

PLAYING THE GYPSY.

Four girls were sitting together in the early twilight. There was nothing particularly remarkable in the fact, perhaps, that I should record it here; but seldom are four such faces grouped in one picture, and framed by the shadows from the dark forest. They had been nutting, but it was too early in the season for the fruit they desired, and their baskets were filled with beautiful moss of a dozen different varieties. Tired and languid, they were resting beside the brook before beginning their homeward walk, and just as they look now we will draw their portraits.

Bell Landon, the tallest, largest, and queenliest of the quartette, could not, had she made it her especial study for a week, have chosen a more picturesque attire or wildly graceful attitude. She was partly sitting and partly reclining on the soft green sward, one arm thrown over the mossy covered trunk of a fallen tree. A crimson crape shawl, wound artistically around her shoulders and carelessly tied, trailed its long, silken fringe on the grass. Her face was a perfect oval, of a delicate creamy tint. Her eyes were large and dark, and the rich color in her cheeks proclaimed her perfect health. A mass of dark, wavy hair floated over her shoulders, which, at morning, lay in glossy rolls, puffs and crimps, but which had now escaped from its fastenings, and revolved in freedom. Had her dress been a trifle less stylish, of classic white instead of plain black, and the tiny stream beside which they waited somewhat wider, deeper and more turbulent, she might have represented a beautiful water-nymph in the eyes of some romantic wanderer, if he could have ignored the fact that water-nymphs never travel with Saratoga trunks; or have extensive wardrobes in their beautiful caves 'neath the dark blue sea.

The next, Minna Warren, was a beauty of precisely the opposite type. Such large blue eyes and lovely golden hair would have rendered her attractive had she possessed no other charms; but, united with these, was a complexion of the clearest white. Just then she looked dreamy, with her robe of green reminding her friend Kate of a beautiful water-lily.

The other faces were not remarkable for beauty, unless it were in the expressions. Kate Wilber's always wore a thoughtful look, Lily Ells, the pet and plaything of the party, was so changeable in temper and mood, that she never looked twice alike.

If you are sufficiently rested, let us go home, said Kate, rising as she spoke; and, taking up her basket and hat, she led the way, the others following almost in silence.

They had not been thus quiet all day! On the contrary, they made the old woods ring with gushes of girlish laughter, snatches of songs, and recitations from the poets. They had thoroughly enjoyed it; but, either wearied by the vehemence of their sports or by a natural reaction, they had become strangely silent. The tempting supper which they found, on their return, greatly refreshed them, and restored their wonted spirits; and they gathered in the sitting-room for their evening's enjoyment with as much interest in the matter as though they had been separated for a month.

It was perfectly natural for Bell Landon to appropriate the best of everything; therefore she seated herself, with a charming air of "nonchalance," in the large arm-chair, placing her feet on an ottoman, and, after arranging her draperies, leaned her head back, saying:

Oh! would that something would happen. Even a small sized earthquake would be welcome—anything to break this monotony.

Bell, you are unreasonable, responded Minna; we have had an unusual gay day, and here you are, wickedly wishing that the earth would open and swallow us up, just for your diversion! I'm shocked at your selfishness. I wouldn't be surprised, if girls, if she were to ask us to turn ballet-dancer, and get up a small entertainment for her.

Miss Landon slightly elevated her eyebrows and smiled. Her slightest movements expressed more than the most elaborately constructed sentences of many people, and seemed to be a favorite way of hers in expressing her feelings, as she had become quite noted among her friends for the grace and appropriateness of her gestures.

At this moment, their hostess, Mrs. Smith appeared at the door, holding up a letter. She seldom used more words than were absolutely necessary, so she only gave a nod towards the occupant of the large rocker, and said,—For you.

Bell showed astonishing alacrity in possessing herself of the missive, and, in consideration of the intimacy existing between herself and the other girls, opened the letter; and, without a word of apology, began its perusal. The others drew nearer the grate on which a wood fire was crackling in a sociable sort of way, and talked in low tones.

A quarter of an hour passed, when Minna, turning her head, caught a glimpse of Bell's face. She had dropped the letter in her lap, and, with her elbows resting on the arms of the chair, had covered her face with her fair hands. The others glanced in the same direction, then looked at each other, fearing that she had received ill-tidings, and that their frivolous talk had perhaps pained her. After a few moments of unbroken silence Minna said:

"Ma belle" Bella, why so sad? If you have received bad news, let us sympathize with you.

Thus interrogated, Bell raised her head; her eyes, instead of being suffused with tears were sparkling with merriment, and the expression of her face betokened mischief. A sigh of relief passed around, beginning with Minna, and faithfully echoed by the others.

I see in prospect something wherein to enliven our drooping spirits, the very anticipation of which cheers me, said Bell, in reply.

Good! let us have your plan, remarked Lily; I'm nearly all ears now.

Oh, it can scarcely be called a plan yet because it will need the skill and tact of us all to perfect the arrangements, provided it meets with your approval.

Well, how much longer are we to be kept in suspense? inquired Kate. My mind is prepared for anything from a select musical soiree to a war-dance, by torch light, on Mrs. Smith's artificial mound in the garden, in full dress of paint and feathers. Come Bell, be gracious; appoint some day and hour, and we will gather at your bidding, to listen with an attention only equalled by admiration of the plan that has kept your brain busy for the last half-hour.

I believe, Kate, interrupted Lily, that you quoted that from some unpublished manuscript story of yours; it sounds so like you.

Have done, girls, do, began Minna, beseechingly; Bell is just waiting for an opportunity to speak.

Thus adjured, they remained silent while Bell, leaning back in the depths of the capacious chair, began:—

You've heard me speak of my brother Gerald?

Oh! it is a story? interrupted Lily, so innocently that they could not forbear laughing, while they replied to Bell's question by inclining their heads.

Perhaps their laughing was partly caused by the absurdity of the question itself, for she was always relating some wonderful achievement or daring deed of her gifted brother Gerald's.

Well, she continued, taking no notice of Lily's desire to know in advance to what class her communication could properly be said to belong, he has a friend who is coming to Lawton on business; and as Gerald is needing rest and recreation, and as we have not seen each other for four years, he proposes to accompany him. Gerald writes that my letters, since I've been here, have decided him to come. He wishes to see the scenery, the excellent Mrs. Smith, whose unexceptionable light bread and puddings I've extolled, and at last, but by no means least, my three young friends, which, of course means you.

Is that all? queried Lily; and then, fearing that she had spoken slightly of such important news, she added, hastily, all that you were going to tell, I mean—the funny plan you spoke of.

Miss Bell proceeded:—

Now you've no idea girls, how much I've changed in four years. I was fifteen then—such an awkward age, you know—tall, bony, run mostly to collar-bones, and shoulder-blades, sallow, and wore my hair, which by the way, was stiff and bristling, short on my neck. Without exhibiting any astonishing amount of personal vanity, I can safely assure you that I've greatly improved in that time. My mental acquirements, as well as my personal attractions, at that time were few and small, and I do hope that Gerald will be as greatly astonished as I think he ought, all things considered.

Oh, he will! broke in Lily, excitedly. Never you fear. But what's the plan?

Without heeding this second interruption, Bell placidly continued:—

Of course, not having seen a picture of me since then, he would not easily recognize me, and I've a notion that it would be fine to play some one else awhile.

How? exclaimed three eager voices.

Mr. Leydon, the gentleman Gerald is to accompany, is to stop at Marshville, which, you know, is twenty miles south of us. Five miles north of Marshville is a large forest at the edge of which is a flag station. I propose that we, on that day that they expect to come here, go as far as that forest to meet them. We can go down on the ten o'clock express, picnic in the grove, signal the three o'clock passenger train, and return in company with them. But the very cream of the plan is yet to come; we must go in disguise, of course, and I propose that we transform ourselves into four handsome gypsies.

Certainly, responded Kate, with a comical expression. If I can be transformed into any kind of a beauty, I am more than anxious to have the trial made. Had you said Camanche squaw, with that adjective before it, I should have been eager. You all know how to pity me now, as I have unveiled my innermost longings, also given you a glimpse of my woe.

Like the followers of the prophet in The Fire Worshippers, I fear we cannot stand the sight. Veil your anguish, I beseech you for I'm anxious to know how we are to obtain appropriate costumes, in this benighted region, replied Minna, mockingly.

Oh, I think by doing some sewing, we can contrive some suitable garments. Minna, will have to wear my large brown sundown tied over your ears, said Kate.

Why, I'd like to know? Its ugliest hat in the whole collection, asked Minna laughing.

To conceal your hair, of course, retorted Bell. Who ever heard of a gypsy with yellow hair? Fortunately mine is of the right hue, and I shall wear it floating in the breeze, or, more plainly, streaming down my back.

Yes, ma'am, said Minna, with a charming assumed air of meekness; and as all gypsy tribes have a queen, I suppose you will personate that mythical individual.

With pleasure; and as I am the tallest, I would do the best. I tell you, girls, 'twill be almost as good as the private theatricals at Madame Pomfon's, when we are all so charmingly finished. But let us go to bed; I'm sure I never felt more fatigued in my life. Forest roaming is nice, very—but so wearing!

Chapter II.

Bell, with whom of the four girls you are already the most acquainted, was an orphan and had passed the larger part of the four years previous to the opening of our story at a fashionable city seminary in Kentucky. Minna Warren was her room-mate there. Kate had graduated the year previous, and Lily expected to return for another year after their summer roaming. Fast friends were they, and they had, for three summers, been trying to spend the heated term together; but once Kate's mother was ill; another time a fashionable aunt of Bell's insisted on her company to the White Mountains; but at this, the last attempt, the fates were propitious and relatives agreeable, and they had sought out a quiet boarding place where the scenery was delightful, and the ways of the people primitive in the extreme.

They had explored every cave, small and large; visited every farmhouse, and made an expedition to the famous Mammoth Cave under the care of Mr. and Mrs. Smith, who, though born and reared in Kentucky, had never been before to that wonderful work of the Creator's hand, and were only persuaded into the step now by the arguments of the dashing Kate, who protested that she knew something awful would happen to them if they went alone, drawing a fearful picture of the impropriety of their taking such a step without a protector or a pair of them.

But they had, as Minna said, done everything so thoroughly, that they were getting tired of country life. They were quite ready for any wild frolic, so Bell's proposition was received with acclamations of delight.

I do hope, said Lily, the next morning, that something romantic will happen; don't you all? It will seem so tame and commonplace if there doesn't.

Yes, responded Kate, it is such an every day affair to go off roaming, as Bohemians, that I think we must coax circumstances a little, and make something happen; besides, I'm nearly out of material for the continuation of my serial story, and I should be very thankful for an increase of capital. What would suit you best, Lily? To fall off the train, and have one of the beleaguered gents jump after you, and so break some impor-

tant part of his physical frame—no matter whether his head or his heels, so the "de-nouement" is striking, supposing, of course, that the train has, in the meantime, been stopped, and the uninjured passengers are gazing placidly from the windows?

There, Kate, stop now, and take breath before starting your train afresh. I'll never sigh for a vivid imagination again, after seeing what tricks yours plays you. The warning is awful. I'll try to remember it.

Good! little Lil. I didn't suppose you had so much pluck, returned Kate, good-naturedly. But there would be no life about this party of people if I didn't stir them up sometimes. By the way, Bell, when are you going to announce yourself, and introduce yourself, and introduce your friends to that paragon brother of yours? When the train reaches the little station shall we leave it or shall we follow them to the gate before disclosing the real facts of the case.

Not at all! Let them discover our secret the best way they can. When the train stops they will step off on the platform, and we on the opposite side. While they are inquiring the way, and walking leisurely around the road, we will strike into the forest and come by that path we followed yesterday. That will give us time to reach the house, and I can, by your help, get dressed and ready to play the devoted and delighted sister by the time Sir Gerald arrives, who, if he is as deliberate in his movements as he used to be, will be a good half hour or more in sauntering here.

Girls, said Minna, issuing from the doorway, and joining the three on the piazza, I've been telling Mrs. Smith about our trip, and she says it is a kind of a wild goose chase, but she reckons that we'll get a mighty sight of fun, and so on, and if she kin do anything short of telling a downright lie to help us, she will, for she was young once herself.

I'm thankful that she was, if that fact will lead her to remember the golden rule in our case, remarked Kate, drily.

A wonderful overhauling of garments took place during the next three days. Kate, by virtue of having visited once a first-class gypsy camp, was elected umpire, and some marvelous costumes were arranged as the result of their labors. The stitches were long and few, but the general effect very picturesque. Bell had a crimson wool wrapper, which was turned up at the bottom; over this she looped an old black alpaca skirt, trimming the same with blue ribbon. A set of silver jewelry, borrowed of Mrs. Smith, and a white scarf, a black-riding hat, ornamented with a scarlet wing and black gauze veil, completed her attire, and gave her the fast dashing look she desired; Minna wore dark blue, with black trimmings, and had her face tinged with some harmless dark liquid. The sundown was tied over her golden locks, and she was pronounced a charming gypsy. Kate's costume was decidedly "outré" but she declared that she was the most appropriately dressed of any of them.

I only hope, she remarked, that neither of the gents will be very observing in minute matters, and that Bell can be persuaded to go without a point-lace collar around her neck, and a pair of French kids on her hands. As for me, I've borrowed a silk bandana that Mrs. Smith has bought for the excellent Mr. Smith, and as the prevailing colors are crimson and orange, and the palm leaves large and striking, I fancy that it will be exactly the thing loosely knotted around my neck.

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

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