CHAPTER XX.

RURALIZING.

On returning to Onara homestead one evening I found, to my delight and surprise, that Diso Rota had come out to see me on his tricycle. He had arrived about fourteen o'clock, when Nellie was resting and reading, preparatory to the commencement of preparations for the evening milking. During the seven years that she had managed the dairy, from the time when at the age of fifteen she had herself done all the work, to that of our visit, when she was dairy mistress, and did little else than superintend, she had deservedly developed in importance, and become only second to Mrs. Andra in household matters. As Lucy was away when Diso called, Nellie had to receive him. When Mary and I sat down in the outer room to change our walking boots for light shoes, we heard a voice,—

"The long, perfectly straight pipe, with the elbow double screwed joints, is undoubtedly far the best. The subject is one of the greatest importance, if not the greatest."

Mary recognized the style, and smiled. I looked in. Nellie was comfortably seated in a great easy chair, with her feet on a foot-stool. Now, as she did not usually use such a thing, it was evident she must have taken it because Diso had politely got it for her. She looked the picture of contentment, as she listened and wondered at the polite, handsomely dressed man who talked so volubly on a subject that was unintelligible to her. He looked cool and comfortable in a grey suit, as he sat talking animatedly, mistaking the interest she felt in him for an interest in the subject he spoke about. Pinned to Nellie's frock was a piece of white stock with pink-wrapped stem, that had evidently in the first instance adorned Diso's coat.

"How do you do, Frank?" he said on seeing me. "Allow me to congratulate you on your marriage."

He then turned to Mary, and said,—

"Mrs. Fairleigh, I have come to congratulate Frank on his good fortune."

Mary held out her hand, which he took, and gracefully stooping, kissed. Nellie looked on, admiring this gallant exhibition
of good feeling. The men on Onara could feel as deeply as Diso, or any other man, but they could not express themselves as politely or elegantly as he.

"Thank you, Diso," said Mary, smiling, "for your congratulations to my husband, which are a pleasant compliment to me. Soon I hope that he and I may be able to offer you similar congratulations. Put it in our power to do so, and you will see how readily we will rejoice in your good fortune."

"I hope," he said, "that time may soon come. Though as yet I cannot even see its shadow."

Certainly Nellie was no shadow, but a dear delightful lump of plump womanhood. Perhaps in her shadow he would find the one he looked for. Nellie took Diso to see the dairy arrangements, and the cows being milked. When they returned he was introduced to Lucie.

"I was surprised," he said, volubly, "to see the excellent and scientific way Nellie has of doing everything in the dairy. I have seen the cows milked, and the cream taken from the milk and made into butter. The management of the milk must be of the greatest imporance in farming, and the way you have it attended to is perfection."

Nellie smiled, partly from pleasure, partly at Diso's enthusiasm. In the evening the men amused themselves with boxing, and one of their number presently came into the room with a message.

"If Diso Caro Rota cares for boxing, or to see boxing, will he come to the big room?" The messenger paused, and then continued with a scowl, "The boxing will amuse you, but do not box, or you may be hurt. We are too strong for a ladies' man."

Diso laughed, and replied pleasantly, "I will come and take a lesson in boxing; if you hurt me I will forgive you."

"We will follow, Cheno," said Nellie. And the man turned and left.

When he was gone Nellie said to Diso, "Do not box Cheno, he is very strong, and I think would like to hurt you."

"Why?" asked Diso.

Nellie blushed. "I not quite know;—but he is very strong, and I feel sure wants to hurt you."

Again Diso laughed. He was gratified at the anxiety that Nellie showed on his behalf.

"Do not fear, Nellie," he said, "I will box him if you will watch the match."

"We will all watch the match," said Andra. And so we went to the play room.

"Diso will box with you, Cheno. Remember, in good fellowship. Hard knocks or soft, as you will, but only in sport and kindness," said Andra.

With slight preparation the men entered the ring, Cheno a little the taller, and much the heavier, looked the doughtier man
by far; but the hard work of the farm, while giving him great strength, had handicapped him with slowness. He stood like a young bull, quiet and determined. He loved Nellie, but she did not care for him, notwithstanding which he was savage against Diso, who stood alert and smiling, active as a cat, and dandy as a Spartan warrior prepared for battle. His ruddy face, with just sufficient of a laugh to move his curled moustache, was strikingly in contrast with that of the stern, bronzed, and bearded man who so sullenly faced him.

Each man wore singlet and knickerbockers. With one the arms were bare, and the clothing brown. With the other the body covering was white, blue trimmed, and the knickerbockers light grey. Two handsome men. Diso, with swaying figure, keenly alert, stepped up to his opponent, feinted with the right hand, and tapped him smartly on the nose with the left. Cheno struck with all his might, but missed his man. Again and again he struck, but always without result. Like a bull he fought, with strength only, careless of his adversary's methods. Diso, on the contrary, watched his man, and had already comprehended his tactics. Cheno, now panting, struck more fiercely, but less hard. The quick work told on his slow, heavy muscles, while Diso, lithe, and used to nimble exercise, was fresh as ever. Nellie looked on with parted lips and heightened colour. The men were striving for the maid fiercely, as men, all the world over, will fight for the woman they love. The loveless maids looking on envied Nellie her two suitors. Even in Zara sometimes one had more than they could take, while others wanted. As Cheno tired he grew more fierce, and now both men received and gave hard knocks, Diso's blows always striking home, Cheno's but seldom. As the men sparred, suddenly Diso dropped his left arm, and unprotected, stood up to his opponent. With a great effort, Cheno struck with his left glove at Diso's head, who, stepping slightly aside to let the blow pass, struck his opponent on the point of the chin with his right glove, and knocked him clean off his legs. With difficulty he rose, dazed and stunned, to continue the contest, and staggered to his opponent.

"Let us stop now," said Diso, "we are both sufficiently exercised."

"Bravo! bravo!" they all cried.

"If you are frightened we will stop," said Cheno; "but I do not think these soft gloves need alarm you."

Even now we would have stopped them, but Nellie spoilt everything by saying indignantly,—

"Diso Caro is only afraid of hurting you, Cheno. Surely you can see that?"

He did see it; but to be thus humiliated in the eyes of the woman whom he had called to see his triumph, was too much. He was beside himself with jealous rage.
If that is his reason, we will box again; I will not hurt him for your sake," he sneered in reply.

Diso became angry at seeing Nellie slighted.

"If you will do your best, and not to spare me," he said, with a smile, "I will box you again. I thought you were only playing; your blows had neither direction nor strength."

Sneer for sneer; Diso would now do his best.

"You must only box in good fellowship," said Andra; "I think you have both had enough?"

Cheno insisted, and again they faced each other. This time they each meant fighting. They were completely changed. Cheno, exhausted from the tremendous lunges he had been making and the hard blows from his adversary, was dazed by Diso's lightning skill, and made foolish by his own passion. Diso, simply warmed by the exercise, had completely gauged the measure of his man, and, stimulated by anger, seemed anxious and able to do him harm.

Making no pretence of guarding, Diso commenced by sending his left glove into his adversary's face, ducking his head to escape the return blow, and striking with his right full on his opponent's liver. Cheno staggered, and, before he could regain his balance, Diso's left glove struck him full on the nose, and the right on his ear, and knocked him down almost senseless. Only a few seconds, and the contest was finished. The men shook hands; to the one it was a crowning humiliation, to the other a condescension.

As we returned Diso said, "The fellow made me angry by answering you uncivilly, Nellie, so I punished him. He can neither box nor keep his temper."

We chatted after the others had gone to bed. When we dispersed Nellie held out her hand to Diso, and they said "Good night!" He stooped and kissed her strong, shapely fingers. She blushed.

"May your dreams be rosy as your cheeks!" he said.

"Diso," said Mary, "something has changed you."

"Yes," he replied, "and I hope the change will continue under favourable circumstances, till I receive from you such congratulations as I offered Frank."

Cupid's touch soon makes a blaze of some men's feelings, and, if a maid's heart be thrown into the flames, only a ring will keep the fire within desirable limit.

In the morning neither of the men seemed much the worse for their sparring match. Cheno's bronzed cheeks were unchanged, and a swelling lip and bloodshot eye alone bore witness to the knocks he had received. Diso had not been struck on the face at all, but—hidden—his arms and chest were bruised and sore from the boxing bout. To the women, he was unhurt and a hero. Before he left he had received and accepted an invitation to spend the following Saturday and Sunday at Onara Fields.
One bright morning Andra sent us with Carlo Orna, one of his helpers, to see a large farming establishment. We had a light, low, four-wheeled vehicle, such as is commonly used in America, drawn by one horse. Nellie, for once, left her duties to a deputy, and came with us. She and Mary had become fast friends, for Mary cunningly talked of Diso, and of her own happiness, the while pointing out how clever, but sensitive, he was, and how men improve when they marry—all with an intent to incline a maid's heart to a wooer, that they might both, like her, become bound in the bonds of hymen.

Carlo and I sat in front. He was an old man, hale and hardy, like nearly all the men of Ura. By-and-by he talked. He was seventy-five, and liked to discuss the past events of his life. Old men live only in the past, or in the future of those they love of a younger generation.

“No, Frank,” he said, in reply to a question of mine, “I have no children. She—my wife—was consumptive. In the early days, when people cruelly brought into the world children to suffer and die in early life, all her family on the mother's side died of that deadly disease. The new laws came, and her mother, who had escaped the family curse, married. When I met my wife she was twenty years of age, and had been condemned to a childless life by the Marriage Senate, as consumption had appeared in her, and it was not right that she should have children to suffer as she did. She was very pretty. Her hair was black as darkness. Her eyes were big, and blue as the bluebell; while her face was white and pink, and her lips red and full. No one had wooed her, for men do not wish for a childless wife. I saw that she was beautiful and good, that her childless future had made her subdued and patient, but oh, so kind. The love that should have been for husband and children she gave to all who were unhappy. I loved her, but I did not care to woo a woman whose life must be barren, so I left her; but I could not forget her. Everywhere I saw her blue eyes. I longed for her, and felt always lonely. Then I went back, and told her everything, but she would not have me. She admitted she loved me, for she had seen my love for her in my eyes, and guessed why I went away. She told me to love some other woman and forget her; but I would not take no from a woman who loved me—no man should—so I waited till she said 'Yes,' and then we were married.'

“It seems hard and unjust, to me,” I said, “that a woman should be deprived of the glory of maternity.”

“No, Frank. But it would be hard and unjust to allow children to be born to a life of certain sickness and sorrow; for they go together. We were both fond of children, so we sent to Ura, and got one from a poor widow woman there. She only let us take it because she knew it would be better off with us than with her.”
“Could you not get a child to adopt in Zara?” I asked.

“No, for every child has a chance to get on here, and no one is so poor as to be willing to part with an offspring. He was only two years old when we took him, and he grew up to be a schoolmaster. We will call on him to-day, for we pass his school. She lived to be quite an old woman before she died. She was fifty-two, and, had it not been that a very cold winter came—the coldest ever known—she might have been alive yet.”

The old man mused in happy melancholy. The love of all his life had been given to his childless wife, and time—that has made the agony of her death but a gentle memory—had brought him near to the time when he should again meet his darling in the hereafter.

Presently we came to the school-house. In the yard some twenty children of each sex were being drilled, each of whom carried a dummy rifle. The old man introduced us to the man drilling, who was his adopted son. The children were from about nine to twelve years of age, and went through their drill excellently.

“Is it customary in Zara to drill both boys and girls?” I asked.

“Yes,” replied the schoolmaster, “it is part of their education.”

“Surely not a part of a girl’s education, as of a boy’s?”

“Yes. We drill them together till they can pass the first examination; after that they drill separately. It improves the physique, and consequently the health of all the children.”

“All children,” said Mary, “must pass an examination which proves them capable of serving as soldiers before they are allowed to leave school.”

“Do your women serve as soldiers?” I asked, in amazement.

“To a certain extent,” answered the young schoolmaster, with an amused smile. “Two regiments of women went with the soldiers in the war against Gurla. In time of war, all women who volunteer are drilled, and many of them go on active service with the baggage, and act as nurses. In case of need they fight, for they are all armed like the men soldiers.”

“In Zara,” said the old man, “the women encourage and assist the men in everything. In the war with Gurla, they cut off the retreat of the enemy, and slaughtered them as they ran, without mercy. Many of them had had husband, lover, or brother killed; and they encourage the rest to slaughter without pity. Women have no mercy on those who kill their men. The sight of their dead loved ones makes them fiends.”

Reaching the farm building, we were taken to the tower, and had a bird’s-eye view of the surrounding country. It was level, and we could see a very long distance on either side. Stretched out around the base of the building were the glass houses for the less hardy fruit and vegetables, the gardens, and the out-
houses. The roads faded away in the distance, getting smaller and smaller till they seemed to end. Everywhere they ran at right angles, cutting up the country into blocks. Away towards Zara, we could see Onara Fields and the homestead. The green trees and the golden grain, with houses scattered here and there, showed the glory and fruitfulness of summer. Nellie gave me the history of the surrounding houses, and a great mass of buildings that constituted the farm barracks of the soldiers of Zara.

"Have you no poor or almshouses at Zara?" I asked, after noticing their complete absence.

"None; though in Gurla," said Mary, in indignant tones, "they give the working classes so little wages, that they cannot save anything during the time of their vigour, and so are destitute in their old age. There they have both poor and almshouses, where the worn-out workers are kept till they die, at the expense of the generous portion of the wealthy people. The mean employer works them until they are useless, and then turns them adrift. They are worse off in reality than if they were slaves, as a slave-owner must feed his worn-out bondpeople. In Zara no one is allowed to employ an adult at a less wage than will suffice to keep and clothe him decently. In Gurla, many men and women are employed at the rate of about three florins a week—equal to six shillings and threepence English money—out of which they have to pay for their own dress, bed, and board. The result is, that they are driven by hunger and misery to theft, and every other sort of folly."

As we drove home, the old man told us about Gurla, where he had been. It was a country, evidently, where the masses were ground down in poverty and misery, that a favoured few might live in pampered luxury; where priestcraft was killing Christianity; and a foolish hereditary aristocracy begetting a State of Socialism that would wipe them off the face of the earth, with violence and bloodshed.

I could hardly believe that so much stupidity could exist, but I afterwards found out that, unfortunately, it did.

In the evening, while the more enthusiastic were dancing, and the others listening to the music, Lucy gathered Mary, Andra, and me together, and unburdened her mind.

"Now, Mary," she said, "I want to know all about this young man you have been praising up to Nellie so unsparingly."

"Well, my dear Lucy," said my wife, complaisantly, "you had better get a description of him from the marriage bureau, and strengthen it by personal observation, then you will know all about him."

"I would sooner," said Lucy, very much in earnest, "you would give me a full sketch of him, coloured by your personal opinion. I see that he dresses too much like an artist for my
taste, though I am ready to forgive him for that, and for curling his moustache, and for_—"

"It curls naturally," said Mary.

"And for making a harmony of the colours of his tie, his button-hole flower, and his dress; as these are faults that are almost desirable, if they do not make their possessor vain, or take up too much of his time. He seems clever, is very chatty, and though rather florid, has a graceful, taking way; but has nevertheless reached the age of twenty-five, without being betrothed. Now what is the reason, Mary dear? Is it temper, or what?"

"Perhaps," said Andra, "it is bashfulness."

"That it certainly isn't," said Lucy, shortly.

"Now, what is it, Mary?"

"It's several things," my wife replied. "His brain is always working; and often at top speed, with the result that his nerves are so highly strung, that they are very easily jarred, especially as, though he has lots of pride, he has no self-appreciation."

"All the more reason that he should get a wife to appreciate him," said Andra.

"Do be quiet, Andra, you're almost as bad as Nitho," said Lucy. "Go on, Mary, please."

"The result of this is," continued Mary, "that when he begins to be in love, the girl jars his susceptibilities, and he leaves her."

"I don't want Nellie to get fond of him," said Lucy, "only to be left lovelorn."

"There is no fear of that," said Mary confidently. "He will only see her once a week, meanwhile he will long for her sympathy, and so teach himself to love her, that he will magnify her good qualities, and be blind to her bad."

"She hasn't got any bad qualities," said Lucy.

"Then her weaknesses," replied Mary.

"He seems a strong, masterful man," continued Lucy, questioningly; "but that I like. You can guide and be proud of such men; besides, they are easily managed with plenty of kisses."

"She knows," laughed Andra. "Experience teaches."

Lucy smiled, but ignored the interruption, and continued,—

"Tell me, Mary, what has he done? What is he doing? What does he hope to do?"

"Well, he plays football, and boxes."

"I like the way he boxes. He took and gave some very hard knocks without losing his temper. Strength and good temper are good qualities in one's husband."

"He was first a scavenger," explained Mary, "because that being night-work and well paid, enabled him to continue his studies in chemistry. He invented a movable refuse cart body that was accepted at the College of Engineers and Patents."
This got him his promotion to an inspectorship, and obtained him the friendship of Duke Mura, who thinks very highly of him. He next invented a new system of drainage pipes, and became Superintendent of Scavengers. Now he is Secretary to the Phonetic Dictionary Board, and a member of the Public Health Committee. So he has succeeded very well."

"He has, indeed," said Lucy, admiringly, "I suppose he must be very well off."

"He can have very little money. He made a settlement on one of his sisters when she married, that must have taken nearly all the money he has made."

"Well, I don't mind," said Lucy, hopefully. "Our Nellie will have her share of the farm, which will make them well off with his income."

So it was settled that Diso was to be allowed every opportunity of gaining Nellie's troth, and the two women, generous in their own happiness, schemed to guide the man into the path of true love, and make his journey thereon a smooth and happy one, ending, as all such journeys should, in the unity of two hearts, hopes, thoughts, wishes, and lives. The man had worked and conquered. The two women thought that the best wooer is one who so makes himself worthy of a woman's love. He should be made to see the woman as perfect; excelling all others in womanly worth, and realizing his dream of feminine perfection. Such dreams make the hope of budding manhood. All men should so think of the woman they wed. The maid should hear of what he had done, and what he might do, if strengthened by her love. It would be whispered in her ear, how he gazed at her. That surely in his heart the tiny flower of love had fixed its roots, to be nourished by her smiles till they spread, and it became the dominating power of his existence, or to be—alas, for the possibility—withered by her scorn, and killed in its first growth. His faults would be shown, like briar roses in a garden, as things not quite to be condemned, but to be carefully restrained as of dangerous tendencies. For no woman should think of her lover as quite perfect, but only to be made nearer perfection than other men by her love and sweetening influence. This will be so for ever, for men—all males—have a nature fierce, and tending to evil, while all women—all females—are of a gentler sort, wishing only for good. So it has been since the days of Adam, and will be till human nature becomes totally altered. Really that poor man doesn't receive the pity he is entitled to. Think of it. To be put in a splendid garden, with flowers and fruit and all sorts of animals, but to have no one to talk to, no woman to love.

In Ura, some old maids, women who had quarrelled with their husbands, and a few of the women who had married poor, weak, nerveless creatures of men, had banded together and agitated for what they call women's rights. They were the discontented
and unsuccessful who had failed in womanly duties, and for this reason asserted their ability to perform the duties of man. The other women of Ura were contented with their lot, and believed they were enjoying women’s rights, and so, consequently, were looked down on by the discontented few, as down-trodden, poor things. In Ura, there had once been a prize offered to the woman who could best describe a perfect husband. The committee awarding the prize were married women, whose opinion was, “A man who leaves his business cares behind him at his office, and never worries his wife with them.” So you see that their opinion of a wife at Ura, was that she was only a superior housekeeper, with maternity added to her other duties. In Zara, a woman wished to share her husband’s life, and to be his other self. To know all that he thought or did. To be his adviser and comforter in all his failures and sorrows, and to enjoy to the full the fruits and triumphs of his successes. They believed that the women were mainly responsible for the faults of the men, as they considered the men were always guided either by their mothers, their sweethearts, or their wives. They also took to themselves a large share of the honour and credit due to the community, for the rapid progress it had made towards wisdom and happiness, and pointed out that in the nations where the women were the least thought of—such as amongst the Rodas, where they were supposed to be beneath consideration, and only fit to work and bear children—there, folly and unhappiness most prevailed, and as the women had greater power, so the wisdom and happiness increased. This was so. In Gurla—where the women were looked upon as in every way inferior to men, and treated with kindness and deference, certainly, but not as man’s equal, being only considered worthy of managing their household affairs—the status of the community was only little better than amongst the Rodas. In Ura the women had greater consideration, and the community was more elevated; while in Zara, where women’s influence was everywhere felt, the community had as nearly reached a state of perfect wisdom and happiness as is possible to human nature to attain.