

“ When the moon is at the full, yes.”

“ Can it be possible that you are still harping on the wild words of poor old Nannie? ” she exclaimed, and once more, she curled her lip at him.

“ Nannie is very old, I’ll admit,” he nodded, “ but surely you remember that we proved her right in one particular,—I mean about the Tiger Mark, you know.”

Now, when he said this, for no apparent reason, the eyes that had hitherto been looking into his, proud and scornful,—wavered, and were hidden under their long, thick lashes; the colour flamed in her cheeks, and, without another word, she was gone.

## CHAPTER XVIII

### *How the Sergeant went upon his guard*

THE Arcadians, one and all, generally follow that excellent maxim which runs:

“ Early to bed, and early to rise  
Makes a man healthy, and wealthy, and wise.”

Healthy they are, beyond a doubt, and, in their quaint, simple fashion, profoundly wise. If they are not extraordinarily wealthy, yet are they generally blessed with contented minds which, after all, is better than money, and far more to be desired than fine gold.

Now whether their general health, happiness, and wisdom is to be attributed altogether to their early to bed proclivities, is perhaps a moot question. Howbeit, to-night, long after these weary Arcadians had forgotten their various cares, and troubles in the blessed oblivion of sleep, (for even Arcadia has its troubles) Bellew sat beneath the shade of “ King Arthur ” alone with his thoughts.

Presently, however, he was surprised to hear the house-door open, and close very softly, and

to behold — not the object of his meditations, but Miss Priscilla coming towards him.

As she caught sight of him in the shadow of the tree, she stopped and stood leaning upon her stick as though she were rather disconcerted.

“ Aunt Priscilla! ” said he, rising.

“ Oh! — it’s you? ” she exclaimed, just as though she hadn’t known it all along. “ Dear me! Mr. Bellew, — how lonely you look, and dreadfully thoughtful, — good gracious! ” and she glanced up at him with her quick, girlish smile. “ I suppose you are wondering what I am doing out here at this unhallowed time of night — it must be nearly eleven o’clock. Oh dear me! — yes you are! — Well, sit down, and I’ll tell you. Let us sit here, — in the darkest corner, — there. Dear heart! — how bright the moon is to be sure. ” So saying, Miss Priscilla ensconced herself at the very end of the rustic bench, where the deepest shadow lay.

“ Well, Mr. Bellew, ” she began, “ as you know, to-day is my birthday. As to my age, I am — let us say, — just turned twenty-one and, being young, and foolish, Mr. Bellew, I have come out here to watch another very foolish person, — a ridiculous, old Sergeant of Hus-

sars, who will come marching along, very soon, to mount guard in full regimentals, Mr. Bellew, — with his busby on his head, with his braided tunic and dolman, and his great big boots, and with his spurs jingling, and his sabre bright under the moon. ”

“ So then — you know he comes? ”

“ Why of course I do. And I love to hear the jingle of his spurs, and to watch the glitter of his sabre. So, every year, I come here, and sit among the shadows, where he can’t see me, and watch him go march, march, marching up and down, and to and fro, until the clock strikes twelve, and he goes marching home again. Oh dear me! — it’s all very foolish, of course, — but I love to hear the jingle of his spurs. ”

“ And — have you sat here watching him, every year? ”

“ Every year! ”

“ And he has never guessed you were watching him? ”

“ Good gracious me! — of course not. ”

“ Don’t you think, Aunt Priscilla, that you are — just a little — cruel? ”

“ Cruel — why — what do you mean? ”

“ I gave him your message, Aunt Priscilla. ”

“ What message? ”

"That 'to-night, the peaches were riper than ever they were.'"

"Oh!" said Miss Priscilla, and waited expectantly for Bellew to continue. But, as he was silent she glanced at him, and seeing him staring at the moon, she looked at it, also. And after she had gazed for perhaps half a minute, as Bellew was still silent, she spoke, though in a very small voice indeed.

"And — what did — he say?"

"Who?" enquired Bellew.

"Why the — the Sergeant, to be sure."

"Well, he gave me to understand that a poor, old soldier with only one arm left him, must be content to stand aside, always and — hold his peace, just because he was a poor, maimed, old soldier. Don't you think that you have been — just a little cruel — all these years, Aunt Priscilla?"

"Sometimes — one is cruel — only to be — kind!" she answered.

"Aren't the peaches ripe enough, after all, Aunt Priscilla?"

"Over-ripe!" she said bitterly, "Oh — they are over-ripe!"

"Is that all, Aunt Priscilla?"

"No," she answered, "no, there's — this!" and she held up her little crutch stick.

"Is that all, Aunt Priscilla?"

"Oh! — isn't — that enough?" Bellew rose. "Where are you going — What are you going to do?" she demanded.

"Wait!" said he, smiling down at her perplexity, and so he turned, and crossed to a certain corner of the orchard. When he came back he held out a great, glowing peach towards her.

"You were quite right," he nodded, "it was so ripe that it fell at a touch."

But, as he spoke, she drew him down beside her in the shadow:

"Hush!" she whispered, "Listen!"

Now as they sat there, very silent, — faint, and far-away upon the still night air, they heard a sound; a silvery, rhythmic sound, it was, — like the musical clash of fairy cymbals, which drew rapidly nearer, and nearer; and Bellew felt that Miss Priscilla's hand was trembling upon his arm as she leaned forward, listening with a smile upon her parted lips, and a light in her eyes that was ineffably tender.

Nearer came the sound, and nearer, until, presently, now in moonlight, now in shadow, there strode a tall, martial figure in all the glory of braided tunic, and furred dolman, the three chevrons upon his sleeve, and many shining medals upon his breast, — a stalwart, sol-

dierly figure, despite the one empty sleeve, who moved with the long, swinging stride that only the cavalry-man can possess. Being come beneath a certain latticed window, the Sergeant halted, and, next moment, his glittering sabre flashed up to the salute; then, with it upon his shoulder, he wheeled, and began to march up and down, his spurs jingling, his sabre gleaming, his dolman swinging, his sabre glittering, each time he wheeled; while Miss Priscilla leaning forward, watched him wide-eyed, and with hands tight clasped. Then, all at once, — with a little fluttering sigh she rose.

Thus, the Sergeant as he marched to and fro, was suddenly aware of one who stood in the full radiance of the moon, — and with one hand outstretched towards him. And now, as he paused, disbelieving his very eyes, he saw that in her extended hand she held a great ripe peach.

“Sergeant!” she said, speaking almost in a whisper, “Oh Sergeant — won’t you — take it?”

The heavy sabre thudded down into the grass, and he took a sudden step towards her. But, even now, he hesitated, until, coming nearer yet, he could look down into her eyes.

Then he spoke, and his voice was very hoarse, and uneven:

“Miss Priscilla?” he said, “Priscilla! — Oh, Priscilla!” And, with the word, he had fallen on his knees at her feet, and his strong, solitary arm was folded close about her.