

BEWARE OF THE COUNTRY!

(Concluded.)

Now, if you are an ardent young fellow of some five or six and twenty, whose affections are still free and whose heart is still whole, it is impossible to hear that any day in your rambles you may meet with a very pretty girl—for that she was pretty old John declared with great warmth, though, again, "uncommon 'aughty"—it is impossible to hear this, I say, without a degree of pleasurable excitement. Carlton knew plenty of pretty girls in London; he was a good match, and he had been pursued—pursued is a strong word, but there is no other for it—by sundry mammals with views in which sundry "darling girls" coincided. Well, he had escaped all the snares laid for him; and he enjoyed the ease of his bachelor life; but, as you may imagine, he had no objection to entering upon a little game on his own account.

It would have interested Carlton still more if he could have known that mutual enquiries were being made; that he himself was at that very moment the subject of conversation between Miss Laura Nettley and her maid.

Miss Laura Nettley was in every respect a "superior" young woman. She knew the meaning of "higher education"; she played the violin—she rather scoffed at the piano; she sang not only in English but in three or four other languages also; nor were her attainments confined to the arts; political economy and logic were both favorite studies; in short, this young lady was a paragon, and a remarkable pretty paragon. She was no bluestocking in appearance; her face was not pale, nor of a particularly intellectual cast; neither did she wear a *pince nez*. On the contrary, Miss Laura had a fresh young face—she was between nineteen and twenty—clear, dark eyes, large and expressive; a great wealth of gold brown hair falling about a head which was held up with something of an air: a trifling downward curve of the lip, and the somewhat scornful nostril of the tip-tilted nose; these were features which made up a very agreeable whole—even the supercilious expression somehow added to the charm.

Miss Laura, in spite of her many attainments, found things dull sometimes. What few friends she had lived at too great a distance to be often seen; and her father had a deep rooted objection to visitors; they disturbed his quiet and made his gout worse. Miss Laura was feeling particularly dull just now; there are times when even political economy ceases to interest. The lady's maid had brought news from the village of a London gentleman who was staying at The Blue Fox. The presence of a stranger in such a small community as that of Lullington is soon known; any one of my readers may, if he wish, speedily become famous by visiting a place of sufficient smallness. Miss Laura was secretly interested to hear of the new arrival, but you may be sure that she did not allow her maid to perceive this.

Lizzie—that was the damsel's name—had herself seen Mr. Carlton, and gave a glowing account of his appearance.

"A most handsome man he is, miss, and quite the air of the gentleman," she concluded.

"There, that is quite enough," yawned Miss Laura, when she found there was no more news of the new-comer. "What does it matter who is staying in the village, and whether Mr.—what's his name? Carlton?—walks through the park every day or not?"

CHAPTER II.

On as fine a June morning as anyone could wish to see Carlton started out on one of his daily walks. He was something of a botanist, and collected specimens on his rambles; he had a great handful of flowers now before he had been walking for half an hour. The sun was rather hot, and he turned off the path and entered a wood where the shade and coolness were delightful. He sat down upon a fallen tree trunk and began to arrange his specimens. He had carefully selected from the bunch he held those flowers which he wished to keep, and had placed them beside him, when suddenly a great dog burst in upon him through the bushes and jumped over the tree, scattering the specimens in all directions.

Almost at the same moment Carlton was aware that a slight girlish figure clad in a dark green dress had emerged from among the trees and was standing before him. The lady called the dog off sharply, and then apologized.

"I am sorry Don was so unruly; I saw him sweep all your flowers off," and Miss Nettley stooped to pick up the fallen specimens.

"Pray don't trouble to do that," cried Carlton; "the flowers are of no consequence whatever."

He was entranced by the charming picture of this green-clad maiden with the lustrous eyes and brown hair. This, he thought, must be the proud Miss Nettley; there could not be a doubt of it.

"Speaks like an educated man," thought Miss Laura on her side.

"Some of these flowers are worth picking up, though," she said, and held out a few of them as she spoke with such a pleasant smile that there was a good feeling established between them at once.

Carlton, with a secret wonder that anyone should ever have called this girl proud, began talking about the country, and the delights of it to a town-bred man.

Miss Laura confessed with a sigh that it was very pleasant indeed in summer; but it was not always so lovely as he saw it now—in June. In fact, by starting with a few commonplace remarks, the two were soon talking together as easily as possible.

Suddenly Miss Laura looked up rather shyly.

"This is not quite proper, you know, is it?" she said; "ought we not to exchange paste-board?"

Carlton had his card-case out in a twinkling; the interchange was effected with mock ceremony, and the conversation proceeded as happily as ever. Time passes quickly when one is interested, and when Miss Laura looked at her watch she pretended a vast surprise at the lateness of the hour; said she must go at once, and held out her hand to Carlton as she spoke. What a warm little handshake it was! He could feel the thrill of it long after the goddess had departed, and he was left alone.

Here was a diversion at last! Of course they would meet again; he felt sure of it; had they not both almost said as much? Carlton was already quite enough in love to feel that he should merely exist until the next interview.

And Miss Nettley; what was she thinking of? To do that young lady justice, she was considerably ashamed of herself. If she had not been actually flirting with this stranger she had pretended to a great friendliness for him. He seemed quite a gentleman, she thought, and the meeting was a welcome change in the monotony of her life. No one would know of the acquaintance besides themselves. Mr. Carlton would, no doubt, be leaving Lullington before very long. They would then cease to know one another, and there would be no harm done. That she might possibly lose her heart to this stranger she did not for one moment imagine; she looked upon it as a condescension on her part to speak to him at all. That Carlton also might possibly consider matters in a more serious light hardly crossed her mind. She would know how to check any awkward intrusiveness on his part, she was sure.

The next day there was another meeting, and after that another and another, until each day brought its appointed time and place, and each succeeding interview between Carlton and Miss Nettley was more cordial and confidential than the last. Carlton, on his side, was now so thoroughly in love as to feel that without that daily delight of intercourse with Miss Nettley he must certainly have died of very *ennui*, and, indeed, when one day it rained so hard that she failed to put in an appearance—although it was quite unreasonable to expect her to do so—he nearly had a fever, and was so surly to old John at the inn, that that worthy wondered what could have happened to his guest, usually so polite and good-tempered.

Carlton felt, too, that the lady could not be indifferent to him, or surely she would never have encouraged him as she did, smiling at him so brightly when they met, and conversing in tones of such tender accent. No word of love, as he knew well enough, was ever spoken between them. Their present friendship was pleasant of itself, too pleasant that anything should be introduced to embarrass their mutual cordial freedom of manner. Thus the days wore quickly away. To Carlton the summer brightness had never seemed so charming, so full of life and freshness. He felt that he was beginning to live now for the first time; with but one drawback he was perfectly happy. He felt a trifle uneasy at the underhand way in which his friendship with Miss Nettley was continued. He hated any kind of deception, and he had tried to introduce the subject of the squire to Miss Nettley's notice. That young lady, however, steadily refused to take any hints as to an introduction to her father. She was having a very pleasant time with her new friend; but as for falling in love with him, or continuing the acquaintanceship after Mr. Carlton had left Lullington, such a proposition was too absurd to be seriously considered.

The crisis came at last, as it was bound to come.

The young couple had been rambling lazily through the wood-path after a more than ordinarily confidential talk, when they came upon the fallen tree where Don (now grown to be a great friend to Carlton) had so unceremoniously begun the acquaintance.

By common consent the two young folks sat down there. It was a pleasant spot; the shade was very agreeable; the humming of insects among the trees was the only sound to be heard in this solitude. There was silence for a time, then Carlton began in a rather trembling voice:

"Do you remember our first meeting here, Miss Nettley?"

Of course Miss Nettley remembered it well enough, but at Carlton's tone she felt what was coming, and became perfectly frigid, determined to check any impertinence. She said nothing.

"I think," her companion went on, "I think it has been the very happiest time in my life—these last few weeks. My holiday is over; I must go back to London to-morrow."

"Indeed!" in the iciest of tones.

"My dear Miss Nettley," he exclaimed impetuously, "I cannot go away with a mere good-bye; I must know my fate before I leave you."

"What do you mean?" said mademoiselle, rising up very proudly.

"Why cannot you say good-bye?"

Stung by the coldness of her tone, Carlton started to his feet and let his love speak in one great passionate outburst; how he had loved her from the hour of their first meeting; how every moment when she had been absent from him he had thought unceasingly of her; and a vast deal more besides to the same purpose.

As he grew more excited he tried to seize her hand, but Miss Nettley drew it away sharply.

"Mr. Carlton," she began in freezing tones, and looking him straight in the face without the least appearance of emotion. "Mr. Carlton, I am perfectly astounded. You have presumed, sir, upon an acquaintance which ought never to have been begun. You must be aware that the difference in our social positions alone renders a marriage quite out of the question. Do you know that the Nettleys—with an absurd toss of the head here—are the best family in the country? And you—" She stopped, not quite knowing what to say next.

"Yes," said Carlton bitterly, determined to spare his own pride as much as possible, and now even cooler than the lady, so great had been the unexpected shock of words, "what am I, to aspire to such eminence? I have been a fool like many another man before me. However, the harm