

## HIS HAIR WAS RED.

(Continued.)

"What do I think of her? Perhaps you don't know she is my cousin," I answered.

"Oh, yes, I do; that's why I ask. You ought to know something about her. Is she a humbug? Is she the sort of girl to lead a man on and then throw him over? That's what I mean."

And then, to my amazement, he proceeded to state that he had made up his mind to marry Miss Neville; that she had given him to understand that his attentions were not disagreeable to her; and that he wanted to know whether she was the girl he had taken her for, or nothing but a flirt. "Because," he concluded, "I do hate a flirt."

I always try to say pleasant things both of and to people when I can. I gave Florry a rather better character than she deserved at the same time pointing out to my companion that he was really jumping to conclusions in a rather too impetuous way.

"Oh," said he, "I'm not impetuous. I don't for a moment suppose that she would take me to-morrow, if I asked her; and I don't mean to ask her then, nor for a long time to come. I tell you, because you are a friend of mine" (he had known me just four days), "and because I don't see the use of keeping secrets from one's friends; but of course it's quite another thing with her. I only asked you tell me the truth about her so that I might have the chance of pulling myself up before it was too late."

I began to wish with all my heart that Red-head had kept his confidences to himself. The plain, unvarnished truth was that Florry was about the most irreclaimable flirt of my acquaintance; but it seemed a pity to say this; for she was not well off, and I had found out that Percival was a man of considerable property.

On the other hand, if I allowed him to infer that she was all his fancy had painted her, he would probably ere long have an unpleasant shock; in which case the chances were that he would murder us both. I therefore took up a high tone. I said that in matters of this kind a man must use his own powers of observation and choose for himself; I really could not accept the responsibility which he sought to impose upon me. Furthermore, I didn't think it was quite the thing to give private information about a lady's disposition, as though she were a hunter put up for sale.

He made me rather ashamed of myself by grasping my hand warmly and saying that I was a good fellow. Did I think, now, that Mrs. and Miss Neville could be persuaded to pay him a visit at his place, in November? And would I come, too? Without vanity, he might say that he could promise me as good pheasant shooting as there was to be had in the county. I said yes to that without much hesitation; for I reflected that, if Florry accepted him there would probably be no flare-up, until after the marriage, and that if she didn't he couldn't blame me. And so we walked back to the house upon the best of terms with one another.

I suppose Percival had no great difficulty in making his peace with Florry. Her second string was still out shooting, and to quarrel with the only available man at hand would have seemed to her a wanton waste of opportunity. She allowed him to monopolize her for the rest of the afternoon and evening, and he was proportionately cheerful and gracious to those about him. But on the following day she thought, no doubt, that it would be only fair to give the other man a turn. At all events, she went out riding with the other man; and nothing more than that was required to convert Percival once more into the semblance of a wild beast. All day long he did his best to pick a quarrel with one of us, but was baffled by our obstinate politeness; and I dare say we should have managed to get to bed without a row if poor old Toogood had not made a most unlucky slip of the tongue at dinner.

"I can't see anything to admire in her," said he, referring to a lady whose claims in beauty happened to be under discussion. "I never could admire a woman with r—"

He came to a dead stop, and turned a great deal redder than the locks which he couldn't admire. It is true that he recovered himself rather cleverly by saying "round shoulders" in a loud voice; but this emendation came a great deal too late to be of any use to him. Already the children had exploded, one after the other, and were rolling about on their respective chairs in agonies of merriment; the rest of us were preternaturally unconsciously; Mrs. Toogood was fanning herself nervously; and Percival, with a white face and blazing eyes, was crushing biscuits to powder between his fingers. The awkward moment passed, however, as all moments, awkward and otherwise, do, and there was no reason why it should have been ever alluded to again. But poor, dear Toogood, is one of those infatuated people who never make a false step without subsequent uncalled-for flounderings. No sooner had the ladies left the room than he actually began to apologize for his stupidity. "My dear fellow, I'm sure I beg your pardon most sincerely. Can't think how I can have been such an idiot as to let it slip out." The fact is, that at the moment I had quite forgotten that you were here."

I don't suppose that our amiable host was ever before in such imminent danger of having one of his own decanters hurled at his head. Percival was lithe, quivering from head to foot with passion, and it was evident that he went through a hard struggle before he would trust himself to answer. When he did speak, it was to say in a low voice, "If you think you are going to get a rise out of me, Mr. Toogood, you'll be disappointed. But I don't see that I am bound to put up with insults of this sort, in any man's house, and I shall leave yours to-morrow morning."

Toogood is the most patient of men; but his patience was probably exhausted by this time. He didn't say, "You may go the devil," as I

really think I should have done in his place; but he made no apologies, nor did he beg his guest to remain on. He sat silent and rubbed his head.

Later in the evening Percival came into the smoking-room and offered a sort of apology; upon which, as a matter of course, he was urged to reconsider his decision about going away. But this he declined to do, alleging that he had other reasons for wishing to leave without loss of time; and, to tell the truth, he was not very much pressed to stay.

## II.

Shortly afterwards I wrote to Percival, saying that I was sorry to say that I should not be able to avail myself of his hospitality. To this he returned no answer, and I soon forgot all about him. My next meeting with him did not take place until some six months later, when he turned up unexpectedly at Cannes, whither I had betaken myself, after wintering in Egypt, in order to see the Novilles, who were living in a hotel there.

I was half-dozing in an arm-chair by the open window, one morning, when I was startled by a tremendous shindy going on in the courtyard of the hotel, below me. I went down-stairs at once; for I rather like a row (when I am not called upon to take part in it), and the first thing that I saw was my red-headed friend engaged in an angry altercation with the landlord, while a group of grinning waiters and porters stood around, keeping well beyond the reach of his umbrella, with which he was describing energetic circles in the air.

"You chattering idiot!" he was bawling out, "si vous n'avez pas shomber, pourquoi diable télégraphier to say that you had!"

"Monsieur, je vous assure—" began the landlord, deprecatingly.

"Je vous assure that I'm not going to stand here all day. Avez-vous shomber ou n'avez-vous pas? Oui ou non? Répondez!"

Here the hall porter interposed. "Very good rooms on the second floor, sir; au premier it was impossibilité d'en avoir."

"Then pourquoi diable didn't you say so before? Here, carry up the luggage, you beggars! Porty bagage—vite! Look sharp!"

The noisy little procession came clattering upstairs—first the landlord, relieving his feelings by calling Percival opprobrious names in an undertone; then the waiters; then the porters with the luggage; finally Percival himself, growling like a distant thunderstorm. On the first landing he became aware of me, and looked a good deal more surprised than pleased at seeing me.

"Hullo!" he said, "I didn't know you were here."

From the emphasis which he laid upon the pronoun I was led to conclude that he had known that the Novilles were at Cannes; and this, it subsequently appeared, was the case. I had not long resumed my interrupted siesta when there came a thundering rap at the door, and immediately my friend stalked in "to tell me," as he said, "all about it." He dragged a chair up to the window, seated himself astride upon it, and began a rapid explanation, sometimes frowning and sometimes smiling at me over his folded arms while he talked. It seemed that he was as much bent as ever upon espousing Florry Neville. He had tried to forget her, but without success; "and when I saw that fellow's marriage in the paper the other day," he concluded, "I made up my mind to lose no more time, and started for Cannes at once."

"What fellow?" I asked, in some bewilderment.

"As if you didn't know!" he returned pettishly. "Why, that man whom she threw me over for down in Suffolk, of course. I know there was no chance for me so long as he was in the way."

At the risk of being pitched neck and crop out of the window, I could not restrain a roar of laughter. "My dear fellow," I said, "it's ten to one that Miss Neville doesn't even remember the name of that individual. You must either be unwarrantably particular or very easily discouraged."

"I'm not easily discouraged," he answered. "As to my being particular, that's quite possible. I wouldn't give a fig for a man who was not particular where his wife was concerned."

"His wife! This is taking time by the forelock with a vengeance," I remarked.

"Oh, well," he said impatiently, "it's the same thing." And then, by way, no doubt, of showing me how particular he was—he requested to be informed what had brought me to Cannes. He was kind enough to say that he quite admitted my right to be his rival; only he was anxious that there should be no misunderstanding about it. He begged, therefore, that I would treat him as a friend and speak openly.

I hastened to assure him that he had nothing to fear from me; that I hoped to remain a bachelor for many years to come; and that, if ever I did marry, my cousin would assuredly not be the favored lady who would be asked to share my joys and sorrows. But I believe he was only half convinced, and indeed, from then to the end of our acquaintance, he never ceased to regard me with a greater or less degree of suspicion. Percival was the sort of man who would have been jealous of his own grandfather rather than not have been jealous at all.

He found plenty of people to be jealous of at Cannes, where Florry's attractions were widely known and appreciated, and I felt quite sorry for the poor fellow when I saw how cruelly she treated him. For the first few days he had it all his own way. Florry seemed to be, and I dare say she was, delighted to see him. She rode to a picnic with him, she allowed him to take her out for a sail on the bay, she sat with him in the garden in the evenings, and, in short, lifted him up into a seventh heaven of bliss. Then, of course, she abruptly kicked him out of it. There was a man named Lacy who was at that time among the most devoted of her slaves; and when Percival had had his innings, it was Lacy's turn to score. To do Florry justice, I must say that there is no sort of deception about her proceedings. She is very pretty, she is capital fun, and she is an adept at what I should call the hard-hearted style of flirtation;