Linnet: A Romance

Grant Allen

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L I N N E T

_=A R O M A N C E=_

_By_ GRANT ALLEN

Author of “UNDER SEALED ORDERS,” “MISS CAYLEY’S ADVENTURES,” ETC.

New York:::NEW AMSTERDAMBOOK COMPANY : : : : _MCM_

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NOTE

This story was written in the midst of the scenery which it describes; but the author desires to acknowledge his obligations for many touches of local colour to Mr. Baillie-Grohman’s admirable work on “Tyrol and the Tyrolese.” The quatrain on p. 283 is quoted, with some slight modifications (to adapt it to its place in this novel), from a poem by Mr. William Watson.

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L I N N E T

CHAPTER I

“TO INTRODUCE MR FLORIAN WOOD”

’Twas at Zell in the Zillerthal.

Now, whoever knows the Alps, knows the Zillerthal well as the centre of all that is most Tyrolese in the Tyrol. From that beautiful green valley, softly smiling below, majestically grand and ice-clad in its upper forks and branches, issue forth from time to time all the itinerant zither-players and picturesquely-clad singers who pervade every capital and every spa in Europe. Born and bred among the rich lawns of their upland villages, they come down in due time, with a feather in their hats and a jodel in their throats, true modern troubadours, setting out on the untried ocean of the outer world—their voice for their fortune—in search of wealth and adventures. Guitar on back and green braces on shoulders, they start blithely from home with a few copper kreuzers in their leather belts, and return again after a year or two, changed men to behold, their pockets full to bursting with dollars or louis or good English sovereigns.

Not that you must expect to see the Tyrolese peasant of sober reality masquerading about in that extremely operatic and brigand-like costume in the upper Zillerthal. The Alpine minstrel in the sugar-loaf hat, much-gartered as to the legs, and clad in a Joseph’s coat of many colours, with whom we are all so familiar in cosmopolitan concert-halls, has donned his romantic polychromatic costume as an integral part of the business, and would be regarded with surprise, not

unmixed with contempt, were he to appear in it among the pastures of his native valley. The ladies in corset-bodices and loose white lawn sleeves, who trill out startling notes from the back attics of their larynx, or elicit sweet harmonies from mediæval-looking mandolines in Kursaals and Alcazars, have purchased their Tyrolese dress direct from some Parisian _costumier_. The real cowherds and milkmaids of the actual Zillerthal are much more prosaic, not to say commonplace, creatures. A green string for a hat-band, with a blackcock's plume stuck jauntily or saucily at the back of the hat, and a dirty red lappel to the threadbare coat, is all that distinguishes the Tyrolese mountaineer of solid fact from the universal peasant of European Christendom. Indeed, is it not true, after all, that the stage has led us to expect far too much—in costume and otherwise—from the tillers of the soil everywhere? Is it not true that the agricultural and pastoral classes all the world over, in spite of Theocritus and Thomas Hardy, are apt, when one observes them impartially in the flesh, to be earthy, grimy, dull-eyed, and unintelligent?

Florian Wood didn't think so, however, or affected not to think so—which in his case was probably very much the same thing; for what he _really_ thought about anything on earth, affectation aside, it would have puzzled even himself not a little to determine. He was a tiny man of elegant proportions: so tiny, so elegant, that one felt inclined to put him under a glass case and stick him on a mantelpiece. He leant his small arms upon the parapet of a wall as they were approaching Zell, shifted the knapsack on his back with sylph-like grace, and murmured ecstatically, with a side glance at the stalwart peasant-women carrying basketfuls of fodder in huge creels on their backs in the field close by, "How delicious! How charming! How

essentially picturesque! How characteristically Tyrolean!”

His companion scanned him up and down with an air of some passing amusement. “Why, I didn’t know you’d ever been in the Tyrol before,” he objected, bluntly. And, in point of fact, when they started together from Munich that morning on their autumn tour, Florian Wood had never yet crossed the Austrian frontier. But what of that? He had got out of the train some five hours back at Jenbach station, and walked the sixteen miles from there to Zell; and in the course of the tramp he had matured his views on the characteristics of the Tyrol.

But he waved one lily-white hand over the earth none the less with airy dismissal of his friend’s implied criticism. “How often shall I have to tell you, my dear Deverill,” he said blandly, in his lofty didactic tone—the tone which, as often happens with very small men, came most familiarly of all to him—“that you unduly subordinate the ideal to the real, where you ought rather to subordinate the real to the ideal. This, you say, is the Tyrol—the solid, uncompromising, geographically definite Tyrol of the tax-gatherer, the post-master, and the commercial traveller—bounded on the north by Bavaria, on the south by Italy, on the east by the rude Carinthian boor, and on the west by the collection of hotels and pensions marked down on the map as the Swiss Republic. Very well then; let me see if there’s anything Tyrolese at all to be found in it. I have instinctive within me a picture of the true, the ideal Tyrol. I know well its green pastures, its upland slopes, its innocent peasantry, its fearless chamois-hunters, its beautiful, guileless, fair-haired maidens. Arriving by rail to-day in this its prosaic prototype—cast up, as it were, from the train on the sea-coast of this Bohemia—I turn my eyes with interest upon the

imitation Tyrol of real life, and strive earnestly to discover some faint points of resemblance, if such there be, with the genuine article as immediately revealed to me."

"And you find none?" Deverill put in, smiling.

Florian waved that dainty Dresden china hand expansively once more over the landscape before him, as if it belonged to him. "Pardon me," he said, sententiously; "in many things, I admit, the reality might be improved upon. The mountains, for example, should be higher, their forms more varied, their peaks more jagged, their sides more precipitous; the snow should drape them with more uniform white, regardless of the petty restrictions of gravity; the river should tear down far rockier ravines, in more visible cataracts. But Nature has sometimes her happy moments, too. And I call this one of them! Those women, now, so Millet-like in their patient toil—how sympathetic! how charming! A less primitive society, a less idyllic folk, would have imposed such burdens upon a horse or a donkey. The Tyrol knows better. It is more naïve, more picturesque—in one word, more original. It imposes them on the willing neck of beautiful woman!"

"It's terribly hard work for them," Deverill answered, observing them with half a sigh.

"For _them_? Ah, yes, I admit it, of course, poor souls!—but for _me_, my dear fellow—for _me_, just consider! It gives me a thrill of the intensest sensibility. In the first place, the picture is a beautiful one in itself—the figures, the baskets, the frame, the setting. In the second place, it suggests to the observant mind an Arcadian life, a true Dorian simplicity. In the third place—which is perhaps the most

important of all—it affords me an opportunity for the luxury of sympathy. What is the trifling inconvenience of a heavy load on their backs to these poor ignorant creatures, compared with the refined and artistic pleasure—of an altruistic kind—which I derive from pitying them?"

"Florian!" his friend said, surveying him comically from head to foot, "you really are _impayable_. It's no use arguing with you; it only flatters you. You know very well in your heart you never mean a word of anything you say; so stop your nonsense and put yourself in marching order again. Let's get on to Zell, and see what sort of quarters we can find in the village."

Florian Wood came down at once from his epicurean clouds, and strode out with his little legs in the direction of their resting-place. In spite of his tininess, he was a capital walker. If Nature, as he averred, has sometimes her happy moments, she certainly had one when she created her critic. Florian Wood was a young man of a delicate habit of mind and body—a just and pleasing compromise between a philosopher and a butterfly. His figure was small but extremely graceful; his limbs were dainty but well-knit and gazelle-like; his face, though small-featured, was very intelligent, and distinctly good-humoured; his voice was melodious and exquisitely modulated. And what Nature had left undone, his godfathers and godmothers did for him at his baptism when they christened him Florian. As plain John Wood, to be sure, he would have been nobody at all; as William or Thomas or Henry or George, he would have been lost in the multitudinous deep sea of London. But his parents had the glorious inspiration of dubbing him Florian, and it acted like a charm: all went well in life with him. A baronetcy would have been a far less valuable

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