

A BUNCH OF VIOLETS.

(CONTINUED).

CHAPTER I.

"What's to be the color of your dress, Miss Scott?" Fred inquires, thinking no doubt of Convent Garden.

"Blue—cerulean blue."

"Taking color from the skies, can heaven's truth be wanting?" he quotes sentimentally, looking into eyes which were certainly not "made for earnest granting," blue as they may be.

"Come home, Fred; we shall be late for dinner. Send him away, Allie; you'll have lots of time to flirt on Friday evening. Good-by, my dear, and mind you write down to Yattendon for your dress. 'I'll see you at Madame Cronhelm's to-morrow. Farewell till we meet again!'"

An hour later, while I am engaged in demolishing my solitary chicken, I hear voices overhead—high overhead—Mrs. Wauchope's voice and another, and then a careless boyish laugh. I glance at my closed door, at the great empty silent room, at the chair by the fire where I shall presently try to while away the rest of the evening with the aid of a dish of almonds and raisins and Octave Feuillet. How lonely it looks! How wearisome it will be without a voice to break the silence! I envy people who have other people to talk to—I envy Mrs. Wauchope—I envy Mary Anne. That boy's laugh is an offense to me—me, who have nothing to make me laugh.

Yes he must be as lonely as I am, up there at the top of the house. The evenings must seem just as dreary and long to him as they do to me. Not a bit of it! Before I have finished my dinner, I hear him run down stairs, cross the hall, and go out at the front door. On the doorstep he pauses a moment to light a match, and then he walks away down the street quickly, as though he knew where he was going, and is glad to go.

It is good to be a man, I think, a little bitterly, as I lean back in my hammock-chair and stretch out my hand lazily for an almond. How pleasant it would be if I could put on my Newmarket now and sally out into the gayly-illuminated streets—to the theater perhaps, or to meet and chat with a friend! But, instead of that, I must sit here over the fire, reading a book I know by heart and munching almonds and raisins.

"Who went out?" I ask Mary Anne, as she folds up the table-cloth.

"The Count," Mary Anne answers laconically.

"Does he go out every evening?"

"Mostly—to the opera or something."

"Where was he going this evening?" I ask carelessly.

"To a dance," Mary Anne answers vaguely. "And he do look well when he's dressed for the evening," she adds, with some lighting up of her stolid countenance. "The mistress told him so just now on the stairs."

That was what had made him laugh. What a careless young laugh it was! It rings in my ears still. To drive it away I throw down my book and go to the piano. A piece of music lies on the carpet; I take it up and set it open on the desk before me. It is a song—a favorite one of mine—"The Cross-Roads"—and I play the prelude dreamily, lingering over each familiar chord. In the days to come I may wonder vaguely what led me to sing this song to-night. On to the very last verse, I sing it through—

"Was I not made for him? We loved each other.
Yet fate gave him one road, and me another!"

CHAPTER II.

"Come upstairs, and I'll show you his new picture."

"But he may not care to have me see his picture, Mrs. Wauchope."

"He'll never know anything about it. He doesn't know you are in the house."

"That makes no difference," I say, my sense of integrity being, apparently, no mate for my landlady's.

I am sitting at the table in the middle of the room, finishing my breakfast. It is nine o'clock, and a cool gleam of March sunshine lights up my big dingy drawing-room, making the ancient carpet and curtains—which have faded into an indescribable shade between drab and dust color—look still more ancient, and gleaming brightly on the breakfast-table, on the tin sardine box, on the knives and fork, on my silver solitaires—for I have drawn the blinds up to the top of the windows that I may feel even that vague unsatisfactory bit of sunshine on my face. My landlady is standing opposite to me, on the other side of the table—a tall, sallow complexioned woman in a frilled gown of black luster, with purple ribbons in her black net cap and a purple knitted *fichu* tied behind with woolen tassels.

"He wanted to know this morning if the drawing-rooms were taken," Mrs. Wauchope says, laughing in her silent fashion. "I told him they were—by a lady of a certain age from the country. That will keep him from asking any more questions."

Aunt Rosa's face rises before me, grimly disapproving. But I turn my back—metaphorically—on the menacing vision.

"How long has he been lodging here, Mrs. Wauchope?"

"Well," Mrs. Wauchope answers slowly, "he's been with me off and on, for more than two years now; and I've never found him anything but most respectable and well-conducted, though his temper is none of the sweetest. Not that any of us is sweet if we're put out," she adds extenuatingly; "and if one's born with a bad temper, why it's all the more creditable if one keeps it down."

This bad-tempered young man—whose name, Mrs. Wauchope informs me, is Baxter—Gerard Baxter—would be intensely gratified if he could hear us. But as he left the house hours ago—so Mrs. Wauchope also informs me—that gratification is denied to him.

"Come up, and I'll show you his studio, Miss Allie. You never saw such an old curiosity-shop. And it would be as much as my life is worth to sweep it or anything—though, goodness knows, it wants it! But he'd fly at me like a young tiger for raising a dust on them weary old pictures."

"But if he were to come in and find us poking about his premises, Mrs. Wauchope," I say, divided between all the notions of propriety which Aunt Rosa has been inculcating on me for nearly a score of years and a powerful desire to see the pictures, "fancy what a row he would have to pluck with you!"

"He's gone to Kensington, and won't be in till four o'clock," Mrs. Wauchope declares positively. "I wouldn't have you caught up there for the world, Miss Allie; but, even if there was a chance of his coming back, he has left his latch-key on his dressing-table, so that he can't get into the house unless he knocks."

I am more than doubtful about the whole proceeding; but I rise from the breakfast-table, and, gathering up my long dress in my hand, follow Mrs. Wauchope out of the room and up the gloomy stairs.

It is a long way up—quite long enough for my better judgement to have had time to assert itself before we reach the topmost landing, under the very roof of the house.

"I shall only just peep in at the door," I say; and Mrs. Wauchope, passing on before me, nods her head and opens the low unpaneled door.

"He has had the wall raised, you see," she says, ushering me in—for I do go in—and got that glass roof put on. Makes it much lighter, you know, and quite cheerful and pleasant. You'd never guess there could be such a fine roomy place up here at the top of the house."

The great garret-room has certainly been metamorphosed into a very well-lighted studio. An awning has been stretched under part of the glass roof, throwing the light more fully upon the easel in the middle of the floor. The place is crowded for the most part with a litter of quaint odds and ends, but its untidiness does not trouble me as it seems to trouble my landlady. Several pictures, finished and unfinished, hang or lean against the walls; a lay figure does duty as a hat-rack in one corner, in another a pile of rusty armor shelters innumerable spiders, to judge from the webs with which it is festooned. On the easel in the middle of the floor stands an unfinished picture, with the colors still wet upon it—a somber, yet splendidly realistic view of mountain-scenery, in the foreground.

"A lake of sadness, seldom sunned, that stretched
In sullen silence from a marge of reeds."

I am not an artist; yet I stand before the unframed canvas—I think a picture never looks so well as when standing unframed upon the easel where it was painted—lost in admiration of the power, clearness, and artistic completeness which breathe through the whole composition, and which even I am not too ignorant to understand and to appreciate.

"That is the picture he brought from Scotland," Mrs. Wauchope says, standing a little behind me with her head on one side. "I suppose there's a great deal in it—there ought to be, if he did nothing but paint it all the time he was away. I tell him I am sure there is some young lady in Scotland, he goes there so often; but he says, No, he doesn't care for young ladies—which is ridiculous, you know," Mrs. Wauchope adds; "and he with such a pair of eyes in his head! Whether he likes them or not, they like him; and so I tell him."

"Has he very handsome eyes?" I ask absently, fascinated by the picture before me.

"Handsome!" Mrs. Wauchope repeats. "I often tell him they were not put in his head for the good of his soul! But he only laughs at me, and asks me what I want him to do for me. He mends my spectacles, and the other day he touched up poor Wauchope's picture, and made it look as good as new."

"Is there anything he cannot do?" I ask, laughing.

"He doesn't seem to be able to make his fortune," Mrs. Wauchope says, shaking her head, with a glance round the studio. "Look at all those pictures on the walls—only half finished, most of them—thrown aside because he got tired of them, and wanted to begin something new! The greatest fault I find with him is that he won't stick to anything. Because he's not satisfied with it, he tells me; but that is all nonsense. It is because he is new fangled, and wants to be at something else."

"An unlucky temperament!" I say to myself, wondering if any woman has lost her heart to this unstable young man.

Mrs. Wauchope has moved away to the other end of the room, intent on carrying away some empty cigar-boxes which she has found there, and I turn away from the canvas which has taken such hold on my imagination to glance round the precincts wherein I cannot help feeling I have no business. It is my first introduction to anything so Bohemian as the studio of a professional painter; and I like it, notwithstanding the litter of palettes and brushes, the bottles of "medium," the maul-sticks and palette-knives, the colors and odds and ends of canvas scattered about the floor. There are pictures framed and unframed, ranged about the room. There is a miscellaneous assortment of pipes on the table—here a quaint china tobacco-jar, there a tall candlestick of Florentine bronze, wherein the candle has been allowed to burn down to the socket, fencing-foils on the wall, books thrown down carelessly here and there and anywhere, a faded blue velvet smoking-cap on one shelf, on another a dead camellia in its dusty specimen-glass—a dead brown carnellia, which seems to have perished of thirst, for the lad beside it, which reaches down to the drop of water in the bottom of the vase, is still fresh and green.

"I'll show you his photograph, if you'd like to see it," Mrs. Wauchope says, pausing beside a door leading into an inner room—or garret. "He leaves his album on the dressing-table mostly, and you might know some of his friends."