as those who won't see! You have spoilt all the fun, so I think I'll go."

"I came to give you this," said Alice, handing her an envelope.

"What is it?" Mr. and Mrs. Blennerhasset at home on Tuesday afternoon the 15th, at four o'clock. They generally are at home; they needn't give publicity to the circumstance," said Lotty, tossing the card upon the floor.

"Will you go?" inquired Alice.

"Who else are asked?"

"Gordon and I. I am going."

"I am not. I like a jolly dance, or even a substantial dinner-party, when you get a man to speak sensibly to you; but one of Mrs. Blennerhasset's afternoon at homes! No, thank you, sister dear."

"They are charming—quite too charming!" said Alice, enthusiastically.

"They are quite too frightful! This is the programme, Stannie. Drive ten miles to the county town; sit down with your hat on or off *ad libitum*; drink some weak tea, unless it's in the dog-days, when you are treated to a course of ices well warmed and diluted; listen to some ear-rasping music and songs, and possibly a duet, the latter as harmonious as if a peacock and an antique owl were the performers. Then a pyramid of photographs are dragged out, and you must sip and gaze enraptured for the ninety-fourth time over a Venetian gondola, and glance up now and then at the solemn young man who is exhibiting them, and ask if he doesn't think the handle of an old bucket, or an Irishman's crownless hat, beautifully realistic. Then, perhaps, Mrs. Blennerhasset, who is advanced (she is the Bishop's sister), will make a little speech about the emancipation of woman,

or she will read you the last report of the 'Flannel Petticoat and Peppermint Tea Club,' of which she is president. No, you don't catch me there at such times."

"Is that really the way you are entertained?" asked Stannie, looking intently at Mrs. Blennerhasset's limp unglazed card which she had taken up. "I don't think I should care much about it."

"It's something like a true bill," said Gordon, pausing an instant from his work; "but it's a nice enough house to go to. Tuesday, did you say, Alice?"

"Yes, Tuesday. Will you go?"

"I think so."

"You can tell Mrs. Blennerhasset that I am not so strong as I look," continued Lotty, "and the fatigues of afternoon parties tell upon me very seriously. The irony expressed upon that card doesn't seem to strike you as it does me. At home, indeed! When Alice collects her friends of an afternoon, we all look and feel intensely at home—about as much so as the fat woman in the purple silk, who sat wedged into a box too tight for her, and sold tickets for the wild beast show in the village last month. That perspiring, long-enduring woman put me in mind of myself at a high art-party. Bill, in particular, has a very at home aspect on such occasions; his dress clothes never fit him, and he fidgets on his chair like a poor relation at a Christmas dinner, and says, 'Oh, indeed!' when he ought to say, 'Ah, really!' and takes a header over his neighbour's train, generally when his hands are occupied with a cup of scalding tea, which he is carrying to some old lady. And the vapoury small talk that goes on—oh!"

Miss Lotty's feelings at this point became too much for her, and she gave utterance to a prolonged groan, which afforded great amusement to Stannie.

"Are there any girls at this place—any Misses Blennerhasset?" she inquired.

"Yes," answered Lotty; "two very nice girls—Lily and Eily. On ordinary days I like to go and see them, but not when they are floating round the rooms in extraordinary costumes, and doing high-pressure conversation."

"How do they get on when they are alone?" asked Gordon, with something like interest in his tone.

Eily unties her dress, and sits with her feet upon the fender, and works or reads, and eats chocolate creams; and Lily rushes all about the garden, and cuts the flowers, and feeds the chickens, and does lots of things. They are quite different when you know them that way. In society everybody is like beans growing in a row, only not so natural."

"Oh, no, Lotty; people assert their individuality even in society now and then," said Alice.

"I suppose you refer to the scribbling, painting devotees," said Lotty, scornfully—"the amateurs like yourself and Gordon. There's not much variety among them, except that they all ride a hobby, and the do-nothings don't."

"To which do the Blennerhasset girls belong—the do-nothing or the other set?" inquired Stannie.

"The do-nothings," answered Gordon, laughing. "Lotty, what has crossed you this morning? You are in a shockingly unchristian frame of mind."

"I very often am. Mrs. Blennerhasset is to blame in this instance, for informing me of her domestic arrangements. It's wonderful what lives some people lead. The autobiography of a full-grown cabbage, if it could become animated and endowed with the gift of writing, would be quite as interesting as many a human being whom you meet in society, only the cabbage leads a more peaceful, truer, more natural existence."

"Well done, Lotty! You are eloquent. I have always had a little respect for that rather vulgar vegetable, but I shall lift my hat whenever I see one in future, dimly recognizing in it something better than myself."

"I feel as if I required a soothing sedative, in the form of one of Stannie's mild rebukes. Do give me one—calm and telling, Stannie."

"I can't, because I don't understand what you have been talking about exactly; and I never rebuke you, Lotty."

"Not intentionally; but you do, very often."

"Miss Charlotte comes down strong upon eccentricities in others," said Gordon, "and she is full of them herself; they are always cropping out. What do you say, Elma—isn't Lotty a queer girl?"

"She's a very nice girl. I like her," wrote Elma, on her little slate. "I don't like 'afternoons'—I like picnics."

"That's an idea," said Gordon. "Shall we have a small picnic while this weather lasts, girls? I beg your pardon, Lotty; I forgot that you are not so strong as you look. You would faint before we got out of the park."

"Out of consideration for me, you might have it in the kitchen garden," said Lotty, gravely.

"Let us go into the woods, where the fairies are," wrote Elma. "Stannie would like that."

"Not safe," said Gordon, shaking his head. "If the fairies saw you they would run off with you. How would you like that?"

"Not at all; but I would keep tight hold of Bill or Tom's hand. Your green clothes are very like what the fairy gentlemen in my picture books wear; they would take you for a big brother."

"And so I am a fairy's big brother," said Gordon, laying down his paints and brushes,

and lifting his little sister up in his arms. "You have sat long enough for one day, and may run away now. And you shall have a picnic when and where you please. Our present visitors are all elderly, Alice. I suppose they would not care to join us. Shall we ask one or two outsiders?"

"Yes; the Blennerhasset girls," cried Lotty, eagerly.

"Ah, perhaps Miss Eily will untie her dress, and be natural," said Gordon.

"And Madame Berg will come with us," continued Lotty. "She will never be too old to enjoy herself."

"May I look at your picture?" said Stannie, stepping nearer the easel.

"Certainly; there's scarcely anything to see yet. Can you make out what it is intended for?"

"Elma, of course. No one could doubt that."

"Thank you; that's high praise. Friendly critics affect to mistake my portraits for fancy subjects generally. I don't think that this will prove such a total failure if you see the likeness already."

"Remember Lot's wife," said a solemn voice at the open window.

"Have you been long there, Bill?" asked Gordon, without turning his head.

"For one minute and a half have I been gazing in rapt admiration on my beloved family. I am damp, as you may observe, or I would step in and join you."

"You are drenched," said Alice, going to the window, and looking at him. "Your very hair is soaking! Where have you been? Has any thing happened?"

"Nothing. I'm merely moist. I think I'll go and put on something dry." And whistling a tune he sauntered away.

"What can he have been doing?" said Alice, looking after him.

"You will never know, so don't hazard a conjecture," said Gordon.

But he was wrong; they knew later.

That afternoon a working man called at the Chase, and asked if he could see Master William. But Master William was nowhere to be found in the house, nor out of it. He then expressed a wish to see the Squire, and on being admitted to his presence, told him, in a husky, faltering voice, how Bill had saved his two little lad's lives that morning.

They had ventured within the grounds of the Chase, and in an audacious moment unchained the "young people's" pleasure boat from her moorings, paddled her out into the deepest and most dangerous part of the river, and there upset her.

Bill was not far off when it happened, and the children's first shriek brought him to their assistance. A neighbour—a cripple—had seen it all from the opposite bank, but was powerless to help in any way.

Bill was a good and tireless swimmer, and had accomplished a noble deed.

Colonel Hunter's countenance glowed with paternal pride as he listened, and he undertook to convey his tenant's thanks to Bill. But when they met at dinner-time, and he commenced to do so, Bill laughed, and said, carelessly, "I happened to be in the woods at the time, so ran down to the bank and pulled the youngsters out. They were not much the worse for their ducking, and the fright would do them good."

CHAPTER XIII.

ELMA'S PICNIC.

Rather more than five miles' distance from the Chase, on the banks of a dark, sluggish stream, by courtesy called a river, stood the crumbling foundation and walls of an old monastery, which, according to tradition, had flourished six hundred years before.

In that distant era, judging from the great thickness of its walls and the vastness of its dark dungeons, the house must have been a great stronghold and centre of power; but for well-nigh three hundred years it had stood a word, roofless ruin. The monks who once lived jovially within it were all gone, and had left no memory or trace behind them; the very name and order of their house had been as evanescent as the smoke which once rose curling from the chimneys. Antiquarians, no doubt, had they cared to do so, might have unearthed satisfactory information regarding the date, order, and final destruction of the old pile; but none had ever shown any zeal in the matter, and it was left undisturbed in its desolate decay. All around it, and on both banks of the river, were great trees, ancient oaks and elms, with trunks of marvellous circumference. Those old patriarchs of the forest knew all about the abbey and the vanished monks, who, with hood and cowl and sandalled feet, had once glided in and out among the ferny glades in the greenwood.

But trees keep secrets well. We hear their leaves whispering and laughing in the warm sunlight when we lie under their cool shadow on a midsummer's day, but we need not strain our ears to listen to them, for no mortal man can interpret their language or hold converse with them. We can decipher the mystic hieroglyphics sculptured on old Egyptian stones, and read the testimony of the flinty rocks; science can even make dead bones reveal their misty origin; but the living, whispering, moaning trees—the giants of the greenwood—who have seen race after race die out,—they tell no tales to scientist or antiquarian.

So retired was the situation of the old monastery that few strangers ever penetrated to it. Sometimes a stray pedestrian, whom the heat had driven to the cool covert of the forest, would come across it by chance; but such a one never lingered to examine the vaults, or calculate how large an ox in bygone days might have been roasted whole in the yawning kitchen fireplace.

The place was damp and uninviting, and where floors had once been, a rank covering of tall, noisome weeds now reared their unsightly heads.

At this deserted place Elma decided to have her picnic, which fact she communicated to her brothers and sisters through the medium of her slate.

"As you like," said Gordon, tossing her up in his arms. "But there is no road within a mile of the place, and I shall be sorry for the servants, who will have to carry the luncheon baskets so far."

"What a jolly place, to be sure!" cried Tom. "It's almost as good as picnicing in the Catacombs, or among the sarcophagi in the British Museum; but if you fancy it's all right, I'll go half an hour before and frighten away the bats and vampires."

"What are vampires?" wrote Elma.

"Great big bats that fly round at night, and crawl in at open windows, and suck your veins till you die!"

Elma grew pale, and hastily scribbled, "Are there any at the abbey?"

"There's swarms of them!" answered the imaginative Tom, who had never seen even a common bat in all his life. "They would do for you fast enough, but they wouldn't touch me. My sanguinary fluid is too much like vinegar to suit their taste."

"Would they harm Gordon or Bill?"

"No; I think they're all right."

"I am not afraid, then; the angels will make the vampires blind when I am near them!"

"That will be very kind of the angels," said Tom. "I'll take my new rod; maybe they won't make the fish blind."

"I wish they would; fishing is cruel!"

"Oh, come, now, Elma! you eat fish, so you mustn't say it's cruel to kill them first. It would be more cruel to eat them alive."

Elma laughed, and ran away to look for her ally, Lotty.

"The monastery!" said Lotty, lifting her eyebrows in surprise. "Why, Elma, the place is all frogs and snails!"

"I like frogs! The little green ones are dears! Would you rather go somewhere else?" she asked, with a disappointed look.

If Lotty had felt at liberty to act on her own judgment, she certainly would have chosen a more cheerful locality; but the Hunters had been trained to sacrifice their own wishes for others, so she quickly answered, "No; not at all. I darsay the Blennerhasset will like to see the place, and Stannie and Madame Berg will be charmed to go anywhere. No one else cares about going. They all suggested damp, rheumatism, hay fever, and summer colds when Alice mentioned the word picnic last night; so there will just be our six selves, Madame, Stannie, and the two Blennerhassetts. What are we to do when we get there? Throw about scraps of newspaper and empty champagne bottles in the true old English picnic style?"

"I suppose so, if it's always done, and be happy. Bill will take a little hammer, and crack stones—he always does; Tom is going to fish in the river."

"Tom may as well fish in the bath room; I never saw so much as the tail of a minnow in that stream. You know the place is said to be under a curse, and nothing except what is green or that crawls will live there."

"I don't know. How strange! Do tell me more about it," wrote Elma.

"I wish I hadn't mentioned it," said Lotty. "I think I had better not tell you the story, Elma; it's only a foolish old legend, with not a word of truth in it."

"I must hear it. Please tell me."

"Well, long ago, before there was a house called Cumrie Chase, the old monastery was a very grand place; very long ago, remember; no one knows anything about it now. Hundreds of monks were always knocking about it then; rough, unwashed creatures in hair shirts and bare feet. Well, one day there was a division in the house (that's parliamentary language), and things began to get very uncomfortable, and there was endless fighting and squabbling among the holy men; and at last a mutiny broke out, and they all set to and killed one another, and the stream ran red for twenty-four hours. A few of them, however, escaped in the confusion, and found an asylum in France. One of them, a very old and venerable monk, as he was leaving, turned and looked back at his old home, and cursed it and every living creature within and near it, and predicted for all such unfortunates a speedy death. Not contented with that, he said that no man or child, bird or fish, nothing but crawling creatures, should live within a mile of the place, until the crimes of that night had been expiated by the sacrifice of a sinless life."

"What does that mean?"

"I fear I know," answered Lotty. "It's all nonsense, at any rate. I suppose it means until some very good person tumbles into the stream and gets drowned, or a bit of old wall falls upon them and smashes them, but both things are very unlikely. So vegetable life is likely to predominate there for some time. Have I frightened you, little one?"

"Oh, no; the angels are very strong."