

A LOVER FROM OVER THE SEA.

(Continued.)

"First of all, you hint that we may be sheltering an escaped convict or a ticket-of-leave man, and then you turn round and begin to try and find a victim for him in the village. For all we can tell, Mr. Grantley may be married already;" and she took up her hat, as though tired of the discussion, and sauntered across the sunlit lawn.

Miss Vallance returned to the drawing-room, where she paused by the open glass doors, watching her young mistress, a graceful figure in her white dress and broad brimmed hat, one long tan glove drawn up the slender arm, the other hand bare, plucking here a withered leaf, there an imperfect blossom from among the rose bushes.

Presently a tall young man in a light tweed suit, with a hat of the same material and a roll of papers in his hand, crossed the lawn and joined her. It was Mr. Grantley with the plans for rebuilding some cottages on the estate which had been allowed to fall almost into ruin through Gregson's neglect.

Miss Vallance could hear the gay sweet tones of Lady Olivia's voice, as she chattered to her companion, and his deeper-toned replies, although she could not distinguish their words.

Then her ladyship led the way to the chairs under the elm-tree and seated herself on one, Mr. Grantley spreading out the plans he had brought on the rustic table in front of her.

With an expression of anxiety seldom seen on her usually placid face, Miss Vallance watched the two heads bending eagerly over the papers.

"I wish he would marry Doctor Graham's niece! Stewards ought always to be married!" she remarked oracularly to herself as she moved away from the window.

The long summer days and the odorous starlit nights flitted away rapidly. Lady Olivia Desmond had been three weeks at Thornwood Manor; it was now nearing the end of June, and all round Camersham the hay was cut and lay in fragrant heaps and ridges, clover-heads and great white daisies with closed eyes among its fading glories, waiting to be carted away from the bare fields.

Only the lawn meadow remained to be carried. In compliance with Lady Olivia's wish, the grass was always left standing there till the very last, and the carrying of it was regarded as a sort of Carnival by the young Irvines, and indeed by every other child in Camersham; for, when the large field was all cut and had lain for a few days in the rays of the mid-summer sun, every boy and girl in the village and from the outlying farms and labourers cottages on the Thornwood estate, was bidden to a tea in the hay-field by the mistress of the Manor, and regaled with tea, bread-and-butter, and an unlimited supply of new currant buns.

This custom had been instituted by Olivia when, as a child ten years old, she paid her first visit to Thornwood under the charge of Miss Vallance, soon after Lord St. Kevin's death, and went from house to house in the village in her white frock and black ribbons, making friends with everybody in a quaint spontaneous fashion of her own, and winning golden opinions from all for a naive grace of manner attributed by the simple cottage people to her education in foreign parts, but which was really merely the outward sign of her own kindly nature, combined with the unerring tact and courtesy she had inherited from her French mother. Fifteen years had slipped away since the first tea drinking in the lawn meadow, and during that time it had not always been possible for the mistress of Thornwood to grace the entertainment with her kindly presence. In the preceding year circumstances had detained her in town till considerably later in the season, much to the disappointment of her juvenile guests, in whose eyes the festival lost half its charm when Lady Olivia was not there to stand at the head of the long table and pour out the tea. She would push extra buns and unexpected sweeties into sunburnt little hands, scatter a sudden shower of almond sugar-plums to be scrambled for as a wind-up to the feast, and dress up Wrinkles, the pug, in a red cap and blue jacket, and make him smoke a pipe to amuse the assembled company.

"It ought to be a better feast than ever, because you were away last time," Sydney Irvine had remarked when he and Olivia had been discussing the entertainment. "I do think it's an awful grind, old Blanford's fixing the holiday so late this year, just as if it signified to a country grammar-school when Eton and Harrow break up; but we have managed to screw half a day out of him, and, if we stay in and work during the morning play-hour, we can get back from Beechenford by half past three and be all ready to come here by four o'clock. Do have a surprise for us this year, Olive! Don't you remember the time those travelling niggers came by, and you made them go and dress up in the barn and sing to us after tea? Try to get up something extra jolly, won't you? I expect Mr. Grantley could help you. He's awfully good natured and knows a lot about everything, I'm sure!"

The desire to comply with Sydney Irvine's wishes, and devise something "extra-jolly" for the hay festival, caused Lady Olivia a good deal of anxious thought.

It was characteristic of her to do nothing by halves. Whatever her occupation for the time being, she threw herself heart and soul into it. This was the secret of the success which usually attended whatever she took in hand. She racked her brains as assiduously to discover a new pastime wherewith to astonish the Camersham children as though she was pledged to provide a new programme for the entertainment of Royalty. Long distance from a town and a slender purse rendered her efforts for some

time unavailing, but at last an idea occurred to her which was at once feasible and moderate.

"Punch!" she exclaimed with animation one intensely hot day just before the hay-field treat, while she and Miss Vallance were still lingering over the *tête-à-tête* luncheon that was always served in the cosy oak breakfast-room at Thornwood. "Punch, to be sure, Val! Why didn't I think of it before? Half the children in Camersham have never heard of it, and everybody likes Punch. I like it myself."

"My dear!" remarked Miss Vallance, in a tone of mild expostulation. "Do you indeed? People of that sort are always so very untidy; and it's rather immoral altogether, don't you think?"

"What—poor Mr. Punch?" exclaimed Lady Olivia, laughing heartily.

She was standing before the dim old-fashioned pier-glass between the two windows, fastening with some long gold pins the straw hat which she has just put on. Miss Vallance contemplated her ladyship's movements with some consternation.

"Surely you are never going out again in this heat?" she queried, reproachfully.

"Why not? Don't you know that I love the warm weather, and feel more energetic as the thermometer rises?" was the composed reply. "I am going to Camersham, across the fields, to find out, if I can, when the annual fair at Great Coby takes place. I fancy to-morrow is the last day; if so, there is almost sure to be some wandering show—Punch probably—which for a few shillings would come here on the day after to-morrow and play to amuse the children. I shall let Croker ride over to Great Coby to-morrow to make inquiries if I find that the fair is really going on."

Miss Vallance offered no further remonstrance.

"Mind you take an umbrella, dear. The weather is so oppressive that I am sure there must be a storm in the air!" the old lady called out a few minutes later, as she saw Lady Olivia run lightly across the hall with Wrinkles at her heels.

Lady Olivia paused with an impatient exclamation. She remembered that she had left her umbrella at the Rectory by mistake on the evening before; but a large sunshade of scarlet twill lay close at hand where she had carelessly tossed it on coming in from the garden.

"This will do!" she said to herself, as she took it up and hurried away, dreading another recall. "Val is always on the look-out for storms and hurricanes; but the glass is going up, and I don't believe there will be a drop of rain!"

CHAPTER IV.

The shortest way from Thornwood to Camersham lay over the Steepway—an abrupt incline rising suddenly at the back of the old manor-house, which it sheltered snugly from many a north-east gale and winter storm. The Steepway terminated in a high thorny hedge and an awkward stile, dividing it from a long straggling field known by the name of Goodman's Ground.

It took at least ten minutes' less time to reach the village through this field than if one went round by the road; nevertheless it was a route seldom patronised by any one but Lady Olivia. Although there was an undisputed right of way, the Steepway belonged without doubt to the private grounds of the old manor-house; besides, it was nothing short of a scramble to reach the top of the hill, where a stile, erected apparently for the express purpose of preventing people from getting over it, awaited the breathless traveller.

Miss Vallance had a wholesome horror of the Steepway; consequently it was only when Lady Olivia was alone that she was able to avail herself of her favorite short cut to the village. On the present occasion, anxious to make the most of her time, in less than five minutes after leaving the house she found herself on the other side of the Steepway stile, walking leisurely across Goodman's Ground towards Camersham. The afternoon was undeniably sultry, even though the sun had hidden itself behind a rather heavy-looking bank of clouds more suggestive of thunder than Lady Olivia cared to admit. A thunder storm might mean unsettled weather for a week, and consequently failure for the hay-field treat in prospect. With some anxiety she paused and looked around her, noticing the curious stillness that usually precedes a tempest, the low-flying birds above her head, and the extreme heaviness of the atmosphere.

"Val was right for once. We shall have a storm, I am sure, almost directly," she said to herself.

At the same moment a heavy drop of rain as large as a shilling fell with a resounding thud upon the smart scarlet sunshade she was holding. It was followed by half a dozen more, dropping slowly and soundingly, as though in solemn warning of what she might expect later on. Once more Olivia paused and looked behind her, hesitating whether to venture any farther or to return at once to the house. She was just half-way across the field by this time—nearly as far from home as she was from the village. Her white-clad figure, with the large scarlet sunshade above her head, stood out conspicuously against the vivid green of the field and the gray sombre tint of the sky.

A young bull at the far end of Goodman's Ground, which had been lying down peacefully enough till now, felt inclined to investigate this brightly-colored object more closely, and arose slowly to its feet for that purpose, thereby attracting the attention of Wrinkles, who immediately dashed off wildly to meet it, retreating with terrified whelps towards his mistress as he found himself pursued by an animal much larger than himself, with a pair of terrific horns and a wildly-lashing tail.

As Lady Olivia took up the panting dog in her arms and turned to fly, some words of warning uttered by Philip Grantley but a day or two before flashed across her mind with awful distinctness.

"Will you be careful not to walk to the village through Goodman's Ground for the next few days, Lady Olivia? I shall be obliged to let the