

possessed, so sweetly sedate as she. But the Cavalier in the picture above the carved mantel, versed in the ways of the world, and the pretty tricks and wiles of the Beau Sex Feminine, smiled down at Bellew with an expression of such roguish waggery as said plain as words: "We know!" And Bellew, remembering a certain pair of slender ankles that had revealed themselves in their hurried flight, smiled back at the cavalier, and it was all he could do to refrain from winking outright.

CHAPTER VIII

Which tells of Miss Priscilla, of peaches, and of Sergeant Appleby late of the 19th Hussars

SMALL PORGES was at his lessons. He was perched at the great oak table beside the window, pen in hand, and within easy reach of Anthea who sat busied with her daily letters and accounts. Small Porges was laboriously inscribing in a somewhat splashed and besmeared copy-book the rather surprising facts that:

A stitch in time, saves nine. 9.

That:

The Tagus, a river in Spain. R.

and that:

Artaxerxes was a king of the Persians. A.

and the like surprising, curious, and interesting items of news, his pen making not half so many curls, and twists as did his small, red tongue. As he wrote, he frowned terrifically, and sighed oft betwixt whiles; and Bellew watching, where he stood outside the window, noticed that Anthea frowned also, as she bent

over her accounts, and sighed wearily more than once.

It was after a sigh rather more hopeless than usual that, chancing to raise her eyes they encountered those of the watcher outside, who, seeing himself discovered, smiled, and came to lean in at the open window.

"Won't they balance?" he enquired, with a nod toward the heap of bills, and papers before her.

"Oh yes," she answered with a rueful little smile, "but — on the wrong side, if you know what I mean."

"I know," he nodded, watching how her lashes curled against her cheek.

"If only we had done better with our first crop of wheat!" she sighed.

"Job Jagway said it was mouldy, you know, — that's why Adam punched him in the —"

"Georgy, — go on with your work, sir!"

"Yes, Auntie!" And immediately Small Porges' pen began to scratch, and his tongue to writhe and twist as before.

"I'm building all my hopes, this year, on the hops," said Anthea, sinking her head upon her hand, "if they should fail —"

"Well?" enquired Bellew, with his gaze upon the soft curve of her throat.

"I — daren't think of it!"

"Then don't — let us talk of something else —"

"Yes, — of Aunt Priscilla!" nodded Anthea, "she is in the garden."

"And pray who is Aunt Priscilla?"

"Go and meet her."

"But —"

"Go and find her — in the orchard!" repeated Anthea, "Oh do go, and leave us to our work."

Thus it was that turning obediently into the orchard, and looking about, Bellew presently espied a little, bright-eyed old lady who sat beneath the shadow of "King Arthur" with a rustic table beside her upon which stood a basket of sewing. Now, as he went, he chanced to spy a ball of worsted that had fallen by the way, and stooping, therefore, he picked it up, while she watched him with her quick, bright eyes.

"Good morning, Mr. Bellew!" she said in response to his salutation, "it was nice of you to trouble to pick up an old woman's ball of worsted." As she spoke, she rose, and dropped him a courtesy, and then, as he looked at her again, he saw that despite her words, and despite her white hair, she was much younger, and prettier than he had thought.

"I am Miss Anthea's house-keeper," she went on, "I was away when you arrived, looking after one of Miss Anthea's old ladies,— pray be seated. Miss Anthea,— bless her dear heart!— calls me her aunt, but I'm not really— Oh dear no! I'm no relation at all! But I've lived with her long enough to feel as if I was her aunt, and her uncle, and her father, and her mother— all rolled into one,— though I should be rather small to be so many,— shouldn't I?" and she laughed so gaily, and unaffectedly, that Bellew laughed too.

"I tell you all this," she went on, keeping pace to her flying needle, "because I have taken a fancy to you— on the spot! I always like, or dislike a person— on the spot,— first impressions you know! Y-e-e-s," she continued, glancing up at him side-ways, "I like you just as much as I dis-like Mr. Cassilis,— heigho! how I do— detest that man! There, now that's off my mind!"

"And why?" enquired Bellew, smiling.

"Dear me, Mr. Bellew!— how should I know, only I do,— and what's more— he knows it too! And how," she enquired, changing the subject abruptly, "how is your bed,— comfortable, mm?"

"Very!"

"You sleep well?"

"Like a top!"

"Any complaints, so far?"

"None whatever," laughed Bellew, shaking his head.

"That is very well. We have never had a boarder before, and Miss Anthea,— bless her dear soul! was a little nervous about it. And here's the Sergeant!"

"I— er— beg your pardon—?" said Bellew.

"The Sergeant!" repeated Miss Priscilla, with a prim little nod, "Sergeant Appleby, late of the Nineteenth Hussars,— a soldier every inch of him, Mr. Bellew,— with one arm— over there by the peaches." Glancing in the direction she indicated, Bellew observed a tall figure, very straight and upright, clad in a tight-fitting blue coat, with extremely tight trousers strapped beneath the insteps, and with a hat balanced upon his close-cropped, grizzled head at a perfectly impossible angle for any save an ex-cavalry-man. Now as he stood examining a peach-tree that flourished against the opposite wall, Bellew saw that his right sleeve was empty, sure enough, and was looped across his broad chest.

"The very first thing he will say will be that

'it is a very fine day,' " nodded Miss Priscilla, stitching away faster than ever, " and the next, that 'the peaches are doing remarkably well,' — now mark my words, Mr. Bellew." As she spoke, the Sergeant wheeled suddenly right about face, and came striding down towards them, jingling imaginary spurs, and with his stick tucked up under his remaining arm, very much as if it had been a sabre.

Being come up to them, the Sergeant raised a stiff arm as though about to salute them, military fashion, but, apparently changing his mind, took off the straw hat instead, and put it on again, more over one ear than ever.

"A particular fine day, Miss Priscilla, for the time o' the year," said he.

"Indeed I quite agree with you Sergeant," returned little Miss Priscilla with a bright nod, and a sly glance at Bellew, as much as to say, "I told you so!" "And the peaches, mam," continued the Sergeant, "the peaches — never looked — better, mam." Having said which, he stood looking at nothing in particular, with his one hand resting lightly upon his hip.

"Yes, to be sure, Sergeant," nodded Miss Priscilla, with another sly look. "But let me introduce you to Mr. Bellew who is staying at

Dapplemere." The Sergeant stiffened, once more began a salute, changed his mind, took off his hat instead, and, after looking at it as though not quite sure what to do with it next, clapped it back upon his ear, in imminent danger of falling off, and was done with it.

"Proud to know you, sir, — your servant, sir!"

"How do you do!" said Bellew, and held out his hand with his frank smile. The Sergeant hesitated, then put out his remaining hand.

"My left, sir," said he apologetically, "can't be helped — left my right — out in India — a good many years ago. Good place for soldiering, India, sir — plenty of active service — chances of promotion — though sun bad!"

"Sergeant," said Miss Priscilla, without seeming to glance up from her sewing, "Sergeant, — your hat!" Hereupon, the Sergeant gave a sudden, sideways jerk of the head, and, in the very nick of time, saved the article in question from tumbling off, and very dexterously brought it to the top of his close-cropped head, whence it immediately began, slowly, and by scarcely perceptible degrees to slide down to his ear again.

"Sergeant," said Miss Priscilla again, "sit down, — do."

"Thank you mam," said he, and proceeded to seat himself at the other end of the rustic bench, where he remained, bolt upright, and with his long legs stretched out straight before him, as is, and has been, the manner of cavalymen since they first wore straps.

"And now," said he, staring straight in front of him, "how might Miss Anthea be?"

"Oh, very well, thank you," nodded Miss Priscilla.

"Good!" exclaimed the Sergeant, with his eyes still fixed, "very good!" Here he passed his hand two or three times across his shaven chin, regarding an apple-tree, nearby, with an expression of the most profound interest:

"And how," said he again, "how might Master Georgy be?"

"Master Georgy is as well as ever," answered Miss Priscilla, stitching away faster than before, and Bellew thought she kept her rosy cheeks stooped a little lower over her work. Meanwhile the Sergeant continued to regard the tree with the same degree of lively interest, and to rasp his fingers to and fro across his chin. Suddenly, he coughed behind

his hand, whereupon Miss Priscilla raised her head, and looked at him.

"Well?" she enquired, very softly:

"And pray, mam," said the Sergeant, removing his gaze from the tree with a jerk, "how might — you be feeling, mam?"

"Much the same as usual, thank you," she answered, smiling like a girl, for all her white hair, as the Sergeant's eyes met hers.

"You look," said he, pausing to cough behind his hand again, "you look — blooming, mam, — if you'll allow the expression, — blooming, — as you ever do, mam."

"I'm an old woman, Sergeant, as well you know!" sighed Miss Priscilla, shaking her head.

"Old, mam!" repeated the Sergeant, "old, mam! — nothing of the sort, mam! — Age has nothing to do with it. — 'Tisn't the years as count. — We aren't any older than we feel, — eh, sir?"

"Of course not!" answered Bellew.

"Nor than we look, — eh sir?"

"Certainly not, Sergeant!" answered Bellew.

"And she, sir, — she don't look — a day older than —"

"Thirty five!" said Bellew.

“ Exactly, sir, very true! My own opinion, — thirty five exactly, sir.”

“ Sergeant,” said Miss Priscilla, bending over her work again, “ Sergeant, — your hat!” The Sergeant, hereupon, removed the distracting head-gear altogether, and sat with it upon his knee, staring hard at the tree again. Then, all at once, with a sudden gesture he drew a large, silver watch from his pocket, — rather as if it were some weapon of offence, — looked at it, listened to it, and then nodding his head, rose to his feet.

“ Must be going,” he said, standing very straight, and looking down at little Miss Priscilla, “ though sorry, as ever, — must be going, mam, — Miss Priscilla mam — good day to you!” And he stretched out his hand to her with a sudden, jerky movement. Miss Priscilla paused in her sewing, and looked up at him with her youthful smile:

“ Must you go — so soon, Sergeant? Then Good-bye, — until to-morrow,” and she laid her very small hand in his big palm. The Sergeant stared down at it as though he were greatly minded to raise it to his lips, instead of doing which, he dropped it, suddenly, and turned to Bellew:

“ Sir, I am — proud to have met you. Sir,

there is a poor crippled soldier as I know, — his cottage is very small, and humble sir, but if you ever feel like — dropping in on him, sir, — by day or night, he will be — honoured, sir, honoured! And that’s me — Sergeant Richard Appleby — late of the Nineteenth Hussars — at your service, sir!” saying which, he put on his hat, stiff-armed, wheeled, and strode away through the orchard, jingling his imaginary spurs louder than ever.

“ Well?” enquired Miss Priscilla in her quick, bright way, “ Well Mr. Bellew, what do you think of him? — first impressions are always best, — at least, I think so, — what do you think of Sergeant Appleby?”

“ I think he’s a splendid fellow,” said Bellew, looking after the Sergeant’s upright figure.

“ A very foolish old fellow, I think, and as stiff as one of the ram-rods of one of his own guns!” said Miss Priscilla, but her clear, blue eyes were very soft, and tender as she spoke.

“ And as fine a soldier as a man, I’m sure,” said Bellew.

“ Why yes, he *was* a good soldier, once upon a time, I believe, — he won the Victoria Cross for doing something or other that was very brave, and he wears it with all his other medals,

pinned on the inside of his coat. Oh yes, he was a fine soldier, once, but he's a very foolish old soldier, now,—I think, and as stiff as the ram-rod of one of his own guns. But I'm glad you like him, Mr. Bellew, and he will be proud, and happy for you to call and see him at his cottage. And now, I suppose, it is half past eleven, isn't it?"

"Yes, just half past!" nodded Bellew, glancing at his watch.

"Exact to time, as usual!" said Miss Priscilla, "I don't think the Sergeant has missed a minute, or varied a minute in the last five years,—you see, he is such a very methodical man, Mr. Bellew!"

"Why then, does he come every day, at the same hour?"

"Every day!" nodded Miss Priscilla, "it has become a matter of habit with him."

"Ah?" said Bellew, smiling.

"If you were to ask me why he comes, I should answer that I fancy it is to—look at the peaches. Dear me, Mr. Bellew! what a very foolish old soldier he is, to be sure!" Saying which, pretty, bright-eyed Miss Priscilla, laughed again, folded up her work, settled it in the basket with a deft little pat, and, rising, took a small, crutch stick from where it

had lain concealed, and then, Bellew saw that she was lame.

"Oh yes,—I'm a cripple, you see," she nodded,—“Oh very, very lame! my ankle, you know. That is why I came here, the big world didn't want a poor, lame, old woman,—that is why Miss Anthea made me her Aunt, God bless her! No thank you,—I can carry my basket. So you see,—he—has lost an arm,—his right one, and I—am lame in my foot. Perhaps that is why—Heigho! how beautifully the black birds are singing this morning, to be sure!"