

A HOOSIER CHRONICLE

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"Dreams, books, are each a world
and books, we know,
Are a substantial world, both pure
and food;
Round these, with tendrils strong as
flesh and blood,
Our pastime and our happiness
will grow"

Wordsworth

in
Personal Talk



SYLVIA AND PROFESSOR KELTON

TO
EVANS WOOLLEN, ESQ.

The wise know that foolish legislation is a rope of sand which perishes in the twisting; that the State must follow and not lead the character and progress of the citizen; the strongest usurper is quickly got rid of; and they only who build on Ideas, build for eternity; and that the form of government which prevails is the expression of what cultivation exists in the population which permits it. The law is only a memorandum. We are superstitious, and esteem the statute somewhat; so much life as it has in the character of living men is its force.

EMERSON: *Politics*.

CONTENTS

- I. My LADY OF THE
CONSTELLATIONS
- II. SYLVIA GOES
VISITING
- III. A SMALL DINNER
AT MRS. OWEN'S
- IV. WE LEARN MORE
OF SYLVIA
INTRODUCING MR.
V. DANIEL
HARWOOD
HOME LIFE OF
VI. HOOSIER
STATESMEN
- VII. SYLVIA AT LAKE
WAUPEGAN
SILK STOCKINGS
VIII. AND BLUE
OVERALLS
- IX. DANIEL
HARWOOD
RECEIVES AN

- OFFER
- IN THE
- X. BOORDMAN
BUILDING
- XI. THE MAP ABOVE
BASSETT'S DESK
- XII. BLURRED
WINDOWS
- XIII. THE WAYS OF
MARIAN
- XIV. THE PASSING OF
ANDREW KELTON
- XV. A SURPRISE AT
THE COUNTRY
CLUB
- XVI. "STOP, LOOK,
LISTEN"
- XVII. A STROLL ACROSS
THE CAMPUS
- XVIII. THE KINGDOMS
OF THE WORLD
- XIX. THE THUNDER OF
THE CAPTAINS
- XX. INTERVIEWS IN

TWO KEYS

- XXI. A SHORT HORSE
SOON CURRIED
- XXII. THE GRAY
SISTERHOOD
- XXIII. A HOUSE-BOAT
ON THE
KANKAKEE
- XXIV. A WASHINGTON'S
BIRTHDAY BALL
- XXV. THE LADY OF THE
DAGUERREOTYPE
- XXVI. APRIL VISTAS
- XXVII. HEAT LIGHTNING
- XXVIII. A CHEERFUL
BRINGER OF BAD
TIDINGS
- XXIX. A SONG AND A
FALLING STAR
- XXX. THE KING HATH
SUMMONED HIS
PARLIAMENT
- XXXI. SYLVIA ASKS
QUESTIONS

XXXII. "MY BEAUTIFUL
ONE"

XXXIII. THE MAN OF
SHADOWS

XXXIV. WE GO BACK TO
THE BEGINNING
A POSTSCRIPT BY
THE CHRONICLER

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CHAPTER I

MY LADY OF THE CONSTELLATIONS

Sylvia was reading in her grandfather's library when the bell tinkled. Professor Kelton had few callers, and as there was never any certainty that the maid-of-all-work would trouble herself to answer, Sylvia put down her book and went to the door. Very likely it was a student or a member of the faculty, and as her grandfather was not at home Sylvia was quite sure that the interruption would be the briefest.

The Kelton cottage stood just off the campus, and was separated from it by a narrow street that curved round the college and stole, after many twists and turns, into town. This thoroughfare was called "Buckeye Lane," or more commonly the "Lane." The college had been planted literally in the wilderness by its founders, at a time when Montgomery, for all its dignity as the seat of the county court, was the most colorless of Hoosier hamlets, save only as the prevailing mud colored everything. Buckeye Lane was originally a cow-path, in the good old times when every reputable villager kept a red cow and pastured it in the woodlot that subsequently became Madison Athletic Field. In those days the Madison faculty, and their wives and daughters, seeking social diversion among the hospitable townfolk, picked their way down the Lane by lantern light. An ignorant municipal council had later, when natural gas threatened to boom the town into cityhood, changed Buckeye Lane to University Avenue, but the community refused to countenance any such impious trifling with tradition. And besides, Madison prided herself then as now on being a

college that taught the humanities in all soberness, according to ideals brought out of New England by its founders. The proposed change caused an historic clash between town and gown in which the gown triumphed. University forsooth!

Professor Kelton's house was guarded on all sides by trees and shrubbery, and a tall privet hedge shut it off from the Lane. He tended with his own hands a flower garden whose roses were the despair of all the women of the community. The clapboards of the simple story-and-a-half cottage had faded to a dull gray, but the little plot of ground in which the house stood was cultivated with scrupulous care. The lawn was always fresh and crisp, the borders of privet were neatly trimmed and the flower beds disposed effectively. A woman would have seen at once that this was a man's work; it was all a little too regular, suggesting engineering methods rather than polite gardening.

Once you had stepped inside the cottage the absence of the feminine touch was even more strikingly apparent. Book shelves crowded to the door,—open shelves, that had the effect of pressing at once upon the visitor the most formidable of dingy volumes, signifying that such things were of moment to the master of the house. There was no parlor, for the room that had originally been used as such was now shelf-hung and book-lined, and served as an approach to the study into which it opened. The furniture was old and frayed as to upholstery, and the bric-à-brac on an old-fashioned what-not was faintly murmurous of some long-vanished feminine hand. The scant lares and penates were sufficient to explain something of this shiplike trimness of the housekeeping. The broken half of a ship's wheel clung to the wall above the narrow grate, and the white marble mantel supported a sextant, a binocular, and other incidentals of a shipmaster's profession. An

engraving of the battle of Trafalgar and a portrait of Farragut spoke further of the sea. If we take a liberty and run our eyes over the bookshelves we find many volumes relating to the development of sea power and textbooks of an old vintage on the sailing of ships and like matters. And if we were to pry into the drawers of an old walnut cabinet in the study we should find illuminative data touching the life of Andrew Kelton. It is well for us to know that he was born in Indiana, as far as possible from salt water; and that, after being graduated from Annapolis, he served his country until retired for disabilities due to a wound received at Mobile Bay. He thereafter became and continued for fifteen years the professor of mathematics and astronomy at Madison College, in his native state; and it is there that we find him, living peacefully with his granddaughter Sylvia in the shadow of the college.

Comfort had set its seal everywhere, but it was keyed to male ideals of ease and convenience; the thousand and one things in which women express themselves were absent. The eye was everywhere struck by the strict order of the immaculate small rooms and the snugness with which every article had been fitted to its place. The professor's broad desk was free of litter; his tobacco jar neighbored his inkstand on a clean, fresh blotter. It is a bit significant that Sylvia, in putting down her book to answer the bell, marked her place carefully with an envelope, for Sylvia, we may say at once, was a young person disciplined to careful habits.

"Is this Professor Kelton's? I should like very much to see him," said the young man to whom she opened.

"I'm sorry, but he isn't at home," replied Sylvia, with that directness which, we shall find, characterized her speech.

The visitor was neither a member of the faculty nor a student, and as her grandfather was particularly wary of agents she was on guard against the stranger.

"It is important for me to see him. If he will be back later I can come again."

The young man did not look like an agent; he carried no telltale insignia. He was tall and straight and decidedly blond, and he smiled pleasantly as he fanned himself with his straw hat. Where his brown hair parted there was a cowlick that flung an untamable bang upon his forehead, giving him a combative look that his smile belied. He was a trifle too old for a senior, Sylvia reflected, soberly studying his lean, smooth-shaven face, but not nearly old enough to be a professor; and except the pastor of the church which she attended, and the physician who had been called to see her in her childish ailments, all men in her world were either students or teachers. The town men were strange beings, whom Professor Kelton darkly called Philistines, and their ways and interests were beyond her comprehension.

"If you will wait I think I may be able to find him. He may have gone to the library or to the observatory, or for a walk. Won't you please come in?"

Her gravity amused the young man, who did not think it so serious a matter to gain an interview with a retired professor in a small college. They debated, with much formality on both sides, whether Sylvia should seek her grandfather or merely direct the visitor to places where he would be likely to find him; but as the stranger had never seen Professor Kelton, they concluded that it would be wiser for Sylvia to do the seeking.

She ushered the visitor into the library, where it was cooler than on the doorstep, and turned toward the campus. It is to be noted that Sylvia moves with the buoyant ease of youth. She crosses the Lane and is on her own ground now as she follows the familiar walks that link the college buildings together. The students who pass her grin cheerfully and tug at their caps; several, from a distance, wave a hand at her. One young gentleman, leaning from the upper window of the chemical laboratory, calls, "Hello, Sylvia," and jerks his head out of sight. Sylvia's chin lifts a trifle, disdainful of the impudence of sophomores. She has recognized the culprit's voice, and will deal with him later in her own fashion.

Sylvia is olive-skinned and dark of eye. And they are interesting eyes—those of Sylvia, luminous and eager—and not fully taken in at a glance. They call us back for further parley by reason of their grave and steady gaze. There is something appealing in her that takes hold of the heart, and we remember her after she has passed us by. We shall not pretend that her features are perfect, but their trifling irregularities contribute to an impression of individuality and character. Her mouth, for example, is a bit large, but it speaks for good humor. Even at fifteen, her lips suggest firmness and decision. Her forehead is high and broad, and her head is well set on straight shoulders. Her dark hair is combed back smoothly and braided and the braid is doubled and tied with a red ribbon. The same color flashes in a flowing bow at her throat. These notes will serve to identify Sylvia as she crosses the campus of this honorable seat of learning on a June afternoon.

This particular June afternoon fell somewhat later than the second consulship of Grover Cleveland and well within the ensuing period of radicalism. The Hoosiers with whom we shall have to do are not those set forth by Eggleston, but the breed visible to-day in urban

marketplaces, who submit themselves meekly to tailors and schoolmasters. There is always corn in their Egypt, and no village is so small but it lifts a smokestack toward a sky that yields nothing to Italy's. The heavens are a soundingboard devised for the sole purpose of throwing back the mellifluous voices of native orators. At the cross-roads store, philosophers, perched upon barrel and soap-box (note the soap-box), clinch in endless argument. Every county has its Theocritus who sings the nearest creek, the bloom of the may-apple, the squirrel on the stake-and-rider fence, the rabbit in the corn, the paw-paw thicket where fruit for the gods lures farm boys on frosty mornings in golden autumn. In olden times the French *voyageur*, paddling his canoe from Montreal to New Orleans, sang cheerily through the Hoosier wilderness, little knowing that one day men should stand all night before bulletin boards in New York and Boston awaiting the judgment of citizens of the Wabash country upon the issues of national campaigns. The Hoosier, pondering all things himself, cares little what Ohio or Illinois may think or do. He ventures eastward to Broadway only to deepen his satisfaction in the lights of Washington or Main Street at home. He is satisfied to live upon a soil more truly blessed than any that lies beyond the borders of his own commonwealth. No wonder Ben Parker, of Henry County, born in a log cabin, attuned his lyre to the note of the first blue-bird and sang,—

'Tis morning and the days are long.

It is always morning and all the days are long in Indiana.

Sylvia was three years old when she came to her grandfather's. This she knew from the old servant; but where her earlier years had been spent or why or with whom she did not know; and when her grandfather was so kind, and her studies so absorbing, it did not

seem worth while to trouble about any state of existence antedating her first clear recollections—which were of days punctuated and governed by the college bell, and of people who either taught or studied, with glimpses now and then of the women and children of the professors' households. There were times, when the winds whispered sharply round the cottage on winter nights, or when the snow lay white on the campus and in the woods beyond, when some memory taunted her, teasing and luring afar off; and once, as she walked with her grandfather on a day in March, and he pointed to a flock of wild geese moving *en échelon* toward the Kankakee and the far white Canadian frontier, she experienced a similar vague thrill of consciousness, as though remembering that elsewhere, against blue spring sky, she had watched similar migrant battalions sweeping into the north.

She had never known a playmate. The children of the college circle went to school in town, while she, from her sixth year, was taught systematically by her grandfather. The faithful oversight of Mary, the maid-of-all-work, constituted Sylvia's sole acquaintance with anything approximating maternal care. Mary, unknown to Sylvia and Professor Kelton, sometimes took counsel—the privilege of her long residence in the Lane—of some of the professors' wives, who would have been glad to help directly but for the increasing reserve that had latterly marked Professor Kelton's intercourse with his friends and neighbors.

Sylvia was vaguely aware of the existence of social distinctions, but in Buckeye Lane these were entirely negligible; they were, in fact, purely academic, to be studied with other interesting phenomena by spectacled professors in quiet laboratories. It may, however, be remarked that Sylvia had sometimes gazed, not without a twinge, upon the daughter of a village manufacturer

whom she espied flashing through the Lane on a black pony, and this young person symbolized all worldly grandeur to Sylvia's adoring vision. Sylvia knew the world chiefly from her reading,—Miss Alcott's and Mrs. Whitney's stories at first, and "St. Nicholas" every month, on a certain day that found her meeting the postman far across the campus; and she had read all the "Frank" books,—the prized possessions of a neighbor's boy,—from the Maine woods through the gunboat and prairie exploits of that delectable hero. At fourteen she had fallen upon Scott and Bulwer and had devoured them voraciously during the long vacation, in shady corners of the deserted campus; and she was now fixing Dickens's characters ineffaceably in her mind by Cruikshank's drawings. She was well grounded in Latin and had a fair reading knowledge of French and German. It was true of Sylvia, then and later, that poetry did not greatly interest her, and this had been attributed to her undoubted genius for mathematics. She was old for her age, people said, and the Lane wondered what her grandfather meant to do with her.

The finding of Professor Kelton proves to be, as Sylvia had surmised, a simple matter. He is at work in a quiet alcove of the college library, a man just entering sixty, with white, close-trimmed hair and beard. The eyes he raises to his granddaughter are like hers, and there is a further resemblance in the dark skin. His face brightens and his eyes kindle as he clasps Sylvia's slender, supple hand.

"It must be a student—are you sure he isn't a student?"

Sylvia was confident of it.

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