WHICH?

From Hearth and Home.

CHAPTER III.

"Oh, Carmen!" exclaimed Netta, when they were alone again. "I wonder if he really is thinking of buying the Woodlands; wouldn't it be jolly?"

Netta generally spoke in italics.

"I don't suppose he meant what he said," returned Carmen; "but I wish he did. I think he would be a nice landlord, and he is no nouveau riche. He is a gentleman, through and through."

But Netta—coquettish little minx—was not thinking of grave, handsome Gerald Lockwood so much in the character of landlord as of preux chevalier to her pretty self—and, well, who could prophesy? Netta read novels, and as much as she could, lived them. Life at West Selcombe had given her, hitherto, small chances; but then she was only just sixteen. That stumble was a lucky one. Carmen, she reflected, was dreadfully unromantic; but what could one expect at twenty nine! How old! Though, certainly, Carmen did not look it. Still, the fact remained. Then she, Netta, was far—far prettier. Carmen, indeed, wasn't pretty at all. Truly, a prophet hath no honor in his [or her] own country!

Lockwood called the next day, and found Netta's foot better, though she was still keeping it up. The young puss had the visitor almost to herself. Carmen came in for a minute, and begged to be excused; she was so busy, and she did not appear again until he was going. Netta had begged him to stay and have some tea; but to day he declined.

From the gossip of the neighborhood, the inmates of Cedars Farm learned that Mr. Lockwood had only appeared two days before Netta's accident. He was alone, and nothing was known of him, save that he evidently had plenty of money. He had taken the rooms without even asking the rent, and had asked a good many questions about the Woodlands of Farmer Brenton and others. It was the general opinion of West Selcombe that he had come down to "prospect," with a view to the purchase of the estate.

When Mr. Lockwood called again at Cedars Farm, three days later, Netta was standing in the porch, and ran down the path to meet him.

"So you are quite yourself again?" said he, taking the pretty hand in his. "I am very glad. And where is your sister?"

"In doors, and very busy. She always is."

"So it seems." It crossed him that Netta might help a little more; but no doubt she was useless. Only, he thought, Carmen had helped to make her so; she really spoiled this little sister. Even in this short time he had found out that self sacrifice was the key note of Carmen's life—self, of Netta's.

Carmen was superintending something in the dairy, to which place Lockwood easily penetrated; friendships ripen fast in the country.

The girl gave him her hand, and her vivid smile, and then paid little more attention to him. Netta wanted to show him the flower garden, and he let her lead him away, and smiled indulgently at her coquetries, letting her make him a buttonhole bequet and put in his coat. Netta began to think she was making a conquest, and said as much to Carmen that night. Carmen replied, gravely:

"Don't be silly, Netta; Mr. Lockwood must be forty, or near it, and you are a child. He treats you as one. Men of his age don't fall in love with school-girls."

"I'm not a school-girl!" cried Netta, indignantly; "and he's not a bit old."

Carmen began to grow a little troubled as the days wore on. Mr. Lockwood certainly liked coming to the farm, and appeared to like Netta's society, so she must be the attraction; but it seemed incredible that a grave, cultured, intellectual man, such as he was, should really care for a child of sixteen, not a wise or clever child either. Netta was wayward and vain; and despite all her sister's care, had stuffed her fluffy head with nonsense, foreseeing for herself a brilliant future. She was by no means a child in her ideas. Carmen could not well interfere. If Netta made a ridiculous mistake, it was her own fault; it was preposterous for the elder sister to assume, in act or word, that Gerald Lockwood could be wooing a bread and-butter miss of sixteen; on the other hand, if he had any such intention, Carmen, however much she might wonder at his folly, and pity him for the inevitable result, shrank from interference. Perhaps, too another feeling, of which, however, she was wholly unconscious, made her the more reserved in this matter. All the same, she was anxious and troubled, and wished Lockwood would leave West Selcombe; and yet—no! She could not wish that, though she suffered so much pain when he took Netta out, and she could not, or would not join them, or sat with Netta in the porch, and she had to be elsewhere. Not that she grudged Netta her happiness; only she felt lonely and shut out. It was not that Gerald Lockwood failed to ask her company, but she had so little time for excursions, and she knew Netta did not want her, and thought it most likely Lockwood did not. For courtesy he asked her, that was all. Carmen had grown used to consider herself an unattractive person, useful to work, to bear the burdens of life, to make Netta's life happy, not to have any joys, any individual life of her own. Carmen was not an Ibsen heroine.

One glorious morning Gerald Lockwood came up to the farm. Carmen was in the door way. He went forward quickly, and she gave him her hand in her usual frank, easy manner.

"Won't you come for a walk in the woods today?" he said. "Can you never spare me an hour or two?"

She shook her head. "Mine is a work a day life, Mr. Lockwood. I haven't much leisure. Netta can go."

"Forgive me! I asked you. What have you got to do this morning?"

"A good many things. Among others, to core a lot of apples in the kitchen."

"Couldn't Netta do that?"

"Netta!" opening her black eyes wide. "Netta never does things like that."

"I don't see why she shouldn't."

The flash of surprise in Carmen's face did not escape him.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

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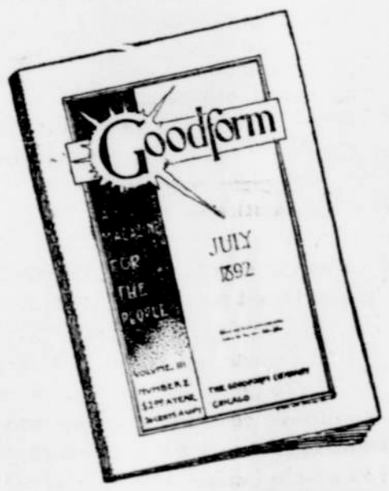

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