

THE COUNTRY COUSIN.

CHAPTER I.

Old Tony Spence kept a second-hand book-shop at the corner of a back street in the busy town of Smokeford; a brown dinky little place with dusty windows, through which the light came feebly and yellowly. From the door one could peer down the narrow interior, with its booklined walls and strip of counter, to the twinkling fire at the far end, where the old fellow sat in his arm-chair, poring over ancient editions, and making acquaintance with the latest acquisitions to his stock. He was a dreamy-looking old man, with a parchment-like face and a snuff-coloured coat, and seemed made of the same stuff as the books among which he lived, with their dusty-brown covers, and pages yellowed by time. He had been a school-master in his youth, and had wandered a good deal about the world; and picked up odds and ends of a queer kind of knowledge. Of late years he had developed a literary turn, and now and again gave forth to his generation a book full of quaint conceits, a sort of mosaic fragment of some of the scraps of knowledge and observation stored up in his brain, which was as full of incongruous images as a curiosity shop. In the morning he used to turn out of his shuttered dwelling about six, when there was light, and go roving out of the town to the downs beyond it, where he would stroll along with his hands behind his back and his head thrown upward, musing over many things he found puzzling, and some that he found delightful in the world.

His house consisted of four chambers, and a kitchen above a ladder-like stair, which led up out of the bookshelves; and his family of an ancient housekeeper, a large tom-cat, and his daughter Hetty, soon to be increased by the addition of a young girl, the child of his dead sister, to whom he had promised to give a shelter for a time. Hetty was often both hands and eyes to him, and wrote down oddities at his dictation when the evening candles burned too faintly, or his spectacles had got dim—oddities whose flavour was not seldom sharpened or sweetened by the sentiment or wit of the amanuensis.

"That's not mine, Hetty; that's your own!" the old man would cry.

"Only to try how it would go, father."

"Tis good, my little girl; go on."

And thus in scribbling on rusty foolscap, and poring into musty volumes, tending a small roof-garden, and sketching fancies in the chimney-corner, Hetty had grown to be a woman almost without knowing it.

She possessed her father's good sense, with more imagination than was ever owned by the book-seller. She saw pictures with closed eyes, and wove her thoughts in a sort of poetry which never got written down, giving audience to strange assemblages in her dingy chamber, where a faded curtain of tawny damask did duty for arras, and some rich dark woodcuts pasted on the brown walls stood for gems of the old masters in her eyes. Lying on her bed with hands folded and eyes wide open, she first decorated then peopled her room, while the moonshine glimmered across the shadows that hung from roof and beam. Sleep always surprised her in fantastic company, and with gorgeous surroundings, but waking found her contented with her realities. She was out of her window early, tending the flowers which flourished wonderfully between sloping roofs, in a nook where the chimneys luckily stood aside, as if to let the sun in across many obstacles upon the garden.

One summer morning she was admiring the crimson and yellow of a fine tulip which had just opened, when a young man appeared, threading his way out of a distance of house-top, stepping carefully along the leads as he approached Hetty's flower-beds, and smiling to see her kneeling on the tiles of a sloping roof and clinging to a chimney for support. He carried in his hands a piece of half-sculptured wood and an instrument for carving. Hetty, looking up, greeted him with a happy smile, and he sat on the roof beside her, and praised the tulips and chipped his wood, while the sun rose right above the chimneys, and gilded the red-tiled roofs and flamed through the wreaths of smoke that went silently curling up to heaven above their heads, like the incense of morning prayer out of the dwellings.

"I have got a pretty idea for your carving," said Hetty, still gazing into the flower as if she saw her fancy there. "I dreamed last night of a beautiful face, half wrapped up in lilies, like a vision of Undine. I shall sketch it for you this evening, and you will see what you can make of it."

"What a useful wife you will be!" said the young man. "If I do not become a skilful artist it need not be for want of help. Even your dreams you turn to account for me."

"They are not dreams," said Hetty, merrily. "They are adventures. A broomstick arrives for me at the window here at night, and I am travelling round the world on it when you are asleep. I visit very queer places, and see things that I could not describe to you. But I take care to pick up anything that seems likely to be of use."

Hetty stood up and leaned back laughingly against the red-brick chimney, with the morning sunshine falling all round her. She was not very handsome, but looked now quite beautiful, with her smiling grey eyes and spiritual forehead, and the dimples all a quiver in her soft pale cheeks. She had not yet bound up her dark hair for the day, and it lay like a rich mantle over her head and shoulders.

"I want to talk to you about something, Hetty. I have made up my mind to go abroad, and see the carvings in the churches; and we might live awhile in the Tyrol, and learn something there."

"Oh, Anthony!" the girl clasped her hands softly together, and gazed at her lover. "Is it possible we could have been born for such a good fortune?"

Anthony was a young man who had come to the town without friends to learn furniture-making, and developing a taste for carving in wood, had turned his attention to that, instead of to the coarser part of the business. His love of reading had led him to make acquaintance with the old book-man and his daughter. Evening after evening he had passed poring over Tony Spence's stores, and growing to look on the book-lined chimney corner as his home. He and Hetty had been plighted since Christmas, and it was now June.

That evening, when the evening meal was spread in the sitting-room above the shops, Anthony came up the ladder out of the book-shelves, just as Hetty appeared at another door carrying a dish of pancakes. The old man was in his chair by

the fire, his spectacles off duty thrust up into his hair, gazing between the bars, ruminating over something that Hetty had told him.

"So," he said, looking up from under his shaggy brows, as Anthony sat down before him at the fire. "So you want to be off to travel! It's coming true what I told you the day you asked me for Hetty. I said you were a rover, didn't I?"

"Yes," said Anthony smiling and tossing back his hair, "but you meant a different kind of a rover. I have not moved from Hetty. I shall not move a mile without Hetty. And you too, sir, you must come with us."

Old Spence lay back in his chair, and peered through half-closed eyes at the speaker. Anthony had a bright keen face, with rapidly changing expressions, spoke quickly and decided ly, with a charm in his pleasant voice, and had a general look of skilfulness and cleverness about him. There was not to be seen in his eyes that patient dreamy light which is shed from the soul of the artist; but that was in Hetty's eyes, and would be supplied to him now and evermore to make him really a poet in his craft. Hetty's fancies were to be woven into his carvings that he might be famous.

"I don't know about breaking up and going abroad," said the old book-worm. "I'm too old for it, I'm afraid. Leaving the chimney-corner, and floating away off into the Nibelungen Land! You two must go without me, if you go must."

"I will not leave you alone, father," said Hetty.

"And I will not go without Hetty," said Anthony. "In the meantime, just for play, let us look over the maps and guide-books."

These were brought down, and after some poring the old man fell asleep, and the young people pursued their way from town to town and from village to village, across mountains and rivers, till they finally settled themselves in the Bavarian Tyrol. From a pretty home they could see pine-covered peaks and distant glaciers, and within doors they possessed many curious things to which they were unaccustomed.

"And I wonder if the mountains are so blue and the lakes of that wonderful jasper colour which we see in pictures," said Hetty. "How beautiful life must be in the midst of it all!"

"Yes," said Anthony, "and Hetty, you shall wear a round-peaked hat with silver tassels on the brim, and your hair in two long plaits coming down your back. 'Tis well you have such splendid hair," he said, touching her heavy braids with loving pride in his eyes and finger-ends.

Hetty blushed with delight and looked all round the familiar room, seeing blue mountains and dizzy villages perched on heights, people in strange costumes, brass-capped steeples, and strange wooden shrines, all lying before her under a glittering sun. Twilight was falling, the homely objects in the room were getting dim, the dream-world was round her, and with her hand in Anthony's she could imagine that they two were already roaming through its labyrinths together. It was not that in reality she could have quitted the old home without regret; but the home was still there, and the visions of the future had only floated in to beautify it. They had not pushed away the old walls, but only covered them with bloom.

The love of Anthony and Hetty was singularly fitting. He had gradually and deliberately chosen to draw her to him for the happiness and comfort of his life; his character was all restlessness, and hers was full of repose. She refreshed him, and the sight of her face and sound of her voice were as necessary to him as his daily bread. Hetty's was that spiritual love which spins a halo of light round the creature that leans upon it, and garners everything sweet to feed a holy fire that is to burn through all eternity. In the hush of her nature a bird of joy was perpetually singing, and its music was heard by all who came in contact with her. No small clouds of selfishness came between her and the sun. She knew her meanness for Anthony and her usefulness to his welfare, and this knowledge lay at the root of her content.

It was quite dusk, and the scrubby lines on the maps which marked the mountains of Hetty's dreamland were no longer discernible to peering eyes, when a faint ting-ting was heard from the shop-bell below. The lovers did not mind it. It might be a note from the little brazen belfry up among the pines against the Tyrolean sky, or from the chiming necklace of a mule plodding along the edge of the precipice, or from the tossing head of the leader of a herd on a neighbouring Alp; or it might be the little pot-boy bringing the beer for Sib's supper. Sib, the old serving-woman, had come to the latter conclusion, for she was heard descending by a back way to open the door.

After an interval of some minutes there was a sound of feet ascending the ladder, and the door of the sitting-room was thrown open. The light figure of a girl appeared in the doorway, and behind followed Sib, holding a lamp above her head.

"Who is it?" cried Hetty, springing forward. "Ah, it must be Primula, my cousin from the country. Come in dear; you are welcome!" and she threw an arm round the glimmering figure and drew it into her room. "Sib, put down the lamp and get some supper for her. Father, wake up! here is your niece at last. Tell us about your journey, cousin, and let me take off your bonnet."

Hetty took the girl's hat off, and stood wondering at the beauty of her visitor.

Primula's father had brought her up in a country village where he had died and left her. She had come to her uncle, who had offered to place her with a dress-maker in Smokeford. The fashions of Smokeford would be eagerly sought at Moor-edge, and it was expected that Primula would make a good livelihood on her return, with her thimble in her pocket and her trade at her finger-ends.

She had been named by a hedgerow-loving mother, who died eighteen years ago in the spring-time, and left her newly-born infant behind her in the budding world. The motherless girl had, as if by an instinct of nature, grown up to womanhood modelled on her mother's fancy for the delicate flower whose name she bore. She had glistening yellow hair, lying in smooth uneven-edged folds across her low fair forehead. A liquid light lay under the rims of her heavy white eyelids, and over all her features there was a mellow and exquisite paleness, warmed only by the faintest rose-blush on her cheeks and lips. She wore a very straight and faded calico gown, her shawl was darned, and her straw hat was burned by the sun.

"She is very lovely—prettier far than I," thought Hetty, with that slight pang which even a generous young girl may feel for a moment when she sees another by her side who must make her look homely in the eyes of her lover. "But I will not envy her, I will love her instead," was the next thought; and she threw her arms round the stranger and kissed her.

Primula seemed surprised at the embrace.

"I did not think you would be so glad to see me," she said. "People said you would find me a deal of trouble."

Old Spence was now awake and taking his share in the scene.

"Bless me! bless me!" he cried, "you are like your mother! a sweet woman, but with no brains at all, nor strength of mind. Nay, don't cry, child! I did not mean to hurt you. I have a way of my own of speaking out my thoughts. Hetty does not mind it, nor must you."

Primula was trembling, and had begun to cry; and Hetty and Anthony drew nearer and comforted her.

CHAPTER II.

"This is a dull place, after all," said Primula next day. Then Hetty, having shown her everything in the house, took her for a walk through the best streets to see the shops. "I thought that in a town one would see gay ladies walking about, and soldiers in red coats, and a great deal of amusement going on about us. Moor-edge is as good nearly, and there isn't so much smoke."

"You thought it was a city," said Hetty, laughing. "I never thought about its being dull, but perhaps it is. We have gay ladies in Smokeford, but they do not walk about in the streets. You may meet them sometimes in their carriages. It is a manufacturing town, and that makes the smoke. I don't wonder at all that Moor-edge should be prettier."

"Oh, there is a lady! Look at her hat! and there is certainly embroidery on her dress. I should like a dress like that, only I've got no money. Do you never see any company in your house, cousin Hetty?"

"Anthony comes often," said Hetty, happily, "and others come in and out, but we have nothing you could call company. You will see more of life when you go to the milliner's. There will be other young girls, and you will find it pleasant."

"I ought to have a better dress to go in," said Primula. "All the girls in the shops are nicely dressed. Have you got any money, cousin Hetty?" she asked, hesitatingly.

Hetty blushed and was embarrassed for a moment. She had indeed a pound, the savings of years, about the expending of which she had made many a scheme—a present for her father or for Anthony, she had not quite decided. Well, here was her cousin who wanted clothing. She could not refuse her.

"I have a pound," said Hetty, faintly, "and you can buy what you please with it."

"Oh, thank you," said her cousin. "Let us go in and buy the dress at once!" And they went into the finest shop, where the counter was soon covered with materials for their choice.

"This lilac is charming," said Primula, longingly. "What a pity it is so dear!"

"The grey is almost as nice," said Hetty; "and I assure you it will wear much better."

"Do you think you have not got five shillings more?" pleaded Primula. "The lilac is so much prettier?"

"No," said Hetty, in distress; "indeed I have not a penny more."

"The young lady can pay me at some other time," said the shopman, seeing the grieved look in Primula's face.

"Oh, thank you!" murmured Primula, gazing at him gratefully.

"No, no, cousin; you must not indeed think of going into debt," said Hetty. "Come home and let us talk about it."

"Ah, I shall never get it," said Primula, with a heavy sigh, and the tears rushed into her eyes.

"I will take off the five shillings," said the fascinated shopman. "You may have the lilac for the same price as the grey."

Primula blushed scarlet, and murmured some tremulous enraptured thanks; and the shopman bowed her out of the shop with the parcel in her arms.

Though Primula was going to be a dressmaker, Hetty had to make this particular dress. "I don't know how to do it yet, cousin," said Primula; "at least not the cutting out." When the cutting-out was done, the owner of the dress was not at all inclined for the trouble of sewing it. Hetty had turned her room into a work-room, and stitched with good-will, while the new inmate of the chamber sat on the little bed which had been set up for her accommodation in the corner, and entertained Hetty with her prattle about the life at Moor-edge, the number of the neighbours' cows, and the flavour of their butter; the dances on the green in summer-time, the pleasure of being elected Queen of the May. When the dress was finished and put on, Primula willingly took her steps to a house in a prominent street, with "Miss Betty Flounce" on a brass plate on the door, and was stared at on her first appearance by all the new apprentices, who never had had so pretty a creature among them before.

Summer was past, and the dark evenings had begun.

"Anthony," said Hetty, one day, "your work-plce is near to Primula's. Could you call for her every evening and bring her home?"

Anthony changed colour, and looked at Hetty in surprise. "Not if it annoys you," said Hetty, quickly; "but I don't think you would find it much trouble. She is greatly remarked in the streets, and some one who call himself a gentleman has been following her about lately."

Anthony frowned. "I should not wonder," he said, angrily; "she is a thoughtless creature."

"You need not be so hard on her," said Hetty. "She is soft and childlike, and does not know how to speak to people and frighten them off."

"Well, I will be her knight, only to please you," said Anthony. "And see, here is the carving of the design out of your dream. Don't you remember?"

"The face among the lilies!" cried Hetty, examining it. "And it has turned out quite beautiful. Why, Anthony, I declare it looks like Primula!"

"So it does indeed," said Anthony turning away.

"I suppose her face must have come in my dreams," said Hetty, "for I never had seen her when this was designed. I have heard of dreams foreshadowing things, but I never believed it. However, you could not have a lovelier model, I am sure."

"No," said Anthony; and thenceforth he called for Primula every evening and brought her home. Sometimes Hetty came to meet them; more often she remained at home to have the tea ready. At first Primula did not like being so escorted, for she had made many acquaintances, and had been accustomed to stop and say good evening to various friends whom she met on her way from Miss Flounce's door. And Anthony walked by her side like a policeman, and kept everybody at a distance. But she had to submit.