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CHAPTER VII.

"You are a cruel wretch, Adrien Strong, and it would only be serving you right if you could be paid back in your own coin. There, and there, and there!"

A crackling of broken wood, and the fragments of his ramrod flew piecemeal from the iron crosspiece of the fence against which it had been struck with furious force.

Adrien faced about hurriedly. He knew of no one who would thus dare to interfere with his discipline, surely not his mother, scarcely his grandfather.

Standing on the moss grown brick wall behind him was a vision altogether out of keeping with its surroundings. It was Liza Martin, silhouetted in gray serge garb and red fringed turban against the dark greenery of the graveyard. Her eyes and cheeks were aflame with indignation as she flung the last splinter of his broken ramrod at his feet and brushed her reddened palms against each other to free them from dust and splinters.

The stormclouds on Adrien's face gradually passed away. It was such an exceedingly comical turn he was ready to laugh. Such transitions came easily to him. But the girl's face was too stern yet awhile for him to venture upon premature mirth. Of course this must be Eben Martin's daughter. He regarded himself as a good judge of female beauty, and this girl, who stood there calmly adjusting her displaced cuffs, filled his most rigid requirements.

"Who are you?" he asked, quite unnecessarily.

"I am Eliza Martin, Governor Strong's overseer's daughter. I have been prowling about here. The views are pretty from this point. My brother Seth left me here when he went by with the wagon to haul cotton to the gin. I am waiting for him to pick me up on his return. I come here to sketch very often. You have spoiled it for me. I am telling you this so that you need not think I went out of my way to interfere. I was in there with Gabriella when I heard your murderous blows. At school I was vice president of a society for the prevention of cruelty to animals. We don't have such societies here at home, but I know of no place where one is more needed than in this plantation. Poor, poor doggy!"

All this time Adrien was thinking much more about the girl herself than about what she was saying.

Yes, she was pretty, the prettiest girl by long odds he had seen since leaving college. Rather self possessed—that was the strong mindedness, he supposed, that his grandfather complained of. Her voice was marvelously sweet, however, and clear. He should like to hear it again. Even when denouncing his brutality it had never once risen to shrillness.

"I think you need not change your sketching ground, Miss Martin. I am at home very little and hunt still less. I was trying to walk off a fit of ill temper this morning."

Liza flashed a mocking smile at him. "And succeeded admirably. Poor old doggy, didn't he, now?"

She was on her knees, with one hand softly smoothing the hair over the welts made by the ramrod on Sarah Jane's quivering flanks. "I imagine you have spoiled your dog for a hunter," she said more gravely. "She will never be anything but a miserable coward after this. See how she cringes when you make one step toward her."

"I fancy Sandy has lied to me. The dog is a miserable, cringing cur by nature. Blood will tell in man or beast."

"True. And as this is nothing but a miserable cringing cur by nature, fit for the quarters only, suppose you give her to me."

She was standing up now and without a tinge of cowardice was looking him placidly in the face. His mistake was irretrievable. He flushed and stammered and made matters infinitely worse. If she would only turn those mocking eyes away from his crimson cheeks for half a second! All the wrath that had been accumulating through the sunlit hours of that serene October morning turned inward with fierce self denunciation, forcing him to blurt out: "I am a cad, a brute, an imbecile, not worthy to stand in the presence of any good and gentle woman."

Liza regarded him in reflective silence. It was as if she were trying to get him in proper perspective.

"Not quite as bad as all that, I imagine. You are simply the product of your environment. It was not that poor dog's shortcomings you were punishing. She happened to be the only safety valve at hand. Her helplessness was your vindication."

Adrien gaped at her like a chidden charity school culprit. She was altogether a new order of womankind. If Eben Martin's daughter had been 40 years old and himself 10, the absurdity of his present position would have been

less apparent. She had reduced him to a condition of absolute wordlessness. Retreat was the only thing left to him. Even that was attended with disaster.

He had flung his coat aside in order to give his arms freer play with the rod of discipline, and the contents of one pocket lay scattered among the bushes. He recovered the coat with a jerk, flung himself into it, and, seizing his gun, he goffed his cap surlily to Liza and turned his face homeward. A bitter sense of defeat was his only company. Sarah Jane still crouched at the feet of her deliverer.

Liza sat down on the brick steps to await Seth's coming. Her sketching mood was broken up, the serenity of her day shattered. Signs of the recent conflict lay about her in the downtrodden grass and the broken ramrod. There, too, were bits of paper that perhaps she had herself carelessly dropped from her portfolio.

(To be Continued.)

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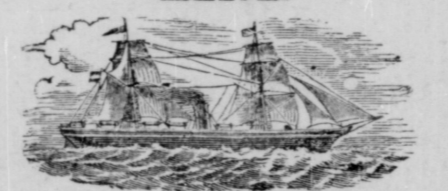
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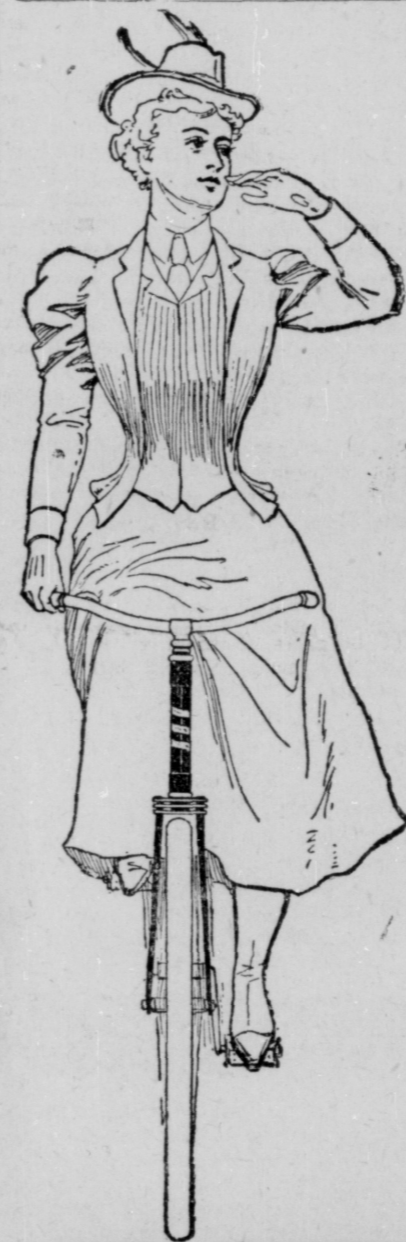
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