

## AN INTERRUPTED ROMANCE.

By S. ELGAR BENET.

THEY were always together, at church, at simple festivities, in daily walks and in visits to the sick or poor of the neighborhood. Their youth had slipped away long ago, but gently, without regret to mar minds or faces.

They were diffident, almost timid in manner. Though styles changed, their gowns were the same; they dressed their hair after a fashion of early days, Mary in ringlets on either side her face, Anna in curls on the nape of her neck. Mary's hair was darker, her eyes gray, the lines about her mouth deeper. She piqued herself upon seniority, liking well to exert a gentle authority.

They were considered the cream of village aristocracy; nothing was so fine as their bonnets and their musical performance. Aspirants to the social privileges of the place were measured by these standards of New Market excellence. So exalted was the position not altogether claimed by themselves, but thrust upon them, that the gallants of the place, if they adored, were fain to do so at a distance. No one had ever approached nearer to Mary, but there are those who yet remember the beginning of Anna's one romance, which was in this wise:

Toward the last of May the annual strawberry festival was held. It was an occasion of utmost importance. Everybody was busy for a week preparing decorations and bringing plans to order. There were cake, confectionery and ice cream tables, a floral bower, a post-office, Jacob's well and that time-honored institution, the grab bag. According to village etiquette, never transgressed, matrons of highest standing led by the Rev. Mrs. Smyser had charge of the table first named, daughters of these ladies filled positions next in honor, less favored maidens presided at the well and a few fortunate younger ones had charge of the grab bag.

In the short spring evenings they met to make garlands, wreaths, etc., for the days of colored paper decoration were not. Cedar, pine and green things torn from the May glory of the woods were heaped at the church door; yards of garlands wound for walls and pulpit, wreaths made to be suspended below the gallery and in the deep windows, a wonderful bower of greenery for Flora, fragrant masses heaped in corners, until at length all was done and the poor ends of sacrificed verdure cleared from the floor.

The festival opened to the New Market public Tuesday evening early. Peonies, roses, snowballs, mock-orange, lilac and all sweet old fashioned flowers were stuck among the garlands and disposed in stiff bouquets down the long tables. There were cakes innumerable; not to speak of candies in net bags cut after the fashion of boots and stockings, and glass bowls of strawberries heaped in red pyramids, mingled entrancing odors with the fragrance of flowers and cedar. Over the pulpit was a triumph of artistic skill—"Welcome," in cardboard letters neatly covered with box leaves. All the lamps were lighted, as well as candles in cones polished for the occasion and consigned with many instructions to Mrs. Smyser's care. New Market declared annually there had never been anything so fine.

Into this splendor, Dr. Farrell with kindly patronage ushered his daughters. Anna had personated Flora since her sixteenth year; so meekly had she worn her honors that no one after the lapse of a decade suggested their resignation to a younger goddess. She wore a wreath of snowballs and roses and a white gown with a prim little bouquet at her breast. Her face showed no record of twenty-six years. In her life there had never been one great sorrow—one great joy. She had never known an ambition unsatisfied, a hope unfulfilled. There was only the repose of a

sweet and gentle nature.

They were met with deference by the Rev. Mr. Smyser begging to introduce "Mr. Ivan Took, who had not anticipated the honor of meeting the goddess of Flora in person."

Mr. Took made a happy reply and had the pleasure of conducting Anna to her bower, where he invested in bouquets, quite recklessly, buying all the snowballs and pink roses. Afterwards he proposed a promenade, and they walked around the room times innumerable as is the fashion at strawberry festivals in that country even unto this day. They made many investments in the grab bag, from which they drew two small tin plates, a skillet, a jointed doll and a wooden chair. Over ice cream and berries Ana expressed the hope that the visitor was pleased with New Market.

"Oh, very much pleased—very much. I came but yesterday, and since this evening have thought seriously of spending more time here."

"It is not always as gay as this," said Anna.

"Gay? It would not matter. I do not care about gayety. I might take up theology, at least look into the subject. I could read with Mr. Smyser. I don't know much of theology, never thought about it; but a man doesn't know what he's fit for until he's tried different things."

"Father says Mr. Smyser is a person of intelligence. There are some things—but then my father knows so much. It is wrong to judge everyone by him, even though Mr. Smyser is a minister, isn't it?"

"I suppose it is. I studied medicine at one time, got as far as my second year."

"Indeed?"

"I found out in time that I never would be willing to devote my life to the practice of medicine. Took up law afterwards, but there were things in law—well, I gave that up before I had committed myself."

"Father had a brother who was a lawyer; he died."

"After that I thought of a mercantile career, but those long-legged stools are uncomfortable and figures are dry."

"Oh very. I had so much trouble at school. Miss Parke could never teach me arithmetic. But," taking up the last berry on her plate, "I do not think anyone has had such—such—wide experience."

Mr. Took flushed with pleasure at finding himself appreciated.

"You flatter me. I really know very little, but I thought about theology. It might be of service some day. I once thought of going out as a missionary to the South Sea Islands. In case the idea should recur and I decide to try it, theology would stand me in good stead."

"It is a noble work; people who go must be very good and devoted. Now I must return to the flowers, they are putting the lilies in the wrong glasses. I shall be considered a poor Flora to neglect my work."

"I do not think one could find a more successful Flora—at least not here," said Mr. Took. He looked critically around as if he would be perfectly impartial.

So Anna's romance began. A village matron who stood behind the table screened by a cedar bush repeated the conversation as suitable to the occasion. There was nothing remarkable in Mr. Took's appearance. He was small and slight, had a thin face and dreamy eyes and walked with an air of importance. His deportment eminently became a student of theology. The citizens of New Market, congregated after early supper around the blacksmith's corner, grew accustomed to his dapper fig-

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