

HIS OWN AT LAST.

CHAPTER III.—(CONTINUED.)

My wish is easy of gratification. Bobby holds the ladder, and I climb cautiously, rung by rung. Having reached the summit I sit at ease, with my legs loosely dangling. There is no broken glass, there are no painful bottoms of bottles to disturb my ruminant quiet. The air bites a little, but I am warmly clad, and young Bobby sits beside me, whistling and kicking the bricks with his heels. There is the indistinctness of fine weather over the chain of low round hills that bound our horizon, giving them a dignity that, on clearer days, they lack. As I sit, many small and pleasant noises visit my ears, sometimes distinct, sometimes mixed together: the brook's noise, as it runs, quick and brown, between the flat, dry March fields; the gray geese's noise, as they screech all together from the farmyard, the church-bells' noise, as they ring out from the distant town, whose roofs and eaves are shining and glinting in the morningsun.

"Do you hear the bells?" says I. "Some one has been married this morning."

"Do not you wish it was you?" asks Bobby with a brotherly grin.

"I should not mind," reply I, picking out a morsel of mortar with my finger and thumb. "It is about time for one of us to move off, is it not? And Barbara has made such a signal failure to hide, that I think it is but fair that I should try my little possible."

"All I ask of you is," says Bobby gravely, "not to take a fellow who has not got any shooting."

"I will make it a *sine qua non*," I answer, seriously.

A louder screech than ever from the geese accompanied with wing-flappings. How unanimous they are! There is not a voice wanting.

"I wonder how long Sir Roger will stay?" I say, presently.

"What connection of ideas made you think of him?" asks Bobby, curiously.

"Do you suppose that he has any shooting?"

"I break into a laugh.

"I do not know, I am sure. I do not think it matters much whether he has or not."

"I dare say that there are a good many women—old ones, you know—who would take him, old as he is," says Bobby, with liberality.

"I dare say," I answer. I do not know I am not old, but I am not sure that I would not rather marry him than be an old maid."

A pause. Again I laugh—this time a laugh of recollection.

"What a fool you did look last night!" I say, with sisterly candor, "when you put your head round the school-room door, and found that you had been witty about him to his face!"

Bobby reddens and aims a bit of mortar at a round-eyed robin that has perched near us.

"At all events, I did not call him a beast."

"Well, never mind; do not get angry. What did it matter? I say, comfortably."

"You did not mention his name. How could he tell that he was our benefactor? He did not even know that he was to be?"

"I begin to have misgivings about it myself."

"I cannot say that I see much signs of his putting his hands into his breeches-pocket," says Bobby, vulgarly.

There is a click of a lifted latch. We both look in the direction whence come the sound. He of whom we speak is entering the garden by a distant door.

"Get down, Bobby," cry I, hurriedly, "and help me down. Make haste—quick! I would not have him find me perched up here for weeks."

Bobby gets down as nimbly as a monkey. I prepare to do likewise.

"Hold it steady!" I cry, nervously, and, so saying, begin to turn round and to stretch out one leg, with the intention of making a graceful descent backward.

"Stop!" cries Bobby from the bottom, with a diabolical chuckle. "I think you observed just now that I looked a fool last night; perhaps you will not mind trying how it feels!"

So saying, he seizes the ladder—a light and short one—and makes off with it. I cry, "Bobby! Bobby!" suppressedly, several times, but I need hardly say that my appeal is addressed to deaf ears. I remain sitting on the wall-top, trying to look as if I did not mind, while grave misgivings possess my soul as to the extent of strong boot and ankle that my unusual situation leaves visible. Once the desperate idea of jumping presents itself to my mind, but the ground looks so distant, and the height so great, that my heart fails me.

From my watch-tower I trace the progress of Sir Roger between the fruit-trees. As yet, he has not seen me. Perhaps he will turn into another walk, and leave the garden by an opposite door, I remaining undiscovered. No! he is coming toward me. He is walking slowly along, a cigar in his mouth, and his eyes on the ground, evidently in deep meditation. Perhaps he will pass me without looking up. Nearer and nearer he comes; I hold my breath and sit as still as a stone, when, as ill-luck will have it, just as he is approaching quite close to me, utterly innocent of my proximity, a nasty, teasing tickle visits my nose, and I sneeze loudly and irrepressibly. Atcha! atcha! He starts, and, not perceiving at first whence comes the unexpected sound, looks about him in a bewildered way. Then his eyes turn toward the wall. He looks and fears are alike at an end. I am discovered. Like Angelina, I—

—stand confessed.

A maid in all my charms.

"How—on—earth—did you get up there?" he asks, in an accent of slow and marked astonishment, not unmixed with admiration.

As he speaks, he throws away his cigar, and takes his hat off.

"How on earth am I to get down again? Is more to the purpose," I answer, bluntly.

"I could not have believed that anything but a cat could have been so agile," he says, beginning to laugh. "Would you mind telling me how did you get up?"

"By the ladder," reply I, laconically, red-dening, and, under the influence of that same unsupportable doubt concerning my ankles, trying to tuck away my legs under me, a manoeuvre which all but succeeds in toppling me over.

"The ladder!" (looking round). "Are you quite sure? Then where has it disappeared to?"

"I said something that vexed Bobby," reply I, driven to the humiliating explanation, "and he went off with it. Never mind! once I am down, I will be even with him!"

He looks entertained.

"What will you do? What will you say? Will you make use of the same excellently terse expression that you applied to me last night?"

"I should not wonder," reply I, bursting out into uncomfortable laughter; "but it is no use talking of what I shall do when I am down: I am not down yet; I wish I were."

"It is no great distance from the ground," he says, coming nearer the wall, standing close to where the apricot is showering down her white and pink petals. "Are you afraid to jump? Surely not! Try! If you will, I will promise that you shall come to no hurt."

"But supposing that I knock you down?" says I, doubtfully. "I really am a good weight—heavier than you would think to look at me—and, coming from such height, I shall come with great force."

He smiles.

"I am willing to risk it; if you do not knock me down, I can but get up again."

I require no warmer invitation. With arms extended, like the sails of a windmill, I hurl myself into the embrace of Sir Roger Tempest.

The next moment I am standing beside him on the gravel walk, red and breathless, but safe.

"I hope I did not hurt you much," I say, with concern, turning toward him to make my acknowledgments, "but I really am very much obliged to you; I believe that, if you had not come by, I should have been left there till bed-time."

"It must have been a very unpleasant speech that you made to deserve so severe a punishment," he says, looking back at me with a kindly and amused curiosity.

I do not gratify his inquisitiveness.

"It was something not quite polite," I answer, shortly.

We walk on in silence, side by side. My temper is ruffled. I am planning five distinct and lengthy vengeance against Bobby.

"I dare say," says my companion, presently, "that you are wondering what brought me in here now—what attraction a kitchen-garden could have for me, at a time of year when not the most sanguine mind could expect to find anything good to eat in it."

"At least, it is sheltered," I answer, shivering, thrusting my hands a little farther into the warm depths of my muff.

"I was thinking of old days," he says, with a hazy, wistful smile. "Ah! you have not come to the time of life for doing that yet. Do you know, I have not been here since your father and I were lads of eleven and twelve together?"

"You were eleven and he was twelve, I am sure," says I, emphatically.

"Why?"

"You look so much younger than he," I answer, looking frankly and unembarrassedly up into his face.

"Do I?" (with a pleased smile). "It is clear, then, that one cannot judge of one's self; on the rare occasions when I look in the glass it seems to me that, in the course of the last five years, I have grown into a very old fogey."

"He looks as if he had been so much oftener vexed, and so much seldomer pleased than you do," continue I, mentally comparing the smooth though weather-beaten benignity of the straight-cut features beside me, with the austere and frown-puckered gravity of my father's.

"Does he?" he answers, with an air of half surprised interest, as if the subject had never struck him at that light before. "Poor fellow! I am sorry if it is so. Ah, you see—with a smile—"he has six more reasons for wrinkles than I have."

"You mean us, I suppose," I answer, matter-of-factly. "As to that, I think he draws quite as many wrinkles on our faces as we do on his." Then, rather ashamed of my over-candor, I add, with hurried bluntness, "You have never been married, I suppose?"

He half turns away his head.

"No—not yet! I have not yet had that good fortune."

I am inwardly amused at the power of his denial. Surely, surely he might say in the words of Lancelot:

Had I chosen to wed,

I had been wedded earlier, sweet Elaine.

"And you?" he asks, turning with an accent of playfulness toward me.

"Not yet," I answer, laughing, "and most likely I shall have to answer 'not yet' to the question, as often as it is put to me, till the end of the chapter."

"Why so?"

I shrug my shoulders.

"In moments of depression it strikes Barbara and me, that we and Tou-Tou shall end by being three old cats together."

"Are you so anxious to be married?" he asks, with an air of wonder, "in such a hurry to leave so happy a home?"

"Every one knows best where his own shoe pinches," I answer, veraciously. "I am afraid it does not sound very lady-like, but, since you ask me the question, I am rather anxious. Barbara is not; I am."

A shade of I cannot exactly say what emotion—it looks like disappointment, but surely it cannot be that—passes across the sunshine of his face.

"All my plans hinge on my marrying," I continue, feeling drawn, I do not know how or why, into confidential communication to this almost total stranger, "and, what is more on my marrying a rich man."

"And what are your plans?" he asks, with an air of benevolent interest, but that unexplained shade is still there.

"Their name is Legion," I answer; "you will be very tired before I get to the end of them."

"Try me."

"Firstly then," says I, narratively, "my husband must have a great deal of interest in several professions—the army, the navy, the bar—as to give the boys a helping hand; then he must have some shooting—good

shooting for them; for them all, that is, except Bobby! never shall he fire a gun in my preserves."

My mind again wanders away to my vengeance, and I break off.

"Well!"

"He must also keep two or three horses for them to hunt: 'Algy' loves hunting, but he hardly ever gets a day. He is so big, poor dear old boy, that nobody ever gives him a mount—"

"Yes?"

"Well, then, I should like to be able to have some nice parties—dancing and theatricals, and that sort of thing, for Barbara—father will never hardly let us have a soul here—and to buy some pretty dresses to set off her beauty—"

"Yes?"

"And then I should like to have a nice, large, cheerful house, where mother could come and stay with me, for two or three months at a time, and get clear away from the worries of housekeeping and—"

"the tyranny of father, I am about to add, but pull myself up and substitute lamely and stammeringly, 'and—other things.'"

"Anything else?"

"I should not at all mind a donkey carriage for Tou-Tou, but I shall not insist upon that."

He is smiling broadly now. The shade has fled away, and only sunshine remains.

"And what for yourself? You seem to have forgotten yourself!"

"For myself!" I echo, in surprise; "I have been telling you—you cannot have been listening—all these things are for myself."

Again he has turned his face half away.

"I hope you will get your wish," he says, shortly and yet heartily.

I laugh. "That is so probable, is not it? I am so likely to fall in with a rich young man of weak intellect who is willing to marry the whole six of us, for that is what he would have to do, and so I should explain to him."

Sir Roger is looking at me again with an odd smile—not disagreeable in any way—not at all hold-cheap, or as if he were sneering at me for a simpleton, but merely odd.

"And you think," he says, "that when he hears what is expected of him he will withdraw?"

Again I laugh heartily, and rather loudly, for the idea tickles me, and, in a large family, one gets into the habit of raising one's voice, else one is not heard.

"I am so sadly sure that he will never come forward, that I have never taken the trouble to speculate as to whether, if he did, my greediness would make him retire again."

No answer.

"Now that I come to think of it, though," continue I, after a pause, "I have no manner of doubt that he would."

Apparently Sir Roger is tired of the subject of my future prospects, for he drops it. We have left the kitchen-garden—have passed through the flower-garden—have reached the hall-door. I am irresolutely walking up the stone steps that mount to it, not being able to make up my mind as to whether or no I should make some sort of farewell observation to my companion, when his voice follows me. It seems to me to have a dissuasive inflection.

"Are you going in?"

"Well, yes," I answer, uncertainly, "I suppose so."

He looks at his watch.

"It is quite early yet—not near luncheon time—would it bore you very much to take a turn in the park? I think (with a smile) 'that you are quite honest enough to say so if it would; or, if you did not, I should read it on your face.'"

"Would you?" says I, a little piqued. "I do not think you would: I assure you that my face can tell stories, at a pinch, as well as its neighbor."

"Well, would it bore you?"

"Not at all! not at all!" reply I, briskly beginning to descend again; "but one thing is very certain, and that is that it will bore you."

"Why should it?"

"If I say what I was going to say, you will think that it is on purpose to be contradicted," I answer, unlatching the gate in the fence, and entering the park.

"And if I do, much you will mind," he answers, smiling.

"Well, then," says I, candidly, looking down at my feet as they trip quickly along through the limp winter grass, "there is no use blinking the fact that I have no conversation—none of us have. We can gabble away among ourselves like a lot of young rooks about all sorts of silly home jokes, that nobody but us would see any fun in; but when it comes to real talk—"

I pause expressively.

"I do not care for real talk," he says, looking amused; "I like gabble far, far better. I wish you would gabble a little now."

But the request naturally ties my tongue tight up.

"This is the tree that they planted when father was born," I say presently, in a stiff, cicerone manner, pointing to a straight and vigorous young oak, which is lifting its branchy head, and the fine net-work of its brown twigs, to the cold, pale sky.

Sir Roger leans his arm on the top of the palms that surround the tree.

"Ah! eight-and-forty years ago! eight-and-forty years ago!" he repeats to himself, with musing slowness. "Hard upon half a century."

I turn over in my mind whether I should do well to make some observation of a trite and copy-book nature on the much greater duration of trees than men, but, reflecting that the application of the remark may be painful to a person so elderly as the gentleman beside me, I abstain. However, he does something of the kind himself.

"To think that it should be such a stripling," he says, looking with a half-pensive smile at the straight young trunk, "hardly out of the petticoat age, and yet—he and I—such a couple of old wrecks."

It never occurs to me that it would be polite, and even natural, to contradict him. Why should not he call himself an old wreck, if it amuses him? I suppose he only means to express a gentleman decidedly in the decline of life, which, in my eyes, he is; so I say kindly and acquiescingly:

"Yes, it is rather hard, is it not?"

"Try one—forty-two—yes, forty-two years since I first saw him," he continues,

reflectively, "running about in short, stiff, white petticoats and bare legs, and going bawling to his mother, because he tumbled up those steps to the hall-door, and cut his nose open."

I lift my face out of my muff, in which, for the sake of warmth, I have been hiding it, and opening my mouth, give vent to a hearty and undisturbed roar of laughter.

"Cut his nose open!" repeat I, indistinctly.

"How pleased he must have been, and what sort of a nose was it? already hooked? It never could have been the conventional button, that I am sure of; yours was, I dare say, but his—never. Good Heavens!" (with a sudden change of tone, and disappearance of mirth). "here he is! Come to look for you, no doubt! I—I—think I may go now, may not I?"

"Go!" repeats he, looking at me with unfeigned wonder. "Why? It is more likely you that he has missed, you, who are doubtless his daily companion."

"Not quite daily," I answer, with a fine shade of irony, which, by reason of his small acquaintance with me, is lost on my friend.

"Two, you know, is company, and three none. Yes, if you do not mind, I think it must be getting near luncheon-time. I will go."

So I disappear through the dry, knotted tussocks of the park grass.

CHAPTER IV.

"Friends, Romans, and countrymen!" say I, on that same afternoon, strutting into the school-room, with my left hand thrust oratorically into the breast of my frock, and my right loftily waving, "I wish to collect your suffrages on a certain subject. Tell me," sitting down on a hard chair, and suddenly declining into a familiar and colloquial tone, "have you seen any signs of derangement in father lately?"

"None more than usual," answers Algy, sarcastically, lifting his pretty, disdainful nose out of his novel. "If, as the Eton Latin Grammar says, *Ira* is a *brevis furor*, you will agree with me that he is pretty often out of his mind, in fact, a good deal oftener than he is in it."

"No, but really?"

"Of course not. What do you mean?"

"Put down all your books!" say I, impressively. "Listen attentively. Bobby, stop seat-sawing that chair, it makes me feel dizzy sick. Ah! my young friend, you will rue the day when you kept me sitting on the top of that wall—"

I break off.

"Go on! go on!" in five different voices of impatience.

"Well, then, father has sent a message by mother to the effect that I am to dine with them to-night—I, if you please—I—I—you must own" (lengthening my neck as I speak and throwing up my untidy flax head) "that sweet Nancies are looking up in the world."

A silence of stupefaction falls on the assembly. After a pause:

"YOU?"

"Yes, I!"

"And how do you account for it?"

"I believe," reply I, smirking, "that our future benefactor—no! I really must give up calling him that, or I shall come out with it to his face, as Bobby did last night. Well, then, Sir Roger asked me why I did not appear yesterday. I suppose that he thought I looked so very green up, that they must be keeping me in pinafores for force."

Algy has risen. He is coming towards me. He has pulled me off my chair. He has taken me by the shoulders, and is turning me round to face the others.

"Allow me," he says, bowing, and making me bow too, "to introduce you to the future legatee—Barbara, my child, you and I are nowhere. This depraved old man has clear, a long career of beggary has utterly vitiated his taste. To-morrow he will probably be clamoring for Tou-Tou's company."

"Brat!" says Barbara, laughing, "where has the analogy between me and the man who pulled up the window in the train for the old woman gone to?"

"Mother said I was to look as nice as I could," say I, casting a rueful glance at the tea-board, at the large plum-leaf, at the preparations for temperate conviviality. I have sat down on the threadbare blue-and-red hearth-rug, and am shading my face with a pair of cold pink hands, from the clear, gloomy blaze. "What am I to wear?" I say, gloomily. "None of my frocks are ironed, and there is no time now. I shall look as if I came out of a dirty clothes-basket! Barbara, dear, will you lend me your blue sash? Last time I wore mine the Brat upset the gum-bottle over my ends."

"Let us each have the melancholy pleasure of contributing something toward the decking of our victim," says Algy, with a grin; "hark! my mess-jacket!"

"Have as many beads as you can about you," puts in Bobby. "Begums always have plenty of beads."

A little pause, while the shifting flame-light makes pictures of it on the deep-bodied tea pot's sides, and throws shadowy profiles of us on the wall.

"Mother said, too, that I was to try and not say any of my unlucky things," I remark presently.

"Do not tell him," says Bobby, ill-naturedly, "as you told poor Captain Saunders the other day that 'they always put the fool of the family into the army.'"

"I did not say so of myself," cry I, angrily. "I only told him as a quotation."

"Abstain from quotations, then," retorts Bobby, dryly; "for you know in conversation one does not see the inverted commas."

"What shall I talk about?" say I, dropping my shielding hand into my lap, and letting the full fire-warmth blaze on eyes, nose, and cheeks. "Barbara, what did you talk about?"

"Whatever I talked about," replies Barbara, gayly, "they clearly were not successful topics, so I will not reveal what they were."

Barbara is standing by the tea-table, thin and willowly, a tea-caddy in one hand, and a spoon in the other, ladling tea into the deep-bodied pot—a spoonful for each person and one for the pot.

"I will draw you up a list of subjects to be avoided," says Algy, drawing his chair to the table, and pulling a pencil out of his waist-coat pocket. "Here, Tou-Tou, tear a leaf out of your copy-book—imprimis, old age."

"You are wrong there," cry I, triumphant, "quite wrong; he is rather fond of talk-

ing of his age, harps upon it a good deal. He said to-day that he was an old wreck!"

"Of course he meant you to contradict him!" says Bobby, cackling; "and, from the little I know of you, I am morally certain that you did not—did you, new?"

"Well, no," reply I, rather crestfallen; "I certainly did not. I would, though, in a minute, if I had thought that he wanted it."

"I wish," says Barbara, shutting the caddy with a snap, "that Providence had willed to send the dear old fellow into the world twenty years later than he did. In that case I should not at all have minded trying to be a comfort to him."

"He must have been very good-looking, must not he?" say I, pensively, staring at the red fire-caverns. "Very—before his hair turned gray. I wonder what color it was?"

Visions of gold-yellow, of sun-shiny brown, of warm chestnut locks, travel in succession before my mind's eye, and try in turn to adjust themselves to the good and goodly weather-worn face and wide blue eyes of my new old friend.

"It is so nice and curly even now," I go on, "twice as curly as Algy's."

"Tongs," replies Algy, with short contempt, looking up from his list of prohibitions.

"Very good looking!" repeat I, dogmatically, entirely ignoring the last suggestion.

"Perhaps when this planet was young," retorts he, with the superb impertinence of twenty.

"You talk as if he were eighty years old," cry I, with an unaccountably personal feeling of annoyance. "He is only forty-seven!"

"Only forty-seven!"

And they all laugh.

"Well,