

## Kate Coventry

## CHAPTER XIX.

(CONTINUED.)

'Lady Mabel married an earl, and had sons and daughters, and lived to a green old age. I have seen a picture of her at fifty, and she was still "fair and comely and buxom" as when she dazzled the old chaplain's eyes and broke Sir Montague's heart, yes, Kate, that is a sensible woman. She's the evergreen in the garden, and blooms, and buds, and sends forth fresh shoots, when the rose is lying withered and trampled into the earth; but for all that, she has never had the charm of the rose, and never can have.'

Such is a specimen of one of my many conversations with Lady Scapegrace, whom I liked more and more the longer I knew her. But I have been anticipating sadly during my drive of Sir Guy's coach up Sir Guy's avenue. When I reached the front door, with all my recklessness, I felt glad to see no head poking out of windows—above all, no female witness to my unwomanly conduct. I felt thoroughly ashamed of myself as I got down from the box; and I confess it was with feelings of intense relief that a polite groom of the chambers informed me, with many apologies, 'her ladyship and all the ladies had gone to dress,' and handed me over with a courtly bow, to a tidy elderly woman, in a cap that could only belong to a housekeeper. She conducted me to my room, and consigned me Gertrude, already hard at work unpacking upon her knees.

## CHAPTER XX.

A very pretty little room it was, none of your enormous dreary state apartments, dull as a theatre in daytime, with a bed like a mourning coach, and corners of gloom and mystery, uncomfortable even at noon, and fatal to the nerves when seen by the light of a solitary wax-candle. On the contrary, it was quite the room for a young lady; pink hangings tinted one's complexion with that rosy bloom which the poet avers is as indispensable to woman as 'man's imperial front—whatever that means—is to the male biped. A dark carpet with a rich border relieved the light-colored paper, picked out sparingly with flowers, the toilet table was covered with a blushing transparency of pink under white, like sunset on snow—perhaps I should rather say like a muslin dress over a satin top, and there was a charming full-length glass, in which I could contemplate my whole person from top to toe, without sinning it an inch off the perpendicular. The look-out was into Lady Scapegrace's garden, a little beyond of a place that bore ample witness to the good taste of its mistress. Every shrub had been transplanted under her own eye, every border filled according to her personal directions. She tied her own carnations, and budded her own roses, like the most exemplary clergyman's wife in England. I do believe she would have been a good wife to anybody but Sir Guy.

However, it was too dark for me to see anything of her ladyship's garden. It was already getting dusk when we arrived, and although it wanted three mortal hours of dinner, all the ladies, including the hostess, had retired to their own rooms, to which away the time by writing letters, reading novels, and going to sleep. I was much too restless to embark in any of these occupations. It would have been a relief to write, certainly—to pour out all one's thoughts and feelings before some sympathetic correspondent, but I knew such, I could not have settled to read, no, not the most interesting novel that was ever printed, although I might have left it off the day before in an agony of uncertainty at the critical place which is always to be found near the conclusion of the second volume; and as for sleep—sleep, indeed! I felt as if I should never sleep again.

When I am unhappy, and particularly when I am angry with myself, I particularly like to be occupied. I had Gertrude and

so loud, that I ventured on a slight cough, merely to break it. 'Anon,' said I, still intent on the Comic Almanac. John turned slowly round, made a half rise, as if out of compliment to my presence, and returned to The Drawing-Room Scrap Book, which, however, he was now reading the right way. 'This would not do; I resolved to wait a little longer, just a quarter of an hour by the clock, and see whether he would have the common civility to speak to me. What a long quarter of an hour it was! the hand reached it at last—it passed it—I gave him another five minutes. It was getting painful. I spoke, and the sound of my own voice quite startled me, yet was my remark as harmless and commonplace as well could be.

'John,' said I, 'what time do we dine?'

'A quarter before eight, I believe,' answered John, quite good-humoredly, and as if nothing had happened to estrange us. 'Dear me, Kate, how early you're dressed!'

I could have cried with vexation; but I tried, if possible, to find a sore place somewhere, and give him 'one' before I had done with him; so I made a saucy face, and asked him, half laughing, whether he didn't think I had driven them well from the station?'

'Inimitable, Kate,' was his reply; 'I hadn't the least idea you were so accomplished a charioteer.'

I should have burst into tears, I verily believe, but just then Lady Scapegrace sailed in, and the usual forms of society had to be gone through; and she kissed me and shook hands with Mr. Jones, as if she really liked us; and we talked of the weather, and the shameful stoppage of the train we had come by, and the general inconveniences of railways; and presently more ladies came down, neat and crisp as it turned out of a handbox, followed by their lords in choking white neckcloths; and then Sir Guy appeared in a costume of unsurpassing splendor; but still, although in his evening dress, brilliant with starch and polish and buttons and jewellery, looking like a coachman in masquerade; and 'manner' was announced, and we all paired off with the utmost ceremony, and I found myself seated between Frank Lovell and dear old Mr. Lumley, and opposite the elder Miss Molasses, who scowled at me with an asperity of which I should have believed her unmeaning face incapable, as if she hated me on this particular evening more than all the other days of the year. I soon discovered the cause. Frank was more attentive to me than I had ever known him, although there was a something in his manner that I did not altogether like: a sort of freedom that I had never remarked before, and which made me colder and more reserved than usual. It was evident he thought he might venture as far as he liked with a young lady who drove four horses, and smoked a cigar the while. I felt I was blushing under my skin; but I was determined to brave it, all out, and bide from every living soul my own vexation and self-contempt. Once I caught a telegraphic signal exchanged between my neighbor and Miss Molasses, after which she seemed more at ease, and went on with her dinner in comfort. I was so angry now that I turned my shoulder towards Master Frank, and took refuge with my dear old friend Mr. Lumley, who, utterly regardless of the noise and flirtation his better-half was carrying on at the other end of the table, discussed his entree quite contentedly, and pressed away to me in his usual kind, consolatory manner. I was one of his great favorites; in fact, he told me so, then and there. He always called me 'my dear,' and often vowed that if he had only the use of his legs he would walk to the end of the world to make me a thorough-going naturalist like himself. I was getting more at ease under his dear old wing. I had gone through so much excitement during the day, that this comparative inaction was a positive relief, and I was really beginning to enjoy a sort of repose, when the baronet's horrid voice from the bottom of the table aroused me once more to an agony of shame and despatch.

'Do me the honor to drink a glass of champagne; the champagne to Miss Coventry!' shouted Sir Guy, 'you must require it after your exertion. Egad! my team won't get over it in a hurry—the roads were woolly and the time short—hey, Miss Kate? But a—'—the whipcord was scarce. I saw that at six o'clock in all weathers,

a topic was too engrossing not to swamp every other, and no more allusions were made to my unfortunate escapade till Lady Scapegrace had drawn on her gloves, bent her haughty head, and 'made the move,' at which we all sailed away to tea and coffee in the drawing-room.

Here I was more at ease. Lady Scapegrace and Mr. Lumley, hating each other, were, of course, inclined to be exquisitely kind to me—I formed a bond of union between the foes. We three, particularly with such a weapon as the tongue of Mrs. Lumley were more than a match for any number of our sex, and most of the other ladies gave in at once. Only Miss Molasses held out and eyed me once more with an expression of eager malice for which I could not easily account. I remarked to that she seemed restless and fidgety, glanced anxiously ever and anon at the door by which the gentlemen would join us, and seemed uncomfortable if any of us approached an empty chair which was next to her seat. I began to have my suspicions of Frank Lovell, notwithstanding all his asseverations. I determined to watch him narrowly; and if I found my suspicions were true—it I discovered he was false and treacherous, why, then, I would—after all, what could I do. It stung me to think how powerless I was.

Now, the establishment of Scamperley, although doubtless the bounds of domestic discipline were by no means over-tightly drawn, was one in which servants, from the stately curly-headed 'groom of the chambers,' down to the little boy in green that was always too late for the post, had more than enough upon their hands. In the first place, nobody ever seemed to think of going to bed much before daylight. This entailed a breakfast, protracted by one late sleeper after another till luncheon-time—that meal was of unusual magnificence and variety; besides which, a hot repast, dressed by the French cook, and accompanied by iced champagne, &c., required to be served in one of the woods for the refreshment of Sir Guy's shooting guest. Then in the afternoon there were constant fresh arrivals and rooms to be got ready, for when the host and hostess were at home, they kept the house full; and the day concluded with a large dinner-party, at which seldom less than sixteen sat down to discuss the inspirations of Monsieur Horsd'œuvre, and the priceless wines of Sir Guy. No wonder the servants grew tired and overworked, though I fancy the luxury and good living down stairs was quite equal to that which elicited ecstasies from *bon-vivants* and connoisseurs above. Nevertheless, it was but just that they too should have their share of relaxation and amusement; therefore did Sir Guy in his generosity give an annual servants' ball, which he attended and opened himself in a state of hilarity not calculated to inspire much respect amongst his retainers. He had, however, sufficient self-command invariably to select as his partner the prettiest maid-servant in his establishment. But if the baronet failed in his dignity as head of the house, her ladyship had enough for both. She looked like a queen as she sailed in, amongst her own domestics, and all the retainers and managers on four wheels. On the evening in question, it amused me much to see the admiration, almost the adoration, she elicited from old and young. No wonder: that stately form, that queenly brow, had been bent over many a sick bed; those deep thrilling tones had spoken words of comfort to many a humble sufferer; that white hand was ever ready to aid, even open to relieve; good or bad, none ever applied to Lady Scapegrace in vain.

'The virtuous it is pleasant to relieve and make friends of,' she has often said to me, in her moments of confidence; 'the wicked it is a duty to assist and to pity. Who should feel for them, Kate, if I didn't? God knows I have been wicked enough myself.'

The men-servants never took their eyes off her, and I fear made but sorry partners to the buxom lassies of the household, till 'my lady' had left the room. I saw two stable-boys, evidently fresh arrivals, who seemed perfectly transfixed with admiration, at an apparition such as they had never pictured to themselves in their dreams; and one rough fellow, a sort of under-keeper in velvet, with the frame of a Hercules, and a fist that could have stunned an ox, having gazed at her open-mouthed for about ten

a complet conquest by the interest I took in his profession, and the thorough knowledge I displayed of its details. I had to make most of the conversation myself, certainly, for his replies, though couched in terms of the deepest respect, and accompanied by a chivalrous deference for my sex, to which I was totally unaccustomed from the partners of a London ball room, consisted for the most part of a little more than 'Yes, Miss,' and 'No, Miss,' with an additional nod of the smoothest, blindest head I ever beheld. When I had exhausted the merits of the hounds for the ensuing week, with a few general observations on the pursuit of hunting, and the merits of that noble animal, the horse, I began to get high and dry for further topics, and was not sorry when three fiddles and a flute struck up their inspiring tones, and away we all went, 'cross hands,' 'down the middle and up again,' to the lively and by this time tolerably familiar air of 'Sir Roger de Coverley.'

I am bound to confess that, as far as the servants were concerned, everything went on with the utmost propriety and respect. Sir Guy, indeed, pulled his partner about with an unnecessary degree of vigour, which at times almost degenerated into a romp, and squeezed my hands in 'the Poussetta' with an energy of affection which I could well have dispensed with; but every one else was a very pattern of politeness and decorum. In fact, the thing was almost getting stupid, when my little second horse rider and myself returning breathless from our rapid excursion down some two-and-thirty couple, were 'brought up,' started and dismayed by a piercing scream from at least that number of female voices, all raised at the same instant.

'Fire! fire!' exclaimed the tall housemaid at my elbow.

'Save me! save me!' shrieked the fat housekeeper, plumping into Frank Lovell's arms, and well-nigh bringing him to the ground, in which case she might have crushed him.

'Murder! murder!' shouted my idiot of a maid, Gertrude, rushing frantically for the doorway by Sir Guy, who was swearing, I am sorry to say, most fearfully.

'Stand still, fools!' I heard Lady Scapegrace exclaim in her deep tones, 'and let nobody open the door!'

By this time there was a rush of all the women towards the door; and as the centre of the room was cleared, I saw what had happened. The muslin transparency had caught fire—a large fragment of it was even now blazing on the floor, and the consequences amongst all those light floating dresses and terrified women might have been indeed awful. For an instant everybody seemed paralysed—everybody but Cousin John; during that instant he had flung off his coat, and kneeling upon it, extinguished the flames; they were still blazing over his head; with a desperate bound he fore down the ill-fated transparency; regardless of singed hair and blistered hands, he clasped and pressed it, and stamped upon it, and smothered it. Ere one could have counted fifty, the danger was over, and not a vestige of the fire remained. How handsome he looked with his brave face lighted up, and his eyes sparkling with excitement! Nobody could say John wanted expression of countenance now. The next moment he was quietly apologising in his usual tone to Lady Scapegrace for 'spoiling her beautiful transparency,' and parrying her thanks and encomiums on his courage and presence of mind, with an assurance that he 'only pulled it down because he happened to be directly under it; but he could not help turning to me and saying—

'Kate, I hope you were not much frightened.'

The words were not much, but they were uttered in the old kind voice; they rang in my ears all the evening, and I went to bed happier than I ever thought I could have been after such a day.

## CHAPTER XXI.

The Sunday at Scamperley, I am sorry to say, was hardly observed with that degree of

ways on duty except when relieved by a cigar or a toothpick. How it could scarcely with propriety be called, inasmuch as it was more like a box at the opera than a seat in a place of worship. We sat red by a staircase outside the church, with a private door of our own; passing through which, we found ourselves in a very comfortable chamber, with a good many chairs and sofas, a handsome book-case and a blazing fire. This a room led to a smaller apartment, into which Sir Guy would swagger with much unnecessary noise and bustle. Throwing up a large window, he looked over as it were from a balcony, and, behold! we were at church.

When the sermon was concluded, Sir Guy shut the window down again, and we took our departure much edified, and may easily be imagined, by the lessons of meekness and humility which he had received in so becoming a manner. From church we invariably proceeded to the kennel, where a stout, healthy-looking keeper paraded the Baronet's pointers and setters for the inspection of the ladies. Here Sir Guy took entire possession of me once more.

'Don't be alarmed, my dear,' he said, as a great bull-headed, black-and-white brute, surnamed Don, came blundering up, and tried to put his muddy paws on my dress. Sir Guy's affection of the 'natural,' and his odious ways of calling one 'my dear,' provoked me intensely; and I gave Don such a crack over his double nose with my parasol, as broke the ivory handle of that instrument, and completely quelled all further demonstrations of affection from the uninteresting brute. Sir Guy was charmed.

'Hit him hard,' said he 'he's got no friends. What a rizen it is! How she punished my dear leader the other day! I love that girl!'

The latter sentence, be it observed, was spoken *sotto voce*, and required, as indeed it received no reply.

'What interesting creatures!' exclaimed Miss Molasses, indicating an old pointer lady, who went swidding by with all the appearances of having lately brought up a large and thirsty family. 'Do tell me, can that dog really catch a hare?'

The keeper's face was a study—he was apparently a humorous individual; but Miss Molasses addressed her remarks to Frank Lovell; and Frank, as in duty bound, replied. That girl was evidently making up to him, and, thinking he was fond of field-sports, pretended to take an interest in everything connected with those pursuits for his sake.

'Come and see the tame pheasants, Miss Coventry,' said Sir Guy. I know what this meant: I knew it would entail a tête-à-tête walk with my aversion, and I cast an imploring look at Frank, as much as to say, 'Do save me.' He caught my meaning in an instant, and skillfully interposed. Of course, as he accompanied us, so did Miss Molasses; but Frank and I lingered a little behind the rest of the party, made a wrong turn in the shrubbery, and found ourselves, I never knew exactly how, taking a long walk all alone in the waning twilight. I don't know what Aunt Deborah would have said to such proceedings; and I am quite sure Lady Horsingham would have been unspeakably shocked; but that Sunday walk was the custom of the country at Scamperley—and, after all, it was not my doing, and consequently not my fault.

I wonder why it is, that in the very convenient code of morality which the world has adopted for its private use, places and people should so completely alter facts. You may do things with impunity in London that would destroy the character of a Diana in the country; and again, certain rural practices, harmless—nay, even praiseworthy—when confined to a picturesque domain, if flourished before the eyes of the metropolis, would sink the performer to the lowest depths of social degradation. It is not what you do that matters one whit, but what the world thinks of your actions; and the gentlemen use a proverb which I have often heard in connection with certain racing enormities, that 'One man may steal a horse, while another must not even look at a halter; and if this be the case with that sex who arrogate to themselves the exclusive privilege of doing wrong, how much more does the adage hold good with us poor, weak, trampled-upon