

XLIII. HE TAKES A DELIGHTFUL RAMBLE INTO THE COUNTRY; AND MAKES THE ACQUAINTANCE OF THREE ADORABLE CHARMERS

Who that dwells in America has not heard of the bright fields and green hedges of England, and longed to behold them? Even so had it been with me; and now that I was actually in England, I resolved not to go away without having a good, long look at the open fields.

On a Sunday morning I started, with a lunch in my pocket. It was a beautiful day in July; the air was sweet with the breath of buds and flowers, and there was a green splendor in the landscape that ravished me. Soon I gained an elevation commanding a wide sweep of view; and meadow and mead, and woodland and hedge, were all around me.

Ay, ay! this was old England, indeed! I had found it at last--there it was in the country! Hovering over the scene was a soft, dewy air, that seemed faintly tinged with the green of the grass; and I thought, as I breathed my breath, that perhaps I might be inhaling the very particles once respired by Rosamond the Fair.

On I trudged along the London road--smooth as an entry floor--and every white cottage I passed, embosomed in honeysuckles, seemed alive in the landscape.

But the day wore on; and at length the sun grew hot; and the long road

became dusty. I thought that some shady place, in some shady field, would be very pleasant to repose in. So, coming to a charming little dale, undulating down to a hollow, arched over with foliage, I crossed over toward it; but paused by the road-side at a frightful announcement, nailed against an old tree, used as a gate-post--

"man-traps and spring-guns!"

In America I had never heard of the like. What could it mean? They were not surely cannibals, that dwelt down in that beautiful little dale, and lived by catching men, like weasels and beavers in Canada!

"A man-trap!" It must be so. The announcement could bear but one meaning--that there was something near by, intended to catch human beings; some species of mechanism, that would suddenly fasten upon the unwary rover, and hold him by the leg like a dog; or, perhaps, devour him on the spot.

Incredible! In a Christian land, too! Did that sweet lady, Queen Victoria, permit such diabolical practices? Had her gracious majesty ever passed by this way, and seen the announcement?

And who put it there?

The proprietor, probably.

And what right had he to do so?

Why, he owned the soil.

And where are his title-deeds?

In his strong-box, I suppose.

Thus I stood wrapt in cogitations.

You are a pretty fellow, Wellingborough, thought I to myself; you are a mighty traveler, indeed:--stopped on your travels by a man-trap! Do you think Mungo Park was so served in Africa? Do you think Ledyard was so entreated in Siberia? Upon my word, you will go home not very much wiser than when you set out; and the only excuse you can give, for not having seen more sights, will be man-traps--mantraps, my masters! that frightened you!

And then, in my indignation, I fell back upon first principles. What right has this man to the soil he thus guards with dragons? What excessive effrontery, to lay sole claim to a solid piece of this planet, right down to the earth's axis, and, perhaps, straight through to the antipodes! For a moment I thought I would test his traps, and enter the forbidden Eden.

But the grass grew so thickly, and seemed so full of sly things, that at

last I thought best to pace off.

Next, I came to a hawthorn lane, leading down very prettily to a nice little church; a mossy little church; a beautiful little church; just such a church as I had always dreamed to be in England. The porch was viny as an arbor; the ivy was climbing about the tower; and the bees were humming about the hoary old head-stones along the walls.

Any man-traps here? thought I--any spring-guns?

No.

So I walked on, and entered the church, where I soon found a seat. No Indian, red as a deer, could have startled the simple people more. They gazed and they gazed; but as I was all attention to the sermon, and conducted myself with perfect propriety, they did not expel me, as at first I almost imagined they might.

Service over, I made my way through crowds of children, who stood staring at the marvelous stranger, and resumed my stroll along the London Road.

My next stop was at an inn, where under a tree sat a party of rustics, drinking ale at a table.

"Good day," said I.

"Good day; from Liverpool?"

"I guess so."

"For London?"

"No; not this time. I merely come to see the country."

At this, they gazed at each other; and I, at myself; having doubts whether I might not look something like a horse-thief.

"Take a seat," said the landlord, a fat fellow, with his wife's apron on, I thought.

"Thank you."

And then, little by little, we got into a long talk: in the course of which, I told who I was, and where I was from. I found these rustics a good-natured, jolly set; and I have no doubt they found me quite a sociable youth. They treated me to ale; and I treated them to stories about America, concerning which, they manifested the utmost curiosity. One of them, however, was somewhat astonished that I had not made the acquaintance of a brother of his, who had resided somewhere on the banks of the Mississippi for several years past; but among twenty millions of people, I had never happened to meet him, at least to my knowledge.

At last, leaving this party, I pursued my way, exhilarated by the lively conversation in which I had shared, and the pleasant sympathies exchanged: and perhaps, also, by the ale I had drunk:--fine old ale; yes, English ale, ale brewed in England! And I trod English soil; and breathed English air; and every blade of grass was an Englishman born. Smoky old Liverpool, with all its pitch and tar was now far behind; nothing in sight but open meadows and fields.

Come, Wellingborough, why not push on for London?--Hurra! what say you? let's have a peep at St. Paul's I Don't you want to see the queen? Have you no longing to behold the duke? Think of Westminster Abbey, and the Tunnel under the Thames! Think of Hyde Park, and the ladies!

But then, thought I again, with my hands wildly groping in my two vacuums of pockets--who's to pay the bill?--You can't beg your way, Wellingborough; that would never do; for you are your father's son, Wellingborough; and you must not disgrace your family in a foreign land; you must not turn pauper.

Ah! Ah! it was indeed too true; there was no St. Paul's or Westminster Abbey for me; that was flat.

Well, well, up heart, you'll see it one of these days.

But think of it! here I am on the very road that leads to the

Thames--think of that!--here I am--ay, treading in the wheel-tracks of coaches that are bound for the metropolis!--It was too bad; too bitterly bad. But I shoved my old hat over my brows, and walked on; till at last I came to a green bank, deliriously shaded by a fine old tree with broad branching arms, that stretched themselves over the road, like a hen gathering her brood under her wings. Down on the green grass I threw myself and there lay my head, like a last year's nut. People passed by, on foot and in carriages, and little thought that the sad youth under the tree was the great-nephew of a late senator in the American Congress.

Presently, I started to my feet, as I heard a gruff voice behind me from the field, crying out--"What are you doing there, you young rascal?--run away from the work'us, have ye? Tramp, or I'll set Blucher on ye!"

And who was Blucher? A cut-throat looking dog, with his black bull-muzzle thrust through a gap in the hedge. And his master? A sturdy farmer, with an alarming cudgel in his hand.

"Come, are you going to start?" he cried.

"Presently," said I, making off with great dispatch. When I had got a few yards into the middle of the highroad (which belonged as much to me as it did to the queen herself), I turned round, like a man on his own premises, and said--"Stranger! if you ever Visit America, just call at our house, and you'll always find there a dinner and a bed. Don't fail."

I then walked on toward Liverpool, full of sad thoughts concerning the cold charities of the world, and the infamous reception given to hapless young travelers, in broken-down shooting-jackets.

On, on I went, along the skirts of forbidden green fields; until reaching a cottage, before which I stood rooted.

So sweet a place I had never seen: no palace in Persia could be pleasanter; there were flowers in the garden; and six red cheeks, like six moss-roses, hanging from the casement. At the embowered doorway, sat an old man, confidentially communing with his pipe: while a little child, sprawling on the ground, was playing with his shoestrings. A hale matron, but with rather a prim expression, was reading a journal by his side: and three charmers, three Peris, three Houris! were leaning out of the window close by.

Ah! Wellingborough, don't you wish you could step in?

With a heavy heart at his cheerful sigh, I was turning to go, when--is it possible? the old man called me back, and invited me in.

"Come, come," said he, "you look as if you had walked far; come, take a bowl of milk. Matilda, my dear" (how my heart jumped), "go fetch some from the dairy." And the white-handed angel did meekly obey, and handed me--me, the vagabond, a bowl of bubbling milk, which I could hardly drink



down, for gazing at the dew on her lips.

As I live, I could have married that charmer on the spot!

She was by far the most beautiful rosebud I had yet seen in England. But I endeavored to dissemble my ardent admiration; and in order to do away at once with any unfavorable impressions arising from the close scrutiny of my miserable shooting-jacket, which was now taking place, I declared myself a Yankee sailor from Liverpool, who was spending a Sunday in the country.

"And have you been to church to-day, young man?" said the old lady, looking daggers.

"Good madam, I have; the little church down yonder, you know--a most excellent sermon--I am much the better for it."

I wanted to mollify this severe looking old lady; for even my short experience of old ladies had convinced me that they are the hereditary enemies of all strange young men.

I soon turned the conversation toward America, a theme which I knew would be interesting, and upon which I could be fluent and agreeable. I strove to talk in Addisonian English, and ere long could see very plainly that my polished phrases were making a surprising impression, though that miserable shooting-jacket of mine was a perpetual drawback

to my claims to gentility.

Spite of all my blandishments, however, the old lady stood her post like a sentry; and to my inexpressible chagrin, kept the three charmers in the background, though the old man frequently called upon them to advance. This fine specimen of an old Englishman seemed to be quite as free from ungenerous suspicions as his vinegary spouse was full of them. But I still lingered, snatching furtive glances at the young ladies, and vehemently talking to the old man about Illinois, and the river Ohio, and the fine farms in the Genesee country, where, in harvest time, the laborers went into the wheat fields a thousand strong.

Stick to it, Wellingborough, thought I; don't give the old lady time to think; stick to it, my boy, and an invitation to tea will reward you. At last it came, and the old lady abated her frowns.

It was the most delightful of meals; the three charmers sat all on one side, and I opposite, between the old man and his wife. The middle charmer poured out the souchong, and handed me the buttered muffins; and such buttered muffins never were spread on the other side of the Atlantic. The butter had an aromatic flavor; by Jove, it was perfectly delicious.

And there they sat--the charmers, I mean--eating these buttered muffins in plain sight. I wished I was a buttered muffin myself. Every minute they grew handsomer and handsomer; and I could not help thinking what a fine

thing it would be to carry home a beautiful English wife! how my friends would stare! a lady from England!

I might have been mistaken; but certainly I thought that Matilda, the one who had handed me the milk, sometimes looked rather benevolently in the direction where I sat. She certainly did look at my jacket; and I am constrained to think at my face. Could it be possible she had fallen in love at first sight? Oh, rapture! But oh, misery! that was out of the question; for what a looking suitor was Wellingborough?

At length, the old lady glanced toward the door, and made some observations about its being yet a long walk to town. She handed me the buttered muffins, too, as if performing a final act of hospitality; and in other fidgety ways vaguely hinted her desire that I should decamp.

Slowly I rose, and murmured my thanks, and bowed, and tried to be off; but as quickly I turned, and bowed, and thanked, and lingered again and again. Oh, charmers! oh, Peris! thought I, must I go? Yes, Wellingborough, you must; so I made one desperate congee, and darted through the door.

I have never seen them since: no, nor heard of them; but to this day I live a bachelor on account of those ravishing charmers.

As the long twilight was waning deeper and deeper into the night, I entered the town; and, plodding my solitary way to the same old docks, I

passed through the gates, and scrambled my way among tarry smells, across the tiers of ships between the quay and the Highlander. My only resource was my bunk; in I turned, and, wearied with my long stroll, was soon fast asleep, dreaming of red cheeks and roses.