

Complete Story.

A REGENT IN ARCADY.

By S. Elgar Bennett.

At five o'clock of an afternoon in May the old house flung its shadow across the road to the meadow beyond.

There was the picturesqueness of vast proportion, decay and delapidation about the place.

Trees of heaven thrust their branches against the windows and under the eaves. The strip of grass lost its green in the highway. There was no fence, but a short paved walk bordered with box bushes terminated in a gate. Those on either side were of unusual height; an arch had been cut through them.

Two young women on a buckboard stopped in the shadow.

"Oh, oh!" said one, "the dear old place! I don't believe there is a square inch of paint on it. It is an enchanted spot."

"Wickedly enchanted. Look at these outbuildings. A puff of wind would level the lot."

"But they are such an exquisite gray. You might paint them all with a wash of lampblack, a little blue in the half-tones and just a trace of yellow where the lights are strongest."

"I shouldn't paint them; but I can thing with satisfaction of a coat of whitewash outside and in."

"Save the mark!"

"And those fields. They won't get enough off them to keep a wooden horse through the winter. They won't get anything but broomsedge."

"There isn't anything in the world as lovely as broomsedge, especially in October, when it begins to burst out all up the stalks like make-believe thistles. Before sunset I've seen the brown blades turn to a tawny pink and the down glisten like silver. It is beautiful."

"A corn stable of a second growth of clover would be much more gratifying. Shall we go on?"

"Wait a little while. I'm going to get down and look through the arch."

"Why? When you can see under and over and all around it from here."

Ellen sprang to the ground.

"Call for me as you come back," she said.

She sincerely expected the buckboard to go on. What if there should be dogs or cows?

There was the sound of a key in the lock and the door swung back. A stream of yellow light ran over the shadow and a woman came out with a watering-can in her hand. She was small and old, and her keen eyes were sunken beneath the prominent arch of her brow.

"Won't you come in?" she called.

Ellen held out her hands and struck as she seldom failed to do with strangers, the keynote of favour.

"Your house is beautiful. I wanted to see it closer. You do not mind, do you?"

"To be sure I don't," said the mistress; "come in and look around as much as you like."

Ellen followed her into the hall. She saw through the door at the far end a green yard and the inevitable outbuildings going to decay.

Mrs. Rail opened the windows in one of the darkened rooms.

"Sit down. You must be tired. I reckon you didn't walk from nowhere?"

"I drove out from town. I had never been on this road before. My name is Ellen Cheritree."

"Any relation to the Cheritrees across the country about tea miles?"

"I'm afraid not."

She was regarding the furniture critically: Not antique, but sufficiently old-fashioned.

"Yes," said Mrs. Rail, "this is a good old place. I think so; a body ought to about her home. But it ain't what it once was. I come here a bride, forty-seven years next Christmas, and I was twenty-three on my wedding-day. Before the war my cheek flushed and her eyes brightened with the proud recollection—"Child, you ought to n-seeen this place then. My husband owned three thousand acres right around here, and we had ninety-seven coloured people. I had ten myself when we were married. The place is gone down. It takes money to keep it up. The land's poor, too, and fertilizer's dear. Crops don't amount to nothing, though I don't mean to cast reflections on Francis. Francis makes considerable truckin',

but Francis'll never be the farmer his father was before him."

A voice from without called loudly: "Aunt Kitty! Aunt Kitty! Don't you think that calf's gone an' got out again?"

Mrs. Rail ran down the hall. "I do think in my heart," she said by way of apology.

Ellen followed. Over one of the sunny meadows, ankle-deep with its straggling grass, a black calf darted, pursued by a girl. She and Mrs. Rail flung their arms above their heads and shouted unintelligible things to the calf. Ellen caught her frock over her arm and ran with the others. The calf, having perhaps a poor opinion of her ability, kept near her. She seized the rope and held him fast.

A man with a hoe over his shoulder came down the stable road and paused in surprise. He leaped the fence when he became aware of the two women hurrying over the field.

Ellen held out her smarting hands. Across the palms the rope had drawn a faint line of blood. Her eyes filled with tears.

"Confound the calf!" said the man. He would probably have laughed if Turah had been so babyish.

Mrs. Rail came up with Turah.

"Lal Francis," she said, "that calf'll be the death of me. If this is what comes of havin' blooded stock careerin' over the fields three an' four times a day, the old red an' white kind's good enough for me. At my age, too! My son Francis, Miss Ellen Cheritree—she ain't no kin to the Cheritrees across the country. Francis—an' Turah."

Turah looked at Ellen and wished the hurt might have been across her own broad palms. She and Francis, with their fine, strong bodies, thought the frail, pale creature with the expression of tragic pain upon her face because she had chafed her hands, a pitiful sight.

"Come in the house an' I'll put some lily an' whisky on it," said Mrs. Rail; "lily an' whisky's grand for hurts. You won't know anything's wrong with your poor little hands to-morrow."

When the buckboard stopped at the gate everybody was sorry to see it. Turah had hastened tea, and they had been merry over curds and cream and biscuit and fruit, and Ellen had concluded an arrangement whereby she was to see more of her new acquaintances.

"I won't be the least trouble in the world," she said. "I can get up very early. I don't mind having breakfast at seven, only I shall have to be called at six. And I can live on bread and milk. It is so good of you to let me come."

They followed her down to the green arch and watched her drive away.

Ellen's mild rhapsodies elicited slight response.

"I wish you had come, Henrietta. They are the simplest, best creatures; so kind, so—"

"Agreeable?"

"More. It was like living in another age. They made me feel artificial. I felt ashamed of everything I had done to place me so far away from nature."

"They said all sorts of pretty things?"

"Only kind things that came directly from the heart."

"How many of those paragons are there?"

"Three."

"All women?"

"A son. The girl has the strongest, best face. Not beautiful, but good. I think it would be a benefit to share their home for a while. One could not help but have wider sympathies and a larger comprehension of life."

Henrietta looked down from her superior height.

"What nonsense now, Ellen? This is an old foe with a new face. I have heard something like it before."

Three weeks later Henrietta at Dawn received a bulky mail.

"My own dearest Henrietta," wrote Ellen. "I am in Arcadia, Alturia, Utopia. Letters are never written from these places. My own is the first on record. I am living at that exquisite old house on the Franklin Road. You remember the evening we went out on the buckboard? I may as well confess I am a summer

boarder, but they do not allow this phrase to obtrude itself upon me. I am one of them—a friend and sister to Francis and Turah, and as much a niece to Aunt Kitty as Turah herself. Do not be shocked. These are not common people, but simple-minded, plain in the sweetest, best sense of the word. I have learned to do things connected with housekeeping, and love my tasks. There is poetry about them if one has vision to perceive it, upon the principle of some hymn I have seen somewhere, "Who sweeps a room as for Thy laws, Makes that and the action fine." Maybe the quotation is not correct, but you have my meaning. I take entire charge of the dairy—the coolest, dimmest place, with roses blooming over the windows and a stream of water running all round three sides and gray milk crocks with blue clover leaves on them in it. I make butter every day in a tall churn, and print it in little pats with acorns and wheat, and Francis says my butter always brings five cents more than any other butter in the market. I really am of use to them. I should be satisfied to make butter all my life. It reminds me of the poor French queen and her dairy. Wasn't it the French queen? I am not surprised she was fond of it. I wanted to have some calico frocks made like Turah's, so that we might look more alike, but Francis asked me please not to. I have tucked up the skirt of those three Chambrays, and taken the lace and ribbon off the waists. And I have some little frilled aprons with bibs that fasten behind and some frilled cuffs to turn back over my elbows whenever it is necessary to roll up my sleeves—and it always is in making butter—so that I think the Chambrays are more becoming than they were at first. We breakfast at six o'clock on a porch that is covered with a climbing rose and a jasmine. We have tea served down by the spring. Life seems' one delightful picnic—if it were not for its sweet seriousness. We have music, too. Francis plays on the violin. Not to suit you, poor unfortunate scientist! No music master has spoiled and crippled his interpretation of pathetic negro melodies and old-fashioned airs. I thought last night I had never heard anything so beautiful. The moonlight seemed gathered in the tops of the trees. All was breathlessly still, and the only living thing in the world was the voice of the viola. Was it living after all? I have a theory that the violin enshrines a soul which speaks at the violinist's will. All violinists have occult powers. We are entirely alone. There are no neighbours to disturb us. Sometimes we go in a farm cart to a little meeting house in the Woods. The men sit on one side and the women on the other, and the women kiss each other after the service. It's very interesting. I want to tell you about—but, oh, dear! it's milking time. The cows—seven of them, counting the heifers—have come up to the bars. I hear them. I have learned to milk, and have the cutest little three-legged milking stool. Who was the writer who said no one lived truly unless he lived near to Nature's heart? Is the dear mother better? believe me, always your own devoted

ELLEN.

P.S.—You know how I hate post-scripts, my dear Henrietta, but I have just come upstairs and want to add a few lines to tell you about Francis. Francis and Turah are engaged to be married, and are very devoted to each other. Turah is, I'm sure, I have the confidence of both. Francis has a high standard which he wishes Turah to reach, and he tells me just where she fails to realise his expectations. Francis is Turah's standard. She does not want him changed, which is as it should be. You know I have always held a wife should reverence her husband, and above all things, avoid a critical spirit. Have heard nothing from Brian. Have you? No doubt he is, as I am, in some charmed spot where letters are unknown or forgotten. Yours, E."

ELLEN.

Henrietta's presence, when she stopped at Honey Path on her way to the White Sulphur, was like a shower of rain upon a merry-making.

Her positive individuality, which she never took the trouble to soften, made an unfavourable impression. Turah was awkward, Francis no Florizel, and the prime mover in the protracted farce a rather mature young woman in short skirts and frilled aprons, striking attitudes over an old-fashioned churn.

Three days of Arcadia were sufficient for her. By the light of a candle she packed her travelling bag.

Ellen sat by the window and looked out into the night.

It had rained and the leaves were dripping. The rays from the candle made a nimbus in the heavy air.

Now and then the wind shook down a shower of raindrops. Ellen thought how well she had heard the sound imitated by Senard's orchestra.

She looked like a creature from opera bouffe, or a model for a Watteau fan. She leaned her head upon her arm and sighed. Henrietta was making herself disagreeable—a risk every one ran who stated facts to Mrs. Cheritree.

"You are very unkind, Henrietta," she said.

"I wish I might be unkind to some purpose. It is you who are unkind. You are amusing yourself at the expense of these good people, for they are good people, so unuspicious they have no idea you are playing with them, and—"

"I like them heartily. It is no exaggeration to say I love them."

"For how long?"

"I shall never forget them."

"By Christmas you will have forgotten their names. Besides, you cannot help but see the girl is miserable."

"Turah isn't treating me properly," said Ellen plaintively. "She no longer shows me the confidence I have a right to expect. I have not changed toward Turah."

"And Francis?—though I think Mr. Rail would be more appropriate."

"I have done my best to be a sister to Francis."

"And Turah objects? Very unreasonable girl, Turah."

Ellen crimped the fold of her kerchief.

"You must know how humiliating it is for me to make such an admission; but, Turah is, or fancies she is, jealous."

"I should say she has abundant cause. I myself saw Francis with his arm around your waist."

"He looks upon me as a sister."

"And it was probably in an excess of brotherly affection that he kissed the palm of your hands yesterday. My dear Ellen, you forget I have brothers of my own."

"You keep your brothers at such a distance."

Henrietta tightened the straps of her bag.

"We get on pretty well. No doubt you have told this dear new brother about Brian?"

"They are not interested in my private affairs, and I never bore people by talking about myself. You wish to insinuate that I have been guilty of a vulgar flirtation."

"Is there any other sort?"

"You know, too, my opinion of a flirtatious woman. The River Jordan could not wash her clean. Ugh! when you think of them, those women are absolutely nasty."

"Then you have not told him of Brian?"

"No."

"You have acted vilely to him and his dotting old mother, and treacherously to the girl."

Ellen crept into bed and cried. Once she raised her head from her pillow to say:

"I hope you will not mention these absurd suspicions to Brian."

Henrietta replied at some length with the unconscious use of a slang expression:

"What do you take me for? Brian wouldn't believe the truth if he saw it. I haven't forgotten the music master episode."

Turah was gathering beans in the garden. It was a misty morning in September. Dew lay over the vines and marked the spiders' webs among the weeds.

It was a relief to Turah to be where she need not struggle to hide her wretched feelings—where she was not compelled to listen to Ellen's light words and laughter.

What was she in comparison with Ellen? She said: "I don't care; I don't want him if he wants Ellen. Let him take Ellen."

She fell to thinking what she would do when they were married. She supposed Ellen would take her place entirely, would look after the poultry and the housekeeping, except what Aunt Kitty still clung to.

"There would be no room for her, Turah! Oh, Turah!" Ellen called. "Where are you? I have come to help you."

"Turah hurried down the row and poured the beans into a basket.

"I reckon I got enough," she said; "besides it's all wet in there. Look at my skirts."