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# WHAT CON DID

By Dorothy Baird, Author of "By the Path of the Storm," etc.

WHEN a young man is cooped up in a microscopic village, miles and miles away from anywhere and anybody, he has two courses open to him. Either he will fall in love and marry respectably, or he will get into mischief." Mrs Roberts shut up her mouth with a snap, as was her habit after making a definite assertion.

"To young Stokes there is but one course open," she added, after a pause.

"Why?" asked Elise softly.

"Why!" retorted Mrs Roberts. "How can you ask, child? There is no one here for him to fall in love with."

Elise covered closer into her corner. Even Mrs Roberts found it hard to avoid reminding her daughter of her deformity in the course of conversation.

"I don't see why he need necessarily get into mischief," she said.

"My dear Elise, you are no longer a baby. Do use your common sense. What else has the poor, unfortunate young man to do? He cannot potter round his farm all day and all night, too. The hunting season is over. He is not intellectual, and a man tires of novel-reading, and there is not a billiard table or a tennis court or golf links for miles. There is no society."

"There is the Rector," interposed Elise. "And I am sure we have asked him often enough."

"The Rector!" Mrs Roberts' voice was full of contempt. "A snuffy old bachelor, with no idea outside his grub-cases. A healthy young man such as Bernard Stokes would find an evening under his tongue worse than an evening in Purgatory. And for ourselves, I am sure there is nothing to attract him here. She stopped short; she was treading on dangerous ground again.

But Elise bore no malice. She rose, and, going to the window, looked out into the soft, velvety twilight as it crept down over the hills.

"Perhaps it will be different when Con comes home," she said.

Mrs Roberts brightened perceptibly. If Elise, with her shrunken figure and her misshapen shoulders was the great disappointment of her life, Con, the cleverest girl of her time at Newnham, was its greatest joy and pride.

"Ah!" she said. "When Con comes home it will be different. She is so full of life and spirits she will waken the whole village. I should not be at all sorry to see them make a match of it," she added softly. "I like young Stokes. He is honest and manly, and if he has not been all that he should be—well, there is every excuse considering."

Mrs Roberts thought over her idea a good deal that evening, and the more she thought of it, the more it found favour in her eyes. Con might do a great deal worse than marry this good-looking young man who was blessed with a long pedigree, a small private income, and a farm to boot. Con would have a little money, too. It would all be very nice and very convenient. She must bring the young people together as soon as she could.

Accordingly, before she went to bed that night she dictated a letter to Bernard Stokes.

"Dear Mr Stokes," it ran. "Will you come and have dinner with us on Thurs-

day next! We shall be very pleased to see you if you will. I am expecting my daughter from Germany to-morrow, so we shall not be so dull as we usually are.—Yours very truly, Isabel Roberts."

"The foundation stone," she said to herself with a smile as she folded the letter.

But Bernard Stokes was not nearly so pleased to receive the missive as Mrs Roberts had been to send it.

"Confounded blue-stocking of a girl," he mused, calling to mind rumours of Con's Newnham days, which were afloat in the village. "I suppose I must consent to be bored for one evening," he added, seating himself at the writing-table.

And when he had finished his note he wandered out into the soft stillness of the summer night. The moon and stars were shining brightly, and the yellow glow of the sunset still lingered in the west. Perhaps it was the heat and closeness of it all that made him turn towards the stream which trickled so merrily through the rushes, hurrying blithely to the mill which roared faintly in the distance. It was cool and shady in the lane by the mill, and the roses and honeysuckle in the hedgerows filled the dampened night air with a sweet and subtle perfume. Be that as it may, he bent his steps towards the mill six nights out of the seven, and, as often as not, he found Mary Alder wandering in the lane, or walking up and down the Mill House garden with a wonderfully expectant air.

Poor Mary Alder! She was not old; she was only about twenty-five, yet everyone called her poor, and everyone looked upon her as an old maid. She was what might be called a sad-coloured little person, with soft grey eyes, a commonplace face, and hair of a nondescript shade. Her dresses were always dark and dowdy, her manners quiet and a little prim. But she had a soft, sweet voice and a pleasant smile that kept her from being totally uninteresting.

She had lived all her life at the Mill House, and had never slept away from it for a single night. The wildest of her dissipations had been a concert at the nearest town, to which she had driven in her father's light cart. She had been taught by a governess after her mother died, and though from this lady she had learnt refinement of manner and tastes, and a certain broad-mindedness of ideas, the very fact of her having had a governess cut her off from other girls of her station. The young ladies of the place would not condescend to know the miller's daughter; the humbler girls assumed that she would be too proud to mix with them. Poor Mary Alder was severely alone. And so her life dragged itself out, each year as dull and monotonous as the last.

Then Bernard came. Bernard was bored to death on his lonely farm, and he fell into evil ways for want of something to do. But he grew tired of playing cards and losing money—for there is no village so small or so remote where a man cannot play cards and lose money if he will. He was secretly ashamed of himself, too, when he thought of the times he had come home the worse for drink; and he cast his eyes about in search of fresh amusement;

By some ill-luck his eyes lighted upon poor Mary Alder, and they brightened considerably. She was quite passable, she was even intelligent, she would help to while away many long hours during the next year—he would probably tire of her after that; but in the meantime she would do very well.

So he made friends with the miller, and in course of time with the miller's daughter also. Hardly a day passed but what Bernard Stokes came down to the mill, and the old man chuckled to himself whenever he heard the well-known step along the lane, thinking that poor Mary Alder would not be an old maid after all. Was it any wonder that Mary herself wondered that she had ever found her life dull and monotonous, or that her eyes brightened and her heart beat quicker at the very sound of Bernard's name?

Truly, his parents had hardly been wise in buying him a farm in this remote country spot, miles away from anywhere and anybody.

But a blue-stocking is not always a bore. Neither is she always awkward and dowdy. When Bernard Stokes paid his duty visit to the Parish Church on the following Sunday morning he was surprised to see a tall and graceful figure next to Elise in the corner of the Roberts' pew. His confounded blue-stocking of a girl carried herself like a queen, and gowned herself like a coquette. She was pretty, too, with the frank and open beauty of a woman who knows her attractions, but who has so many other and better things to think about that the knowledge takes its rightful place in her estimation, and so only adds to her charm. There was an expression on her face which made the young man listen to the words of the service as he had not listened to them since he left home years ago for a public school, and he left the church with a feeling of utter unworthiness growing up in his heart.

But Con was no prude, as Bernard found out on the following Thursday. To hear her talk, it was difficult to believe that she was a learned woman, to hear her delicious laugh was to discredit the fact that she had ranked high among the wranglers when she took the Tripos, in spite of all the books and papers which certified that it was an undisputed fact. Her conversation was a rare treat to one who had been cooped up for many months in a dead-alive country village, with no one to talk to save the Rector—whose only joy in life was studying the habits of grubs—and the employees upon his farm. Mary Alder's conversation was necessarily limited of range and lacking in brilliance and originality; at times it was also a little heavy, so that the talk of this cultured girl, with all her learning and her whole-hearted frivolity, was a revelation to him. Even the quiet Elise brightened up under her sister's sunny influence, and became quite witty.

Bernard lingered as late as propriety would allow, and when he left he found himself booked for a picnic which Con had planned for the following week. His house seemed strangely big and deserted when he returned, and he could not help thinking how different it would be if

there were someone to stang about the dark old corridors and waken the echoes of the gaunt square rooms, but that someone was certainly not poor Mary Alder.

Elise was right. It was quite different now that Con had returned. Even the monotonous village hardly seemed the same, for Con's bicycle would fly through it two or three times a day, scattering fowls and dogs and other sleepy loiterers in the street to right and left, and Con's merry laugh was often heard at the cottage doors. The old Rector himself was persuaded to leave his grubs and join her walking parties and picnics, and he grew quite frivolous when she insisted on accompanying him on his naturalising expeditions. It must be owned that his frivolity was slightly heavy and purely scientific, but as Con was scientific also, she took it as it was meant, and appreciated it duly.

As to Bernard, to him the world was a new place since Con had come within his ken. Of course, he loved her. Few people could know Constance Roberts and not fall a victim to the spell of her pretty face and the direct glance of her bonny blue eyes. And to Bernard his love brought a new and strange feeling of unworthiness. Something about this bright, pure English girl called up all that was fine in his nature. He would give his soul to blot out some of the incidents in his past, he would do anything, suffer anything, to be worthy of her love, even though he should never gain it.

Mary Alder wandered alone night after night in the Mill House garden and in the lane—long after the roses in the hedgerows had faded and wild clematis was blooming in their stead. After a while she grew listless and hardly ever ventured outside the house, but sat in the parlour window evening after evening, listening in the mute tension of hope deferred, for his merry whistle over the meadows, for his step in the lane, for the click of the gate, but he never came. He spent all his evenings at the Grange, or walking with the girls through the woods, or, better still, bicycling with Con along the sweet-scented lanes. Mary was forgotten, and she knew it. She knew that the bonny young girl at the Grange had taken away her one treasure—and yet she hoped.

So the days passed, and Mary did not find them monotonous—her life could never be monotonous now that Bernard had gladdened some of it—only there was a weight at her heart, and some times the pressure amounted to agony.

July passed into August, and Mrs Roberts chuckled to herself over the success of her scheme.

"He is head over ears in love," she said to Elise. "And as for Con, well, he is the only man she ever sees. I do not think there is much fear of her refusing him."

But Elise only sighed. Con had not heard what she had heard in the quiet months when Bernard had been bored to death on his lonely farm.

The next day, as luck would have it, they bent their steps towards the lane by the mill when they started for their usual walk. Con was full of spirits, for it was one of those soft, cool summer