

## **X. Sporting Reflections**

I have now told you (I presume) how I became whimsical, and I fear it would please Mary not at all. But speaking of her, and, as the cat's light keeps me in a ruminating mood, suppose, instead of returning Mary to her lover by means of the letter, I had presented a certain clubman to her consideration? Certainly no such whimsical idea crossed my mind when I dropped the letter, but between you and me and my night-socks, which have all this time been airing by the fire because I am subject to cold feet, I have sometimes toyed with it since.

Why did I not think of this in time? Was it because I must ever remain true to the unattainable she?

I am reminded of a passage in the life of a sweet lady, a friend of mine, whose daughter was on the eve of marriage, when suddenly her lover died. It then became pitiful to watch that trembling old face trying to point the way of courage to the young one. In time, however, there came another youth, as true, I dare say, as the first, but not so well known to me, and I shrugged my shoulders cynically to see my old friend once more a matchmaker. She took him to her heart and boasted of him; like one made young herself by the great event, she joyously dressed her pale daughter in her bridal gown, and, with smiles upon her face, she cast rice after the departing carriage. But soon after it had gone, I chanced upon her in her room, and she was on her knees in tears before the spirit of the dead lover. "Forgive me," she besought him, "for I am old, and life is gray to friendless girls." The pardon she wanted was for pretending to her daughter that women should act thus.

I am sure she felt herself soiled.

But men are of a coarser clay. At least I am, and nearly twenty years had elapsed, and here was I burdened under a load of affection, like a sack of returned love-letters, with no lap into which to dump them.

"They were all written to another woman, ma'am, and yet I am in hopes that you will find something in them about yourself." It would have sounded oddly to Mary, but life is gray to friendless girls, and something might have come of it.

On the other hand, it would have brought her for ever out of the wood of the little hut, and I had but to drop the letter to send them both back there. The easiness of it tempted me.

Besides, she would tire of me when I was really known to her. They all do, you see.

And, after all, why should he lose his laugh because I had lost my smile?

And then, again, the whole thing was merely a whimsical idea.

I dropped the letter, and shouldered my burden.