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## In the Footprints of Spring.

A STORY OF VIOLETS UNPLUCKED.

The mountain road went straight up. On either hand slender poplars sprang heavenward above the under tangle of dogwood. Beneath the dogwood fairy mooses began to assume green tints as delicate and evanescent to the eyes as those sometimes to be discerned in the skies of November. Out of sight down a hollow, a narrow creek, flooded by melting February snows, sang like birds before daybreak. That morning I had come from my lonely house on the trail of the first arbutus. I had found green leaves beneath the brown and dead, had found green buds clustered beneath the green and the living, but of flower not a color, of fragrance not a whiff.

"Too low," I said to myself; "it will have come out up higher."

Presently the road began to wind, and I came to the snows that sent a million rivulets to seek my singing creeks. Old cedar trees filed along the wild way. They warded the winds. They leaned far over to shoulder the snows. They garnered the stray suns of the cloudy month, and under them, in deep, golden-brown clefts, how often had I come to the lips of the sleeping springtime! I knew the cleft that was deepest, sunniest, most guarded of all, and that way my steps were bent when an old astonishment stopped them sheer. The snow was firm along the lifted slope of the road, and there before me went the little footprints, with the prints of a horse's hoofs following after. The feet of a grown up elf might have made them. Their slenderness and straightness were as sure as the flight of a swallow. One of mine would have engulfed two of them. I followed, so enchanted with the charm of the moment, that I failed to ask of myself one of those stupid questions with which we destroy the exquisite strangeness of life. "Whose?" "Why?" "Whence?" What did I care? It was enough that they led to the cleft that was deepest, sunniest, most guarded. I shut my eyes in the sun, and a girl with the fragile white youth of a wood flower gathered her black riding habit about her in one slim hand, while the other bent back the sweet cedar boughs to let her pass. Even in a dream so vague a vision could not linger. I waited no longer, but parted the branches and entered the chapel of the spring as one should, with pulses beating for a sign of her favor, yet with a heart in tears for my unworthiness. She of the small footprints had been before. The brown dead leaves had been softly disturbed. She had looked first upon the unveiled face of the spring. But (and of the matchless rarity of her refraining, you other women may judge) she had not broken off one flower cluster. She had not even brushed its most outward blooms from one inviolate petal. She had but knelt and worshiped; but I buried my face in that incredible sweetness and freshness and bruised and loved it like the brute I was. Yet I did not gather it. No, there are basenesses of which I am incapable. I never gather a wild flower to die at the lonely house. There are hot-house flowers and garden flowers that are sown for this—that are planted to be pulled—that are gathered to die, but I let the wild flowers stay at home.

"Beloved, beloved," I cried to her lying there; but as I went down to my lonely house I knew that I must not even seek to know her name. My wood roads are very beautiful. When the March violets carpet my level groves of oak, Persian rug fashion—they are far too precious to be lavished out of sight in nooks and corners—it is unforgettable, miraculous—blue beds for the sun shapes to sleep in—blueforests for the fairies to kiss in—or, in the

dewy hours, a million opals and sapphires spilled from an eastern treasure jar on the pale green mosses. Astonishment transtixes but once. The little footprints did not surprise me here. I beheld them with a delicious sadness because of the short time my own might be set beside them along my beautiful road. I knew that, although a thousand violets had not been missed, she had not taken one. I had her gentleness by heart. She could as soon have hurt a little blue-eyed sister child. This subtler gentleness subdued me also. I did not bruise the unplucked violets with my lips. I stooped but once to softly touch a pallid cluster in the shadow of an arching root. It was as if I caressed her hand in the shadow and the silence.

"Beloved," I cried, half kneeling there, I dared not imagine her face when I went back to the lonely house. But the whiteness of the first arbutus—I thought of that—the blueness of the opal-leaved violets—I could not but remember that—and the little footprints went before me all night in my dream. I had followed them to the opal gate of paradise before I woke.

That day I gathered hundreds of roses from the garden and illumined the lonely house with them. And my lady of the old chateau came in the sunlit evening, and allowed me to pluck for her my hot-house fruits, and graciously gave me a toast out of Omar to put heart into my wine. My lady's gown was an unbelievable unadorned white thing with silver shadows where the folds fell, and a silver girdle no wider than a willow leaf to gather them close at the waist. But I was not to be deceived. It was no more simple than the white hot-house rose in her girdle.

"There was once a gown of white," said I, dreamily. "I doubt if it cost six francs, and she made it herself. It clad her as its color clothes a flower, and a blue ribbon did her for a girdle—but then, she was only seventeen."

"I am twenty-seven," said the lady of the Old Chateau, swirling over to me, with vague bewilderment in her blue, dark, beautiful eyes; "but, when I was seventeen, white muslin seemed measured out of white clouds, and blue ribbons unrolled themselves straight down from the blue skies between." She feigned to stifle a sigh behind the white rose in her hand; but for all that, she looked perfectly contented with her twenty-seven years and her lovely face of the world and her hot-house rose. Then my lady, a trifle wearied, perhaps, by white and blue irrelevancies, said to those others who trailed their lesser brightness after, that it would be amusing to stroll through my oak woods at set of sun, if I would show the way.

"It is as if one of Abbey's Venetian pastels should wish it," said I, discontentedly, for I did not wish the little footprints defaced, perhaps effaced altogether, and I knew that they would break my violets.

She bent puzzled brows up on me. "That gown is good to paint," I explained; "but, for strolling through damp groves, what profanation!"

I meant of the groves, but my lady pretended to think that I meant the gown.

"It is a shame," she murmured; "but I will hold it up, and even if the worst—a shower—comes, indeed, sir, I have others at the chateau. So!"

I offered the provoking lady my arm. Now there are various byways branching off as one goes to the oak woods, and down these our companions wandered by threes and twos, until, when we gained the wood road, we were quite alone. Because of the footprints this suited me well, for now I had only to keep my lady from preceiving them, being in no humor for the gay conjecture that would play around my sacred subject. My lady has many moods—as many

moods as a rose diamond has facets and each as brilliant—but this was not a mood of the diamond that she fell into on coming with me among the lace-like shadows of the leafless trees. It was a mood of the opal—as if a violet should become sad. I had never seen her so, and unrest stirred me. I wondered; I said that I wondered, and we both looked down. The first little footprint lay before us. With a faint exclamation she withdrew her hand from my arm. Then she lifted a little those wonderful folds, fitting her slender foot into the print and looking timidly at me with eyes that I had never seen before—the eyes of her early girlhood—and I knew, My own eyes summoned her. She came straight to me, and I touched her hand as I had touched the pale cluster of violets.

"You climbed along my snowy road last month," I said. "You found my first arbutus."

The color trembled in her face as it trembles in a little, rosy, wind-flickered cloud.

"I left it all for you," she answered. "And you did not break one violet?" I cried.

She shook her dear head. "Not one." "It is so wonderful," I mused; "why I am afraid to kiss you—I, who have been engaged to you for a half year—I, who have kissed you whenever it seemed convenient."

"Oh, you never loved me," she whispered.

"But I never knew you," I whispered back.

It is true that I had planned to marry the Chateleine of the Old Chateau, but I really married a girl of seventeen that Mey—and she? Her lover was but twenty, surely!

—TOWN TOPICS.



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