

AN APRIL FOOL.

“**T**O-MORROW is the 1st of April, Bob,” said my chum Dick Mylius, as we trudged homewards after a day’s sport with the ferrets and terriers among the rats of the home farm ; “let’s have some fun ; can’t we make someone a regular April fool ?”

“Who is there to make, I should like to know ?” returned I. “Old Pearson has been caught so often that’s she’s up to everything, and Binks is always such a fool that there’s nothing new in his being one on the first of April.”

“No, but couldn’t we fly at higher game this year ? What do you say to old Chutney, now ?”

Old Chutney was our joint tutor, the respectable vicar of Hadly, and even my irreverent boy’s imagination shrank abashed before Dick’s suggestion.

“Nonsense,” I said ; “we should get into no end of a scrape.”

But when did a thought of consequences ever deter Dick from meditated mischief ? He went on as if my reply had breathed nothing but cordial cooperation.

“The worst of it is, that everything is so stale, and you’re the slowest fellow, Bob, that a man could well have at his elbow for anything that requires head. I should think, now, that Heathfield would be just the sort to help a fellow in a difficulty of the kind. He’s about up to everything, I take it.”

“There won’t be a greater fool made to-morrow than Captain Heathfield is to-day,” said I sulkily, not at all pleased by the slighting estimation of my capacity for fun, otherwise mischief, that was so frankly avowed by my friend.

Dick opened his eyes.

“Why, I thought you were ever so fond of Heathfield ; you were always saying he was the jolliest fellow going, not a week ago.”

“Well, perhaps I did not think him a bad sort once, but since he’s taken to make such a donkey of himself—”

“As how ?” inquired Dick, wondering.

“Why, by dangling after the womenkind, sir ; by pinning himself to Milly’s apron-string. By Jove ! I believe the fellow’s spooney upon Milly,” and the contemptuous laugh with which I emphasised my opinion of this unheard-of absurdity on the part of Captain Heathfield partly soothed the feelings which Dick had ruffled.

“Pooh ! I don’t believe a word of it,” said Dick, steadily ; “Philip Heathfield’s too jolly a fellow, too sensible to be an idiot about a girl. You’re always finding a mare’s nest, Bob.”

In indignant, and what I fondly hoped was dignified silence too, I marched onward after this, and we had already turned the corner of the fir-plantation nearest the house, when I stopped short, and laying my hand heavily upon Dick’s shoulder demanded with a stern triumph befitting my feelings and the occasion,

“Look there ! what do you say now, my lad ?”

“Look there ! look where ? O, ah ! I see,” and Dick’s round eyes opened their widest as he certainly obeyed my injunction to look.

Of course we had no business to see what we did. No eyes ruder or more curious

than the robin's twittering in the thorn, or the squirrel's swaying himself airily from branch to branch of the bending firs, should have seen the pretty, tender, foolish scene. My sister Milly sitting in the rustic summer-house which it was her especial fancy to have built among the tall fir-trees, because she liked to hear the sough of the wind among their branches in winter, and loved their faint aromatic perfumes in summer. My sister Milly, and close beside her, so close and bending so low towards her that we could only see the back of his dark curly head, Captain Philip Heathfield. But Milly's face was plainly visible, and no winter wind, certainly not the soft rain-laden one of this last day of March, ever brought such a colour into that face as was wavering there now. She was looking down hard at the two little feet which her looped-up skirt revealed very sufficiently, but I don't think she saw or was conscious of them. No, my boy's shrewdness absolved her of that weakness directly, only to convict her surely of the greater.

"The little ninny!" I muttered in my inward wrath; "but then girls are such idiots! As for him,—well, what do you say now?" I asked aloud of Dick.

"Appearances certainly against him," replied Dick with a queer glance of his eyes towards the unconscious couple; "but then I never judge by appearances myself: 'not so bad as we seem' is the motto for me, old boy."

"O, bother you and your mottoes! I'm not going to stand this," I cried out, as Philip Heathfield, after the merest pretence of unwillingness in the world from Milly, got firm hold of one of her hands. "Hullo, Milly!" I shouted loudly; "you'll be getting cold in that damp hole, and it's coming on to rain; if you don't want to be drenched, you had better come at once."

The two started hastily apart, and the next instant came out to meet us.

Now, looking back to that day, through the years that have made it a distant one, I recall and do the justice it deserves to Philip Heathfield's good temper and perfect breeding on that occasion; then, I thought his good nature and unimpaired heartiness of manner, as the two joined us and we all walked homewards together, only a mean attempt to come over me with soft sawdor.

From a combination of feeling, in which a boyish scorn for anything like spooniness, wounded self-love at Dick's remarks, and a lordly desire to show a brother's authority over a sister, albeit that sister was older than myself by several years, all played a part, I made myself as conspicuously disagreeable on that afternoon walk as my opportunities permitted.

I persisted in walking close by Milly. I made her take my arm, though my only motive for such an unheard-of proceeding was the idea that Captain Heathfield might offer his. I could not prevent him walking on her other side if he chose, but he didn't; after the first few minutes dropping quietly behind with Dick, and listening with much apparent interest and appreciation to a history of our day's sport.

As if I was to be bamboozled and thrown off the scent by Mr. Philip Heathfield's absorption in the deeds of my terrier Snap, or Miss Milly's apparent forgetfulness of the gentleman walking behind her! Up to the time of our arrival at our den, I managed easily to prevent or spoil the little sport the two had been engaged upon, and yet wide awake as I was, they managed to shake hands at parting just when my head was turned another way.

Then, with his usual cheery good-bye to us, Heathfield turned away, and Milly, without lingering, ran lightly up the steps and disappeared into the house, while I proceeded more leisurely.

A little slip of paper, folded carelessly longway, lay on the door-mat as I entered, which I picked up and opened, scarcely thinking what I was doing, though the few words scratched hurriedly inside made me open my eyes and catch my breath with an

exclamation. The paper bore no superscription, and the line it contained no signature ; but it needed no wizard to tell that Philip Heathfield had taken the means of finishing the communication we had been the means of interrupting with Miss Milly. While I was still standing with the paper in my hand, behold Milly came flying down stairs, perturbation in her countenance, and looking wildly here and there as she came. She stopped short when she saw me, and then came on more deliberately, but still looking anxiously on the floor and down the steps from the open door. I knew the paper was hers, and that she must have dropped it as she ran in after leaving Heathfield, in all probability without having had time to open it ; and I was almost in the act of tossing it contemptuously towards the silly goose, when a boyish desire to mar this sort of sport as much as possible, made me crumple it up in my hand and walk away whistling instead. I only meant to worry her by withholding the bit of paper at the time, and have some fun by teasing her afterwards ; but, contrary to her usual practice, Milly during this evening showed so much susceptibility to being teased, and was altogether so unlike her cordial happy self, that half in revenge, half because the sport, that had such a delectable spice of torture to flavour it, was too enticing to be given up, I kept the paper to myself. However, in following up the game with more ardour than prudence, I at last managed to awaken my mother's attention to what was going on, and was thereupon dismissed from the drawing-room and the company of the ladies, to find my amusement elsewhere, and in other ways, as my mother observed severely, "than in persecuting and distressing my sister." To the uninterrupted hour or two of my own companionship which ensued on this, is due, I think, the inspiration of which this present day is the record.

Dick Mylius was still in bed the next morning when I marched into his room and sat down on the bed beside him.

"You wanted to make an April fool, yesterday," said I ; "get up, and come along, and you shall see the jolliest performance in that line that ever you split your sides over, master Dick."

Dick was broad awake immediately.

"What are you up to?" said he, sitting upright ; "I'm with you if there is any fun to be had."

"Look here," and I produced the piece of paper I had picked up in the hall the day before.

Dick read it, and then stared at me in broad surprise.

It contained only these words, and of course to Dick they needed explanation : "If 'yes' to what I asked, will you come to the summer-house in the firs to-morrow morning at nine o'clock?"

"Of course I'm the worst fellow at anything like fun going," said I, answering the look with a lofty sense of that injurious accusation still rankling in my memory ; "but here's my little plan ;" and leaning down I detailed it as succinctly as possible.

There was a burst of explosive laughter from Dick ; an exclamation of "Jolly !" and an immediate tumble up on the part of that young gentleman to be ready for action.

When Dick was dressed, we stole out of the house, and walked towards the fir-plantation already mentioned, in which it was our object to conceal ourselves, fully to enjoy the sport provided. It was a soft still morning, as I recollect, with the moisture of coming rain in the mild air, and a plaintive sound in the wind as it sighed fitfully among the heavy pines ; beyond this nothing stirred, as we took up our position so as to command at once a view of the summer-house, and conceal ourselves from anyone approaching it. As we did so, the half-seen figure of someone within the summer-house became distinctly visible ; someone who sat in a quiet attitude of rest or

expectation, and the fashion of whose garments was as the fashion of my sister Milly's.

Dick burst into a laugh as he caught sight of it, but I admonished him to silence with an emphatic dig, and we both crouched down among the stumps of some felled trees and waited.

How still it was ! Nothing but that hollow sigh of the wind, and the answering shiver of the pines. The quiet figure within the summer-house never stirred, and Dick began to show signs of impatience.

"By George, I should be ashamed to keep a lady waiting if I were Heathfield," he was beginning when I made a gesture of warning ; and the next instant came the sound of a light quick footfall among the pine-needles, that carpeted all the ground so thickly hereabouts. I knew the sound of that step almost as well as Milly herself could have done ; and had just time to drag Dick into cover as Philip Heathfield passed us, his handsome face all aglow with colour that something beside the sweet morning air had brought into it, his handsome eyes brightening with something only dimly fathomed by my boy's intelligence, as he caught sight of that waiting figure in the little alcove. He sprang lightly up the steps and entered. There was an instant's pause, an instant's dead silence, then an exclamation ; the figure fell with a resounding crash to the ground, and Heathfield dashed down the steps again, his face white and livid with passion. Now was our time ; now we should, and had agreed that we would have sprang from our hiding-place to confront the "April Fool ;" instead of which we looked at one another in scared silence, as Heathfield strode past us once more, awed by the white anguish of passion in his face.

He was far out of the plantation before we slunk out likewise, first stripping the old lay figure, a relic of my father's fancy for art-studies while he lived, of the garments I had coaxed Milly's maid into providing me with, hiding the figure for the present, and stowing away the clothes for convenient removal. After all, the jest had hung fire, and I don't think either of us felt very comfortable about it ; though Dick, with his characteristic inability to contemplate consequences, had forgotten all about the matter in an hour.

Captain Heathfield did not put in his accustomed appearance at our house that day. The next and the next came and went, but never brought him. My mother remarked on the subject ; and Milly, what did Milly think of it ? She said nothing, she made no sign, except the pitious and involuntary one of starting and colouring nervously at every ring at the door-bell, or any sudden footstep on the gravel without, and being paler and more silent than her cheerful wont at other times. A sore feeling gathered about my heart almost in spite of me, as I watched these signs of disturbance ; and to relieve myself I cherished into life an indignant scorn of Captain Heathfield's continued signs of resentment at the joke played upon him.

"His lordship is in the sulks, and is doing dignity, I suppose," thought I, glancing sideways at Milly's wistful face beside the window. "By Jove ! Milly's too good for—"

My conscience sprang into life as it were, with the words "too good." Ah, a thousand little acts of sisterly kindness and gentleness came thronging upon me ; repaid how ? I went up to where she stood, put my arm about her neck, roughly enough I daresay, and said :

"Milly, I want to tell you something—something about Heathfield ; he's a worse-tempered fellow than I thought ; he can't take a joke," I went on, becoming more dogged as Milly turned her frightened face towards me.

"A joke, Bob ? what can you mean ?"

Her great brown eyes looked at me full of pitiful fear and pain. I had seen some-

thing like that look now and then in some snared creature of the woods ; and softening again, I drew her on my knee, and began, as I said, to tell her all about it.

The great brown eyes watched me as I floundered through the recital of what had seemed to me, only a day or two ago, such a capital joke ; and when I stumbled to the conclusion, were hidden in Milly's hands, as she cried :

"O, Bob ! how could you ? how could you ? what must he think of me ?"

"Now, Milly, why should he think you had played off the joke ? O, ah ! I see ; the letter, of course. Very well then," said I, rising and putting her off my knee ; "very well then, there's only one thing to be done."

"What, Bob dear ?"

"Of course I'm not going to let you bear the blame of my deeds ; of course I shall tell Heathfield all about it," said I, loftily.

"But wait, Bob," said poor Milly anxiously, and yet with something like light coming back into her face ; "will not that be almost as if I—but yet, O," she cried, clasping her hands, "I cannot bear he should think that I could trifle with him so."

"Very well, Milly ; there's no occasion he should think so longer than to-morrow morning. Look here, I'll go up to the Dale to-morrow as soon as ever I get away from old Chutney, and make it all straight. So now, my dear, don't look so woe-begone ; I'll make everything as right as possible to-morrow."

Up to the Dale, then, I wended my way the next morning about noon, and as I came in sight of the house, I saw that the windows of the rooms Philip Heathfield occupied were wide open ; and that from one Mrs. Mitchell herself was vigorously shaking a hearthrug or some such article of furniture.

"Hullo, Mrs. Mitchell ! Captain Heathfield's not in, I suppose," I called out.

"Not in, no, sir. The captain went away for good the morning afore yesterday. Lor, Master Bob, didn't you know ?"

"Gone away for good ?" I repeated incredulously.

"Leastways, sir, didn't give me no reason to think he was coming back. He went away all in a hurry like ; and it did come into my mind, and so I was saying to my master, that he had heard bad news p'r'aps, being as he was not quite like hisself. But anyhow, he's gone, sir ; and we've let his rooms to a gentleman as is coming from London for his health."

"Did Captain Heathfield go to London ?"

"Don't know indeed, sir ; our Jem drove him over to the railway station, sir ; but I don't know where he was a-going ; and yet, yes, now I come to think on it, I do mind that I saw some direction in London writ on his luggage, but I never noticed what it were. Lor, and to think the captain shouldn't never have told any of you up at the house, and you so intimate ! Ah, take my word for it, Master Bob, he had heard bad news, poor dear gentleman."

And that was the news I was to carry to poor little Milly ! As I walked dismally away on my road home again, I protest I didn't dare think of the pain I was doomed to give the innocent creature. She was sitting over her work when I went in. She did not run to meet me nor show any sign of impatience ; but ah, could I not see how the tender heart was fluttering under her light dress ? could I not read the anguish of hope and fear with which her great brown eyes looked up into mine ?

"Milly," and the great falter in my own voice as I spoke seemed to scare away all my efforts at steadiness, "O, Milly dear !" and I fairly broke down and hid my face, with the hot tears running over it.

There was a minute's pause. I did not dare look up, and then my sister's arms stole round my neck.

"Don't, Bob ; don't, my dear. You did not mean any harm ; and if it cannot be helped—somehow, I felt it would not be set right—it must be borne, dear," she repeated trembling ; " don't cry, Bob."

And this was all she said of her own trouble, though she soothed mine by every loving and tender word she knew. Later on, when I could speak, I told her how I had found Heathfield gone, and professed over and over again my intention of tracing him in London, if that were possible.

" It is not possible, dear," Milly said patiently ; " and, Bob, don't talk to me any more about it, please, nor of him."

" But, Milly, you forgive me ; you don't believe I would have done it if I had thought there was anything but girl's rubbish, you know, between you and—"

" Hush," said Milly, kissing me, " dear Bob ; I know you never meant to hurt me ; don't speak of it any more."

She glided away from me ; and, save that from that time she was gentler with me than she had ever been before—and Heaven knows she was always the tenderest of human creatures—nothing in her manner ever led me to suppose that she remembered my part in that unlucky first of April.

O the passive courage and endurance of these tender women ! O the height and depth, the length and breadth of their power to dissemble ! How, with horrible anguish, longing despair tearing at their hearts, they will hide the cruel wound, and go smiling on their way with courage that no man can match. Here was my sister Milly, for instance, to all appearance one of the softest and most yielding of God's creatures, baffling and defying my boy's penetration—after the first day of suspense was over—to understand the cost of my jest, and how much or how little its unforeseen result had really affected her. My mother spoke often of Philip Heathfield, wondering and speculating over the cause of his sudden and unexplained departure. Milly listened, and replied, if need were, with an indifference and composure that seemed to me perfect ; and if she never started the subject herself, never seemed to shirk it either.

And one morning, perhaps a fortnight after Heathfield disappeared, a letter in his handwriting lay on the breakfast-table addressed to Mrs. Lennox. My mother was long of opening it, turning it over and over to look at the post-marks and wondering at the contents. For my part, I could scarcely restrain my desire to snatch at the letter and put all conjecture to rest, and know that I fidgeted in my chair, and stifled exclamations of impatience in my bread and butter. But Milly sat perfectly quiet ; her dress may have fluttered a little at the bosom, the colour have wavered in her face, but I could not be sure. I know that my own face was burning, and that my hands shook.

And when the letter was opened, it was found to contain only a few lines. The writer briefly apologised for omitting the civility of a farewell in his hurried and explained that his apparent neglect in allowing so much time to elapse writing to supply that omission had been occasioned by the hasty arrangements consequent on his immediate departure for India, from whence the news, as Mrs. was doubtless aware, was so alarming as to make it incumbent on all officers absent leave to return to their regiments at once. The letter concluded with grateful remembrances of Mrs. Lennox's kindness and hospitality, and kind regards to her family. The postscript merely contained a request that she would hand an enclosure to Miss Lennox, which contained a dried flower Miss Lennox had once expressed some to see, and which Captain Heathfield had much pleasure in presenting to

Who could have guessed that the withered flower Milly took and laid quietly away bore a thorn among its shrivelled leaves that inflicted a cruel stab ? She bore it in

silence, and only drew closer the covering beneath which she hid the poor little heart it pierced.

Down with fever, in a climate where the thermometer stood at 86° in the shade. O the misery of those long bright days, when the sun was never hidden for a moment! the torture of those nights, when the mist steamed in through every crevice in the curtains of the palkee in which I was carried through that weary march! O how the uneasy motion of that horrible conveyance jarred my throbbing temples and nauseated me with a sensation every bit as bad as sea-sickness!—so that the unconsciousness which soon came, to render me indifferent to all things, came in the light of a blessing and a boon.

A grateful sense of cool air, the gentle sound of punkahs in motion, greeted my recovery from that trance of pain and weariness unutterable. Too weak to do anything but lie still in calm enjoyment, I made no effort to raise or even turn my head, till a sound of steps and voices entering roused me partly, and two figures came up and looked down silently at me. They were both tall men, both bronzed darkly by the fierce Indian sun, but the face of one of them set my feeble intellect struggling with memory.

"Where am I?" I inquired waveringly, finding myself presently quite unequal to the task, and staring, I daresay, with hollow, ghostly eyes at the face I thought I knew.

"Never mind," answered the owner of it, with a kind smile; "it's all right; but I see you don't remember me."

"Yes, yes, O yes," I cried out, for the smile lighted up the dark face into the likeness of one I remembered so well: "Philip Heathfield; O how long I have waited and wanted to see you again!"

"Have you?" he said kindly, and took my feeble fever-stricken hand into his friendly grasp; "I did not think you would remember me."

And one night, when he came into my room as usual to lighten the weary hours by his cordial companionship, I told him about it.

"But I can never say how heavily that schoolboy trick has lain on my conscience," I concluded; "or how sorry I am that poor little Milly should have lain under the imputation of having perpetrated it so many years."

He had heard me in perfect silence, his dark face growing darker and sterner, till I scarce knew the frank kindly visage that I had grown to love so.

He did not utter a word for minutes; then with a hard deep sigh—

"So many years! Well, well, Bob," he added presently, "if I had not been a hasty fool as well as an April one, perhaps it would not have ended as it has; but you see, it drove me wild to think that the girl I had asked to be my wife could play such a trick upon me when she knew I came to meet her that morning to hear her answer. I was a besotted idiot not to have known she would not have done it."

"Asked to be your wife! O, Heathfield, I never knew, never guessed that it had gone so far," I cried aghast; "O, poor little Milly! poor little Milly!"

"Ah! what of Milly?" he asked very eagerly and softly: "I was counting the cost of your ingenious jest to myself, Master Bob; I hadn't thought of Milly."

But I bowed my head in solemn silence before his eager questioning eyes and softened voice. Not easily or speedily had Milly forgotten her early love, I knew; for had I not—O God bless thee, Milly, and women like thee!—in spite of the wrong I had done, the greatest share of thy tender heart, save one, and more of thy confidence than any other living being? But I knew also that my next letters from home would bring me the tidings of her marriage with an old friend and neighbour, whose cause all our relations had vigorously aided for years.

"Milly was very much distressed that you should have gone away, thinking her capable of a very heartless trick, as she said; she was very unhappy at first," I answered faltering, and stopping awkwardly, as I saw his face change.

"At first," he repeated; "ah! I understand, Bob; I daresay she married long ago."

"No, no, not long ago; but I expect to hear of her marriage by next mail."

He got up, and walked backwards and forwards once or twice without speaking. Then, with that softened tone which seemed involuntary when he spoke of Milly:

"Well, so be it; God bless her, and make her happy! She is the only woman I ever cared about; and thank heaven I can think of her again now, as she always seemed to me in those dear old days, truest, kindest, best—"

He stopped; for, weakened by long illness, moved by many memories, inexpressibly pained and touched by his tender regretful voice, I dropped my head into my hands, and sobbed aloud.

He put his kind hand on my bowed head as gently as a woman.

"My dear lad, there is no need for these tears. Milly is happy, and I—well, I was the most to blame, after all."

Heathfield and I were together—nay, were we ever apart?—when the mail-bags were brought in, and the letters, papers, and books distributed, and we went off in company with our mutual possessions. Half an hour of silence and absorption.

"Well, Bob, plenty of good news and no bad from the dear old country, I hope?"

"No, more bad—that is—"

"Some doubtful? well, your sister's marriage is not that, I suppose?"

His face had flushed; I saw he wanted to get speaking and hearing of it over; and I got up, went over to him, and put an open letter in his hand.

He clutched it eagerly; and then seeming half ashamed to betray even that emotion, leisurely changed his seat, and settled himself comfortably before he read.

I never looked once towards him till I felt his hand suddenly on my shoulder. I looked up, there were tears in his dark eyes, and his deep voice shook.

"God bless her, Bob! God bless my little Milly!"

He held out the letter to me; but I said:

"You keep it, Phil;" and he folded it up reverently, and put it away.

I cannot give it to the reader: since that day I have not seen it; but parts of it so went to my heart that they will never be forgotten. It was from Milly herself, and told me, in simple words, that she had decided on breaking off her marriage with Sir Gilbert Hawthorn, in right and justice to himself. "I wished very much to have pleased mama in marrying him; and I tried very hard to return his generous affection by giving him what I could in return," she wrote; "but it was all of no use, and every day I felt more like the poor girl in the dear old ballad you love so much, that 'went like a ghaist, and cared na' to spin;' and though Robin Gray was more than 'gude' to me, I knew that I could only care for one man, though I should never see him again. Dear Bob, you will have an old maid for your sister; but you won't love her the less, that she has few to do so; and in that belief she will be more than content. Dear Bob, dear brother, you will not see, will not feel any reproach in what I have said; it carries none indeed; only in your eyes I longed to stand free of the charge of caprice and want of feeling that will attach to me in all others' from my conduct to Sir Gilbert."

Is the story told? Did not urgent private affairs necessitate the return of that "distinguished officer," Major Heathfield, very speedily after this to Europe? And did I not to his eldest son, on a recent first of April, read a lesson on the subject of practical jokes, in the shape of this story?