

[COMPLETE STORY.]

# In the Quiet of the Country.

By E. M. P. Risborough.

"Six miles from a station, Jim, and three from any road to anywhere! Why, the place is made for us!"

"But, my dear Alicia—"  
"Nothing, absolutely nothing to interrupt us, and not a soul that knows us in the whole neighbourhood! And you know, Jim, how you hate people dropping in perpetually and interfering with your work."

"O! Tom Dean never interferes with my work in the least," I said cheerfully. The remark was not, I fear, meant to be quite a kind one; my previous attempts had, you see, been so persistently disregarded. That kind of thing is irritating. Alicia, however, appeared to think I had simply been frivolous.

"I am speaking seriously, Jim," she pleaded, "and on a serious subject."  
"And so am I," I replied. "Tom Dean is—serious."

"O! we don't think Alicia even blushed. Well, mean revenges deserve to miss fire."

"O, don't be stupid, Jim," she said dismissively. "And," she went on in her previous tone, "do be sensible about the term. Come down and see it to-morrow."

So we went down to-morrow, and saw, and were conquered. That is, I was conquered. Alicia, of course, had known all the time that it was "the thing," and did not forget to remind me of the fact.

Alicia, by the way, is the sister who was then "looking after" me and my household. She looked after them extremely well. But she was—dare I say unkindly?—animated by a burning desire to shine in other than the housewifely sphere. She had "literary aspirations." She had also sisterly delusions. She believed, for instance, that I needed only opportunity to soar at once to giddy heights of literary renown. Hence her efforts to secure for me and herself "a quiet time for work."  
"And I've arranged to come on Saturday, Jim," she said now. "And we'll stay a month or two—three or four, if necessary—and work hours every day in the beautiful quiet, and—come back celebrities!"

Alicia is perhaps just the least bit inclined to optimism in her prospective surveys of our literary future.

Our work in the beautiful quiet began on the following Tuesday week.

As Alicia truly says, "No one can answer for dressmakers." And as dressmakers have a good deal to do with most of Alicia's arrangements, this was quite as near as we usually get to carrying any of them out literally.

We reached the farm in time for tea—a real old-fashioned, sit-down, substantial tea" to be one of the delights of our months of country life.

"You see," Alicia explained, "it would be ridiculous to go on there just as we do here. Besides, Mrs Partlett doesn't understand late dinner. So we shall have tea instead, the sort of tea we used to have, only nicer. New-laid eggs, you know, and honey, and cream, and home-cured hams. You'll love those lots, Jim!—O, yes, you will." I had not said I should not; but I suppose I have what is sometimes described as a "speaking countenance."

The first of these anomalous feasts, then, was awaiting us in the little dining-room.

"Let us have it at once," said Alicia. "We must unpack and settle ourselves this evening. To-morrow morning we begin our work."

"You are not making a good tea, Jim," she remarked presently with some severity.

"O, yes," I said; "yes. But don't you think, Alicia, 6 o'clock is a difficult time to be hungry at?"

"Certainly not," she began. Then, relenting, "But there will be a light supper, you know, at 10."

After tea I helped her to unpack, till she said: "Jim, I can get on better if you don't stand about looking at me." And I said: "That is so palpably unfair, Alicia, that I certainly will not help you any longer," and went and leaned

over the pigsty gate till she should call me for my "light supper."

It smelt unpleasantly—the pigsty, I mean—but I knew leaning over the pigsty was the right thing to do in the country, and would please Alicia; Alicia, like most people, is nicer when she is pleased.

She was pleased, I think, for the supper was more substantial than my fears had expected it to be. Soon after it was eaten she sent me to bed.

"Good-night, dear," she said. "You must be up by 7, you know, and we'll go for a good spin before 8."

But I was up before 7—a good deal before. So was Alicia. We met at the head of the stairs.

"I couldn't sleep," she informed me. "I never do the first night in a strange room."

"O! was it the strange room?" I remarked. "Now I never found a strange room disturb me."

"Well," she admitted, "it was partly—the roosters crowing, perhaps. But" [cheerfully] "one will soon get used to that; one will not even hear it in a day or two."

"You think so?" I said—not cheerfully at all. I have, unkindly, but little of Alicia's optimistic enthusiasm. "You think so? Certainly one may, conceivably, get used to hand organs or banana peddlers or the Anglo-German band. But—"

Perhaps it was as well that Alicia was evidently not attending to my words; was not, at any rate, perceiving their implications. Alicia dislikes what she calls "Jim's sarcastic vein," and is severe when she thinks she detects any relaxation into it.

I had been sitting with my head in my hands and my fingers over my ears for some time, when I heard Alicia shutting her window. Alicia is of a long-suffering disposition when she thinks it expedient so to be. Besides, shutting one's window made little difference. I had shut mine long ago!

Presently came her step on the stair, and my door was softly opened. She was in hat and gloves, and armed with a camp stool and writing block.

"I'm going to work out of doors, Jim," she announced. "It's a shame to be in on such a lovely day!"

There was a hot sun and an east wind. Besides, I can never work out of doors. I must stay, and struggle on, though all the poultry in the county should insist on congratulating itself, energetically and unintermittently, in the front garden.

"Cluck-cluck, cluck-cluck, cluck-cluck, a-ah-cluck," with the "a-ah" emphatic and jumping startlingly to a major sixth above the monotonous throat register notes of the "cluck-cluck."

There were dozens of them at it. They did it together, and they did it separately, and the blatant self-conceit of it was ridiculous.

All that insufferable expression of complacent self-satisfaction because they had laid an egg, much too late for breakfast, and just when I was straining to make it clearer to my possible future readers than it was to myself that my heroine's latest sufferings were as inevitable as they were undeserved!

But I was not going to be beaten by a set of foolish, procrastinating, inordinately value creatures like those barn-door hens. I would write in spite of them. I seized my pen, filled it with ink, and—held it poised, motionless, idle.

When at last I began to write I found my sentences arranging themselves rhythmically in a novel form of poetic foot—six unaccented syllables, followed by a strongly accented trochee (with a final light syllable)—and wondering what one should call it, and what would be the effect of this new variety of prose-poetry, if I should decide to give public readings from my "Works!"

Then I realised that such speculations were not only ineffectual but premature. I should never produce "Works" at all,

at this rate. I would try "out of doors," like Alicia.

But at lunch I had to confess that I had done "nothing." Alicia was severe about it, and she did not appear to think my excuses any better than excuses usually are.

She said "concentration" was a valuable mental quality which I ought to have acquired by this time; and that if "every little thing" was able to scatter my ideas, my ideas could scarcely be worth keeping together.

Then she volunteered information about her own doings.

"I think I've not got on so badly for the first morning, Jim," she said. "I wrote pages before I went out; and out of doors I read them over and crossed out where I'd made her say 'Cluck-cluck' instead of 'How do you do?' or 'What a delightful day' in her first conversation with him. And now I'm sure I know just how to begin it after tea."

But "after tea" is calling time in the country. Mrs Partlett received her visitors at the garden gate, which was just in front of my window, and talked with them in penetrating whispers, "not to disturb the gentleman." "Beetris,"

her handmaiden, received hers at the kitchen window (he was a rubicund young man, who did not say much; but Beetris did), and that was under Alicia's.

Alicia came down soon. She felt "stiff" after her bicycle ride before tea, she said, and thought she would "walk it off" before supper. Would I come?

She smiled a little sadly at the alacrity with which I said "Yes, indeed!" and thumped my blotting-pad on the top of my papers. And she gave my coat a touch or two with the brush, and said, "Poor old Jim!" with a pretty, gentle smile, and apropos of nothing at all.

Equally apropos of nothing at all, she said at breakfast next morning:

"I've had a table put in your bedroom, Jim. Try working up there this morning."

And I tried working "up there," and got on nicely, managing to involve my heroine in a really enthralling tangle of obstacles to settling down comfortably to be "happy ever after" with my hero.

But just as I was beginning the unravelling of the skein, up came Beetris to "do" the adjoining room. Tom Dean was to occupy it. He was to spend Saturday and Sunday with us.

Why Tom Dean should be prepared for with such a sustained and vigorous banging and brushing and flapping; with such a clattering of buckets and wholesale destruction, seemingly, of cumbersome and resistant furniture, I, of course, did not understand. Such housewifely mysteries I never attempt to fathom. But I left my distressed heroine still hopeless of success—and fled!

Tom Dean arrived by lunch time next day. He had come down on his auto, which he left at the village inn.

He made an excellent lunch. A reference to "supper" by Alicia, and a hint I had given him previously, had not been lost on him. He seemed full of energy after it.

"I've told them to send round 'The Swallow'" ("The Swallow" is what he calls his auto.) "at 3, Alicia," he said. "What do you say to a run out to Cambridge, or somewhere, tea there, and back by supper time? . . . That will give you a nice, quiet time, Jim," he added, kindly.

Really Tom's treatment of Mrs. Grundy is abominable! Besides, no one cares for such broad hints that his room is more desired than his company. So

"But Alicia is here for a 'quiet time,' too, Tom," I remarked. "I don't see how you can spare the time, Alicia; do you?"

Alicia evidently did not hear my query. She was standing by the window.

"This must be 'The Swallow,' Tom, coming up the road now," she said. "I had better put my things on," and away she went.

It was just as well that they arranged to go "somewhere" on the auto. next day, too. Alicia certainly would have

made little further progress on her way, to fame if she had stayed at home.

It was Saturday. Anyone who has followed this narrative will know that it was Saturday. Now, Saturday is a holiday in the country; and every one for miles round arranges to spend that whole day in Huntington. Huntington is our village of "beautiful quiet."

I began learning this interesting fact in local history almost directly after Alicia and Tom and "The Swallow" had set out for "somewhere."

Standing at the gate gazing at the dust "they left behind them," I became aware of a sound I thought I had left behind me—the strains of a "five and drum" corps—an evil "five and drum" corps indeed—accompanied by much rolling and rumbling of heavy vehicles.

Beetris was pulling lettuces in the garden. She looked up at me with a pleasant smile as I shut the gate with a snap and turned towards the house.

"A nice change to make, sir," she said. "For it's awful here mostly, and nobody stirrin' around much."

"Ah! you find it so?" I said, pausing with my hand on the doorknob.

"Law! Yes, sir! Don't you, sir?" [wonderingly].

"But" [cheerfully] "it'll be every Saturday an' hoften in-between days, too, now that the harvestin' is over. And misses lets me out sometimes, as I have a friend to go with me" [blushing and simpering]. "Sometimes they's schools, or church 'sities; and sings hymns lovely!"

Just then Mrs Partlett's voice, coming from some unseen vantage point, said:

"Beetris, wot do you mean, I should like to know, chatterin' there to the gentleman, as bold as brass! Come in this minute."

And Beetris went.

Her information, though so severely stigmatised, proved absolutely correct. They did sing hymns sometimes! They sang them that evening when—the hens having finished clucking, and neither Mrs Partlett nor Beetris, by a happy chance, having visitors—I sat down for an hour's work before the travellers should return.

The travellers returned at 8 p.m. The hymns had ceased at 7.45.

"Why, Jim, dear, you look fagged out!" were Alicia's first words. "You must not work so hard."

"And do you observe the state of my hair?" I inquired tragically. "Most of it out by the roots, and the rest white as snow, I expect," craning up to glance inquiringly into a libellous mirror near the ceiling.

"But what! . . . Why," cried Alicia and Tom together, "we thought you would have such a nice quiet day!"

Well, it was kindly meant! And a good motive perhaps excuses—a little fit!

So I told them all about my "quiet day," and Tom took us up to the city on his auto on Monday.

So Alicia has not waked up "to find herself famous;" neither, for the matter of that, has her brother.

Still, she does not seem to mind. She says: "The duties of wife and mother" [I have a nephew, too small to involve much duty, one would think] "are quite enough for a woman to attend to," and that "Tom would not care" for her to be "talked about."

She often refers to our "delightful quiet time" in "the sweetest, dearest, peaceablest, ivy covered old farmhouse;" and attributes any little success that may have attended my pursuit of literature to the uninterrupted leisure for work she secured for me by insisting on "dear, lazy, sceptical old Jim" bestirring himself to go down into "the quiet air of the country."

## ASPIRATIONS.

Two hearts that yearn  
For love's sweet prison,  
Where his is hers'  
And hers is his'.