

LITTLE BO-PEEP

Richard Dedham had been out all day sketching—at least all day his portable easel, with its nice clean canvas, had stood waiting, with accustomed patience, for the decorating touch of the master's brush.

At this moment he was sketching in a most comfortable manner, his flannel-clad figure prone upon the ground, his hands clasped under the back of his dark head, a half-smoked pipe dropping out of the corner of his mouth. Twice in as many minutes he had been obliged to remove one hand, thereby much discomforting himself, to brush aside a persistent fly which insisted upon descending upon his nose. A third attack caused him to open his eyes and utter an impatient word, decently low in tone just as a clear, high soprano voice behind him sang—

Sha-all I wake him? No, not I;

For if I did he would surely cry.

And with a derisive shake upon the last word the branches were pushed aside to reveal the prettiest little figure that an itinerant painter could ask as a model.

It was a young girl standing there, clad in a golf dress of brightest red, a most ungolflike flower-wreathed straw hat perched on her crop of curly hair, mischief dancing in her laughing eyes, playing among her dimples, and emphasizing the upward turn of her saucy nose. She held in her hand a stick with a curved handle, from which depended a knotted string, which she waved gayly above the young artist as he rose into a sitting position. Then she drew it back suddenly with a startled exclamation, and her face grew crimson.

"I beg your pardon," she faltered; "I thought that it was my brother Tom."

"Neither Tom nor Harry, only Dick, very much at your service, Miss Bo-Peep—or do you still answer to the name of Rosalind given you in baptism?"

"Mr. Dedham! How did you know me?" asked Rosalind, ignoring his question and digging holes in the ground with her stick.

"I saw your crook. By-the-way, where are your sheep?"

"Would children do instead of sheep? It happens that I am looking for some at this very moment."

"And I am busily sketching, as you may see. Yes, I should say that children would be capital sheep; shall I join in your frantic search?"

"You had better blow your horn first and look after your own cows. I passed them in the corn half an hour ago as I came along the path and found you—"

"I was not under a haystack; I was painting fast and furiously, as I told you before—don't you see my traps?"

"But how did you know me, Mr. Dedham? You haven't seen me for ages, not since"—

"Your Aunt Annie's dance for you at Pierce Hall. I have a strong memory, you see, and on that occasion you wore some sort of a blue or green dress, and your hair was shorter and your skin was fairer. Don't you compliment me on remembering so well? I didn't happen to notice your freckles that evening, but I suppose that they were there."

"They distress gran'mamma horridly," said the girl, putting up two little brown hands to hide them; "she makes me wash my face in buttermilk—ugh! how I hate it—but they come and they stay! Still, I don't really see how you come to know me—it seems strange that—oh, dear, did I hear a child crying?.."

"Never mind if you did. You know the rhyme: what is it? 'Let 'em alone and they'll come home'—how many are missing?"

"Two of my small sisters, one small brother, two small cousins, three small visitors. We were all playing

hide-and-seek, and when we got tired I took Jim's crook to hook down some apples, and"—

"Apples! and green ones, of course! You are a nice sort of a shepherdess! And you fed them to the infants, and now they are lying somewhere in the agonizing throes of cholera and you will be put in jail and hanged as a murder-ess! Let us run away quick, before they catch you!"

"They were not green, and you are very disagreeable and—frivolous! Besides, I ate them myself, except what I have in my pocket."

"You have apples in your pocket! And you see here before you a hapless human fellow-creature perishing with hunger, and you have never offered me even a bite!"

"What about the cholera?"

"Oh, you said they were not green; besides, you have partaken of them; let us die together, or, if we are brought back to life, I will be more generous than Adam. I will not say 'The woman Thou gavest me'—"

"It wouldn't be true if you did, and you mustn't be irreligious, as well as frivolous."

"Never mind what I am; tell me about yourself. When did you get home?"

"How did you know that I was away?"

"What do you suppose that I came to the island for?"

"Oh, I don't know; to fish, I suppose. Aren't there four miles of fishing? Oh, no, I forgot, you came to sketch, of course."

"Exactly. Also to see—your father and mother. I called on them day before yesterday, and they told me that you would be at home tomorrow."

"There isn't any to-morrow. I came yesterday."

"Moral—Always expect a girl two days before she is due."

"But how strange that mamma didn't tell me. When I spoke of you she—"

"Go on, why do you stop at such an exciting moment? When you spoke of me—what did you say?"

"Nothing."

"'Nothing for naught.' I hoped that you would please my flattered ear by—"

"Don't be a goose."

"I can't. Both sex and gigantic intellect forbid it, even had I the inclination, which I politely deny. How long is it since your Aunt Annie's party?"

"Several months, I believe."

"Several! Is that as near as you can come to the date? My memory is better than yours. It is six months to a day—or was yesterday."

When they had seated themselves side by side on the trunk of an old tree, Rosalind had tossed her hat aside and amused herself by stirring up the dry leaves with the stick she held. Now it dropped from her hand, and she bent to pick it up, lifting a face deeply flushed by the effort. The man watched the bright curls and the little ear, all that he could see of the face, intently. The ear was crimson.

"Did you have any reason for coming yesterday?" he asked. "Had you an engagement here?" She was silent. "I had. I told someone that I would be back from Europe and would see her six months her six months from the night of your Aunt Annie's party. Do you know who it was? Do you know where she is? Little Bo-peep, what a humbug you are!"

Still the head did not turn, though it drooped a little and the bright color stained the brown throat.

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