

"Yes, I shouldn't object to a little; very nice company—a gentleman or two, and some ladies to tease by a little flirtation. I own I am in a very flirting mood just now, and that I should like to see you caught in Cupid's meshes."

"O, me? I'm afraid you will be disappointed, dear. I'm not an admirer of the other sex, you know."

"I don't know anything of the sort! I think that when Mr. Right comes along you will fall a prey to his wiles, like other girls."

"Like you to poor George's. Or is it not his want of wiles that offends you?"

The man on the chair could hear every word the women above him were saying, the night was so still and the air so clear, and at this stage of the conversation his attention became attracted and he listened.

"My dear, let George go! When he knows enough to ask a lady to marry him without pouncing out upon her like a cat on a mouse, he may receive an answer such as he desires. In the mean time I am going to flirt, if there is anybody in this place fit to flirt with. But let's go to bed."

The man on the chair uttered an accentuated "Whew!" threw away his cigar and went in.

At breakfast the two ladies were alone, but at dinner a large-whiskered, highly perfumed gentleman in a tweed mourning suit comforted them. The landlady, Mrs. Bayley, innocent of etiquette, and regarding the man's as the superior sex, introduced the guests to each other as "Miss Winter," "Miss Van," "Mr. Stern." A stiff bow all round finished the performance. But Mr. Stern was bound to make himself acquainted better, and handed Miss Winter a visiting card with his name better developed in black and white than the landlady had been able to make it, "Mr. Winthrop de Sury Stone."

"We have no cards with us, Mr. Stone, but I am Miranda Winter, and this lady is my friend, Agnes Vaughan; we are here to spend a week or two fern-hunting, and then we return to the city where our families live."

"Please call me De Sury Stone, if it isn't too much trouble; fact is, the lawst name is come to me with some rocks or something that belonged to my great grandfather sometime, and the noo line o' road has made a property of 'em for me—if I can find 'em."

"How shall you know your 'rocks' when you see them, Mr. De Sury Stone?" enquired Miranda.

"Oh, I believe its all a matter of meridian and geometry. Some men are

coming here to do the scientific work, and then I take a big pick, I believe, and take out a bit of rock or something, for its all going to be worked. There'll be quarries here soon. Are you ladies geometric—no! pardon me!—I mean geological?"

"O, no! but we'll come and see you pick out the rock that opens your quarries if you'll let us, Mr. De Sury Stone?" said Miranda.

"Delighted, I'm sure! Fact is, I intend to have quite a party to celebrate the event; some cousins, and men, you know. Have you found any ferns, Miss Vaughan?"

"Yes, one or two specimens, but we have not been far up the valley yet."

"Won't you let me have the pleasure of carrying a basket for you? I do know a little of ferns. My cousin Emma—pretty little thing—is devoted to 'em, and I can tell where some of 'em should be found. *Osmunda regalis* for instance."

"Oh, indeed!" cried Agnes; "I have never found *regalis* yet. I hope it grows here."

"I have'nt anything to do till my scientific friends arrive but just prospect round a bit, and that I can do just as well when hunting for ferns, if you'll allow me to attend you this afternoon, ladies."

The prospecting was productive of everything but flirting. Mr. De Sury Stone was impervious to the little attacks upon his peace of mind attempted by Miranda, who, caring nothing at all for ferns, concentrated her whole attention on teasing the gentleman; but she had to take refuge in herself, and returned to the hotel a very puzzled young lady.

"The strange thing is, that Mr. De Sury Stone, as he stupidly styles himself, seems not wholly unknown to me, though where I can have met those immense whiskers, that horrible suit of clothes, which I am sure he bought ready made, and that detestable jockey-club essence he uses puzzles me," she remarked to Agnes as they rocked to and fro.

"Oh, my dear, he isn't another Haroun-al-Raschid, nor a second Czar Peter going round in other people's clothes to find them out. I guess he's just a half Yankee Canadian with plenty of money, not so much brains, and less education, who, having come into this bit of property, tries to make an impression, particularly on us unsophisticated creatures all alone in a country hotel. He is pretty well up in ferns however."

"Yes, you have a bag full indeed, Aggie, though your regal one what-is-it?"

The men smoke cigars of the same name, don't they?"

"No, the men don't, Miss Impertinence; they smoke *Regalis*, and my fern is a *Regalis*—*Osmunda Regalis*—did you ever hear the story of its name?"

"No; but if you're very good you may tell it me."

"Well, to-night when the fireflies are out then. Now I must sort and press and label my specimens, and you may arrange all these lovely wild flowers for our table."

The fireflies flashed and glanced in the deep purple of the summer night; the trees chanted their psalm to the cool breeze, and the little purling brook that came down from the hills and ran away under the bridge, crooned an evensong, when the two friends crowded into the large old-fashioned rocker on the balcony, and Agnes Vaughan began her tale of the *Osmunda Regalis*.

"It was long and long before Alfred and the Danes had over-run the country two or three times, when Osmund the Waterman took up his lot on the banks of Tync-water, and brought thither his wife Benda, whom he had carried off from a miserable Saxon who had stolen her from her father's house—if they owned houses—by the way, shieling seems the more suitable word to this story—in the foothills of Snowdon. I do not know whether the mountain was called Snowdon before Alfred, but it doesn't matter.

Benda was a beautiful woman, with long and delicate limbs, a skin like cream, and a blush like a prairie-rose. Her hair hung in long waves, dark as a storm-cloud, down to her waist, and her eyes were like the blue of the pools left by the Tyne after flood-tide. She had a temper like an angel, and all her happiness lay in caring for Osmund her husband, and the sweet babe Thorwald, who had eyes like her own, hair like the sun-god, and the smile of his father.

As for Osmund, he too had golden hair, which clustered in thick curls round his white forehead; his neck was as a pillar for strength; his arms, long and sinewy, could pull the oar when the waves were wildest, and keep the boat straight for its destination; and when danger called, as it often did on those tempting shores, whose rivers ran pearls and whose lands yielded double, Osmund could wield battle-axe and claymore with terrific effect, while his huge chest gave his war-cry the resonance of a big bell.

It was a summer morn, the tide was low, and for days Osmund had been but seldom called to his task of ferrying his neighbors from one bank to the other of