

A Rivalry in Flowers.

BY MARION WARD.

I.



FOR three years the rivalry had existed and flourished—ever since the little colonel had appeared and taken up his abode next door to Butterfly Bower. Indeed, months and months before he actually appeared in person little Miss Silvertown had entertained the gravest suspicions against him; and hours and hours had she spent peering through the white muslin blind of her little bed-chamber at the startling transformation that was taking place in the erstwhile long strips of untidy waste ground that stood for a garden next door.

Her first doubts arose when she saw the two healthy-looking almond trees put in to shade the little rustic summer-house at the end. Then cart after cart came up loaded with plants of every size and description; and finally, unable to bear it any longer, she slipped on her bonnet and marched boldly in to take stock of the enemy's ground.

She inspected the rose bushes first, and the light of battle dawned in her eyes. Moss, William Allan Richardson, Gloire de Dijon, three fine La France, two white Baroness, and last, but most terrible of all, some fine specimens of Captain Christie. She read the hanging labels one by one, counting them off on her little fingers, and when she came to the last she drew a deep breath and shut her lips together tightly. Captain Christie! *Her* cherished monopoly—not another specimen was there to be found in all the village. How dare this interloper-stranger come and trespass on her ground, and actually flaunt his impertinence beneath her eyes in the very next garden? She examined the labels on the other plants, with trembling fingers. Phlox Drummondii, white and pink, sweet peas galore, carnations, two great laburnums, asparagus fern—name after name she read;

and at the bottom of the garden two separate beds, divided by a narrow path—one devoted exclusively to standard rose trees and the other filled with every kind of lily.

Then she went home, tingling with jealous wrath and indignation, and day by day the light of battle deepened in her sharp grey eyes, until at length all was completed and she saw the last great *lilium auratum* rear its budding green head and cast a lofty glance over the low wall into her own treasured garden. And at the sight tears of fierce anger and mortification filled her eyes, and she clenched her small fists in deadliest enmity toward the unknown owner of all that wealth of floral beauty.

The first day of the little colonel's arrival



"SHE READ THE HANGING LABELS ONE BY ONE."

saw him busy in his new garden, snipping off dead leaves, touching here, binding up there, with the air of a loving connoisseur, and moistening the roots of his numerous rose trees with soap-suds.

Miss Silverton watched him intently from behind her white muslin blind.

A few minutes later a quaint little figure made its appearance in the adjoining garden—a little figure in a short, brown holland skirt, large yellow gauntlets, and a huge brown poke of unknown age and fashion.

The little colonel caught the familiar sound of snipping shears and looked up.

The wall was quite low, but the flower-bed was very wide, and, the colonel being any thing but tall, he was obliged to raise himself on tip-toe to peep over.

The top of the large poke met his view, and the clipping continued. "Goot morning, mademoiselle," remarked the little colonel, courteously.

A determined snip of the shears answered him.

The colonel coughed gently.

"Goot morning, mademoiselle," he repeated, raising his voice slightly. The big poke bent a little lower and the yellow gauntlets fidgeted busily.

The little colonel surveyed the poke with surprise and a little pain. Then his face brightened. "Mademoiselle is deaf, perhaps!" he murmured to himself.

The next moment the poke was up with a jerk, and the little colonel was staring aghast into the very fiercest pair of grey eyes he had ever seen. For a second he stood fascinated, then he retired precipitately to the shelter of his own wall.

"Mais—mademoiselle is a leetle—sudden," he said to himself, quite breathlessly.

And that was how the acquaintance began.

It certainly was not the little colonel's fault that it did not prosper. He was the gentlest, sweetest-tempered, most chivalrous of men; morally incapable of rudeness to any woman—much less to his own neighbour. But his most delicate and ingratiating advances met with such uncompromising rebuffs and such fierce glances that he retired each time discomfited, and finally gave up the attempt in despair.

"Mademoiselle was somewhat reserved," he excused her loyally to himself; "she has perhaps trouble. He would intrude himself upon her no longer."

In the village, however, he met with a different reception, and various and numerous were the praises of himself and his flowers

sung into the angry ears of his next-door neighbour.

The Misses Gresham in particular were most enthusiastic. "Such a perfect gentleman—so courteous and kind," they extolled. "Do you not find him a charming neighbour?"

Miss Silverton sat very upright.

"I am not in the habit, as you are aware, of interfering with, or allowing interference from, my neighbours," she replied, stiffly.

They ignored the danger signal.

"But his garden," exclaimed the youngest Miss Gresham, casting up her hands; "such taste, such magnificent blooms. I really believe his roses beat yours." Miss Silverton almost turned them out of the house; and when they were gone she flew frantically up to her white muslin blind.

The little colonel was in his garden as usual; from one rose tree to another, selecting his choicest blossoms and making them into one of the inimitable bouquets for which he was justly famous.

"They are not finer; they are not," she kept repeating fiercely, and she blinked hard to keep back the tears of rage.

There was a perfect Captain Christie just out in his garden, and hers were merely budding. She locked her teeth together as she saw him approach it. He bent over it, and—distinctly she saw him—he kissed it.

"Bah!" she snorted, disgustedly. Then he took it tenderly in his hand and reluctantly severed it from its stem.

Her eyes blazed. The first one out. She would sooner have cut off her first finger than her first Captain Christie.

With bitter scorn and indignation she watched him finish off the bouquet with some feathery asparagus fern, and tie it up.

Then she put on her bonnet and went down to look at her dilatory buds.

"Mademoiselle——!"

The voice made her start, and involuntarily she glanced up.

The little colonel was standing on tip-toe, regarding her timidly.

"If mademoiselle would accept——!" he murmured, deprecatingly, actually blushing beneath the glare of those grey eyes. His head disappeared for a second as he bowed deeply, but reappeared instantly as he anxiously proffered his fragrant bouquet.

All Miss Silverton's smouldering wrath broke into flame. It was a cruel, premeditated insult—he wished to triumph over her, and taunt her with his early blooms. Her grey side-curles quivered against the big

poke as she extended a trembling hand and took the outstretched flowers.

Then, before the smile and light and pleasure had time to fade from the little colonel's face, she had raised them aloft and with compressed lips and eyes afire she had stretched up and flung them with all her force into the farthest corner of his garden.

After that incident there could be no longer any pretence at friendship between them. The desecration of his beloved flowers had roused the gentle little colonel as nothing else in all the world had done. The most flagrant rudeness toward himself he would have passed over and forgiven with his usual gentleness and courtesy, but an insult to his beloved flowers was more than he could bear.

Tenderly he had stooped and picked them up, smoothing their ruffled petals with gentle, trembling fingers, and without another glance at the wall he had carried them into the house.

He still treated Miss Silverton with the utmost courtesy—his nature was incapable of the slightest impoliteness where women were concerned—but never again did he make the faintest overture of friendship; never once did he so much as glance toward that low wall; and the very sight of that big poke in the distance was enough to bring an angry light to his kind eyes, and to send him miles out of his way to avoid its wearer. The village bore the silent enmity between the two neighbours philosophically. They voiced their opinion in Mrs. Mellar, the plump mistress of the post-office. As she said, "There's no noticing the ways of these amytoor horticulturists—they're cranks all of them, and that jealous they can't abide the sight of one another."

II.

AND so for three years the enmity and rivalry grew and flourished. Then came the climax.

There was to be a grand horticultural

show in honour of the opening of the new gardens at Westbury. The prizes were monetary and exceptionally high, and all the surrounding villages in a circuit of six miles were eligible to compete.



"SHE FLUNG THEM INTO THE FARTHEST CORNER OF HIS GARDEN."

Of course, it was settled at once by the delighted and excited inhabitants of Benton-on-Meer that both the colonel and Miss Silverton must enter, and for weeks beforehand opinion wavered backwards and forwards as to which stood the greatest chance. That one must carry off the greatest prizes offered not a soul doubted.

And secretly both the colonel and Miss Silverton were of the same opinion.

Every day and almost all day they spent in their respective gardens, digging, pruning, clipping—silent and busy as bees.

As the great day drew nearer party opinion grew hotter and hotter, but still undecided.

Surely never in all the world were there such roses, so perfect in colour and form, as Miss Silverton's Captain Christies!

And, on the other hand, had there ever been seen such matchless, glorious lilies as the colonel's specimens of *lilium auratum*?

The little colonel hung over his great gold-shaded lilies in an ecstasy of pride and delight. His flowers should win—his beautiful ones; never should that cruel woman's over the wall win before his.

It was not the prizes he wanted, he never gave them a thought; it was the honour, the vindication as it were of his beloved flowers. Miss Silverton's roses might be the admiration of many, but the colonel's lilies were the wonder of all. To him they were as the very apple of his eyes, his children, his captured sunlight, as he whispered to them foolishly a thousand times.

Every moment that Miss Silverton was not engaged in ministering to her precious flowers she spent with her little nose flattened against that white muslin blind, watching every movement of the busy little colonel, trembling with apprehension at the growing beauty of his Captain Christies and glaring with a baleful eye at the beautiful gold-tipped heads of his *lilium auratum*s. She hated those lilies with a deadly hatred as day by day they grew taller and taller in their big red pots; and when at last they grew so tall that they could turn their regal heads and look disdainfully down at her inferior blossoms, the very sight of them was enough to drive her into a frenzy.

There was a rose prize, of course, and a lily, but chiefest of all there was a classless prize larger than any, to be awarded to the queen of all the flowers entered. And that prize both Miss Silverton and Colonel Sangfroid had set every nerve on winning.

And at last the great day came. It was a big affair. Besides all the villagers, the county folk for miles around were represented. Indeed, they were the chief competi-

tors. Squire Thornton of course was there—he was one of the judges—and Lady Thornton, with all the little Thorntons. Sir Banbury Hawes drove over with his wife and two daughters, and his son and heir followed on his bicycle; the Bromleys came over from Bromley Park with a large party and two drags, and all the lesser magnates were there in full force. It was a magnificent show, but from the first it was plain that the little colonel was far ahead for the first prize, and many thought for the second also; his Captain Christies were not very grand, but his *Gloire de Dijons* were superb.

All the morning he stood guard over his cherished plants, growing hot and tired, but never wearying of listening to the admiring exclamations his flowers called forth.

And farther along he could just see a little brown-clad figure and a huge poke—Miss Silverton apparently never altered her apparel summer or winter, and the little colonel sometimes vaguely wondered if it would



"FARTHER ALONG HE COULD JUST SEE A LITTLE BROWN-CLAD FIGURE."

never wear out—standing watchful, harassed, but unyielding. At last he was compelled to go home to luncheon, but he went contentedly. He was sure of the prize now—his beauties, his beloved, were nobler, more beautiful far than any there, and that woman would be defeated.

On the way home he met the eldest Miss Gresham, and in the fulness of his heart he confided to her his almost certain triumph.

She was delighted and voluble in her congratulations and compliments. "But poor Miss Silverton," she said, trying to smile and look sad at the same time. "It will be a great blow to her, and just now too—isn't it shocking about her, colonel?"

The little colonel stiffened.

"Mademoiselle means that I should win?" he said, reproachfully.

Miss Gresham flung up her hands. "Have you not heard the news?" she cried, eagerly; "that her bank has broke and all her money gone?"

"The bank broke? Mademoiselle means thieves broke in, n'est-ce pas?"

Miss Gresham laughed affectedly. "No, no; the bank has stopped payment and all her money was in it. They do say that if she doesn't get this prize she hasn't enough money left to pay her rent. Poor dear! Wouldn't it be sad if she had to leave Butterfly Bower? Well, good-bye, colonel, dear. I mustn't stay another moment. I hope you will win—at least, I mean I wish you could both win," and with a playful little wave and smile she tripped away.

The little colonel stood stock still, gazing blankly after her. Lost all her money—what did that mean? Obligated to leave Butterfly Bower and the garden that was as her very child and life!

She was his enemy; she had cast odium on his beloved flowers, but—she was a woman, and—*Noblesse oblige*.

The little colonel drew a deep breath. He did not wait to reason or grasp exactly what it was that had happened. One thing only was very plain to him: If he had not entered the lists Miss Silverton would have won easily. He forgot all about his luncheon; he turned hastily and hurried back along the way he had come. Then he remembered his lilies suddenly: his beautiful, golden-headed darlings. For one second he paused—then a hot flush of shame scorched his face and he quickened his steps almost to a run.

Straight into the show he went and up to the nearest official.

"I wish to withdraw away my flowers," he

said, bravely, but with a catch in his breath. The gilt-buttoned official looked down on him from his superior height. "Can't be done," he said, curtly. "No flowers once entered to be removed before the judging. Out of the question."

The little colonel forgot his English in his agitation.

"Non, non," he explained, anxiously, "not out of ze question, out of—what you call ze compete."

John Bull hates nothing more than to be ridiculed. The gilt-buttoned official looked suspiciously at the innocent colonel and abruptly turned his back.

"Can't be done," he repeated, gruffly.

Just then Miss Silverton hurried by. She looked pale and tired, and she did not see the colonel, so her grey eyes were less fierce than usual.

The little colonel looked at her, and a great pity welled up in his gentle heart. How very small and weak she looked, and to be suddenly bereft of money and home—

He glanced round desperately. At all costs he must remove his flowers before the awarding of the prizes.

For a moment there chanced to be a lull about him. He glanced furtively all round. If fair means were unavailing, then—

The next moment he had his great pot of liliun auratum in his arms.

"Hi there! put that there pot down!" roared a gruff voice, and the irate official emerged from behind some shrubs. "Didn't I tell you 'twas agin the rules to remove one of them plants afore night?" he demanded, wrathfully. "Why d'you want to enter 'em if you can't let 'em bide the judging?"

The little colonel shrivelled up with shame and despair. He put the pot down and stood like a guilty schoolboy shrinking beneath the wrath of the big John Bull.

But his purpose was unchanged. He must get them away. The roses didn't matter so much; hers were splendid, but those lilies—

Just then he caught sight of the squire.

"Squire!" he cried, faintly.

Squire Thornton heard him and turned.

"Ah, colonel," he said, heartily. "You show them the way to grow flowers. You'll take the first prize to a certainty, and I'm not sure about the second too."

"Monsieur," said the little colonel, clearing his throat, "I wish to withdraw away my flowers."

The squire quite jumped. "Withdraw



"HE PUT THE POT DOWN AND STOOD LIKE A GUILTY SCHOOLBOY."

now—now, man, with two of the prizes as good as won?" He stared at the colonel incredulously, and read the despair in his eyes. "I am sorry," he said, perplexedly; "but I am afraid it is out of the question."

The little colonel turned away and a lump rose in his throat. His eyes fell on the golden glory of his lilies, and he averted them hurriedly.

"I will be rude to a lady," he thought, his brown face crimsoning at the very thought. "I will be rude to a lady, but, yes, one of the wives of the judges, and so she will make that I have not the prize."

But it was one thing to make up his mind to the deed and another to carry it out. Again and again in that crowded place the little colonel had the opportunity, but each time his innate courtesy stepped in instinctively and stopped him. At last in desperation he set his teeth together, and as he saw Mrs. Royston—the great nursery-gardener's

wife—approaching, with tingling ears and thumping heart he stepped wildly forward and blocked her way.

"Will you kindly allow me to pass?" she asked, politely. The little colonel clenched his fists and bent down over a plant, pretending not to hear.

Mrs. Royston raised her voice patiently. "Excuse me, but could you move a little on one side?"

It was a dreadful struggle, but he conquered and stood immovable.

"Now will they make I have not the prize; now will they disqualify me indeed," he was saying exultantly to himself.

Mrs. Royston bent forward to repeat her request for the third time and suddenly recognised her obstructor. "Why, is that you, colonel?" she exclaimed, brightly. "What splendid flowers you are showing! How did you manage to bring them to such perfection?"

Slowly the little colonel turned and faced her, and his eyes were quite wild. "Ahr-rr-rr-r-r-r," he said, with a long, queer, indrawing wail, "you—are not angry?"

"Angry!" Mrs. Royston stared. "Angry! What at?" she inquired, wonderingly.

But the little colonel had turned and fled.

Straight up to his beloved lilies he went, with despair in his eyes and a face quite white—straight up; and seizing a huge pair of shears he shut his eyes tightly, raised them on high, and the next moment those three noble golden heads lay severed in the dust.

For a second the little colonel stood staring dazedly at what he had done, the expression on his face that of a murderer who hardly yet realizes the enormity of his crime. Then a voice broke in on his stunned senses—an amazed undertone: "Is the man mad?"

And somewhere another answered it: "I suppose success has turned his brain. He's got the chief prize, you know; all the judges have settled—"

The little colonel turned one wild glance

on the speaker, and then, with a sudden wail of anguished despair, he flung his arms around his sacrificed darlings, and bowing his grey head till it rested on the hard pot he burst into sobs.

There was a horrified hush all round.

"Oh, mon Dieu! mon Dieu!" he sobbed. "Will you not disqualify me now?"

"Yes, yes," said Squire Thornton, hastily, and he blew his nose violently.

"Yes, yes—anything," promised the tender-hearted squire, recklessly.

There was an awed pause.

Men fidgeted and looked uncomfortable, and women gazed blankly from one to the other.

Then there was a little stir and a diminutive, brown-clad figure in a prodigious poke-bonnet made her way to the front. Her eyes were very bright and there was a scarlet spot on either cheek.

"I think I can explain," she said, breathlessly, looking round on the wondering faces. "There has been a false report raised that I have lost all my money—you heard that, colonel?"

The little colonel nodded without raising his head.

The fierce grey eyes were quite tender, as they rested on that bowed grey head. "My money was in that bank once, but I removed it all months since.

"There was also a still more foolish report spread"—she looked straight at the eldest Miss Gresham, who coloured and looked confused—"that if I did not gain the prize to-day I should be obliged to leave Butterfly Bower. You heard that, too, colonel?"

The little colonel nodded again. Miss Silverton's voice broke a little, but she went on courageously. "I am Colonel Sangfroid's great rival," she said, "and enemy." She

paused. "The colonel knew," she said, slowly, "that if he were disqualified I should be practically certain to win."

There was a dead silence.

Then she spoke again gently, almost beseechingly. "Will you honour me with your arm home, colonel?" she said, huskily.



"A DIMINUTIVE, BROWN-CLAD FIGURE MADE HER WAY TO THE FRONT."

The tears were still wet on the little colonel's cheeks, but he rose instantly. Tenderly, almost reverently, he stooped and gathered up his murdered darlings. Then silently and courteously he offered his arm to the little spinster, and together in the silence they passed out.

At the door Miss Silverton turned round. "If you give me that prize," she said, fiercely, over her shoulder, "I will fling it down the well!"