DUCHESS

PORTIA; OR, BY PASSIONS ROCKED

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Содержание

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CHAPTER I

"A child of our grandmother Eve, a female; or, for thy more sweet understanding, a woman." – Love's Labors Lost.

The gates are thrown wide open, and the carriage rolls smoothly down the long dark avenue, beneath the waving branches of the tall elms and the copper beeches, through which the dying sun is flinging its parting rays.

The horses, sniffing the air of home, fling up their heads and make still greater haste, until presently, rounding the curve, they draw up before the hall door.

It stands open, and on the high, stone steps that lead to it, a very pretty girl looks down upon the carriage from under her palm, with a face eager and expectant. When she has barely glanced at it, she says, "Ah!" in a tone of deep satisfaction, and running down the steps and over the gravel, turns the handle of the carriage door and looks anxiously at its occupant.

"You have come," she says, cheerily. "I was *so* afraid something might have prevented you."

The person she addresses – a girl about two years older than herself, says:

"Yes, I have come," in a tone slow and sweet, almost to languor.

"*So* glad," says the pretty girl, with a smile that must be one of her sweetest charms, it is so full of life and gaiety; "come out of this dreadful old sarcophagus and upstairs with me; I have your tea in your own room for you."

Miss Vibart, stepping out of the brougham, follows her hostess into the house, through the grand old hall, and up the wide, oak staircase, into a room huge and old-fashioned – but delicious and cozy, and comfortable to the last degree.

Having cast one hasty glance round the apartment, Miss Vibart turns to her young hostess —

"You are Dulcinea? isn't it?" she says, questioningly.

"Yes, I am Dulcinea as a rule – (may I be your maid, just for once – you will be so much happier without your hat) – but I have so many other names, that it takes me all my time to remember which one I really belong to. Uncle Christopher calls me Baby! and Mark Gore, when he is here, calls me Duchess, and Dicky Browne calls me Tom, and Roger calls me – I really quite forget what it is Roger calls me," with a slight shrug of her shoulders.

"Is Dicky Browne your *fiancé?*" asks Miss Vibart, uncertainly; "I know you are engaged to somebody; Auntie Maud told me that."

"Dicky Browne! Oh, no!" Then, with the gayest little laugh in the world, "If you could only *see* Dicky Browne! He couldn't, by any possibility, be *anybody's fiancé!* You mean Roger, I suppose." But, with a quick frown and a touch of petulance, "Don't let us talk about *him*. He is such a worry, and has been making himself so exceedingly unpleasant all the morning!"

Miss Vibart stares, forgetting her usually very charming manners for the moment, and then drops her heavily-fringed lids over her eyes.

"By-the-by," says Dulce, breaking in upon what threatens to be an awkward pause, "how d'ye do? I don't believe I have said that yet." Her whole tone and expression have changed as if by magic; the suggestion of ill-temper is gone; the former vivacity re-asserts itself. She lays her hands upon her visitor's shoulders with a light, caressing gesture, and leans towards her. "I shall give you a little kiss for your welcome, my dear cousin, if I may," she says, very prettily.

Portia Vibart, acknowledging her grace, tells herself this new cousin will suit very well, and returns her soft embrace with some warmth. She is feeling tired, used up, *ennuye* to the last degree; even the two or three weeks she has had in town have been too much for her, and she has come down to her uncle's house nearly ready to confess to herself that she is seriously ill. Here, in the stillness, in this great room, with the elms swaying to and fro outside her windows, and the distant cawing of the rooks in the branches high up out of sight, she feels rest, and comfort, and a curious longing, that has a strange pleasure in it, to stretch out her arms and sigh deeply and contentedly.

"Sit in this chair, and rest a little before thinking of taking off anything else," says Dulce; "I shall pour out your tea."

She goes, with the quick undulating step that belongs to her, to a small, round table, and makes a little fuss over the delicate fat little cups that stand on the tray.

"You take sugar?" she asks, in a moment or two.

"No, thank you," says Portia, slowly; she is looking at her cousin still, whose hair is as nearly red as it can be, without being exactly so; it comes very, very close to it, but it is only the rude who have ever called it so.

"But of course not," says Dulcinea. "One might know that by looking at you. It isn't a good thing to take sugar in one's tea nowadays, is it? – it almost touches on immorality;" she is standing with the sugar-tongs poised in her right hand, and is glancing at Portia over her shoulder. "*I* take it, you know – any amount of it, and I have yet the grace to be ashamed of myself afresh, at every new lump. Dicky Browne likes it, too."

"Who *is* Dicky Browne?" demands Portia, suddenly: if she is going to live in this rather mixed household, she had better learn some particulars about the inhabitants at once.

"Not know Dicky? it argues yourself unknown. He is our celebrity. He is really immensely clever, about always doing the wrong thing, and indeed is inestimable in most ways. He is your cousin, too, as much as he is mine, which really," declares she airily, "isn't much. But he is such a pet all through that we magnify the third-cousinship into a first. He rides very straight and smokes the very prettiest cigarettes, and he is *such* a fool!"

Miss Vibart is amused. "What a very charming description," she says, with the low laugh she allows herself; "he sounds like something I have seen somewhere, and he certainly would be a treasure to Byron."

"Lord Byron?" asks Dulce, with lifted brows; "I don't myself think he would show off much as a Conrad, or a Giaour, or a Lara."

"I rather fancy I was thinking of the man who writes plays," says Miss Vibart, mildly. "Is he here now?"

"Yes. He spends most of his time here. Both he and Roger are consumed with a desire to see you. You must know," says Dulcinea, laughing over her cups at her cousin, "that a breath from the outer world came to us, whispering of your success in town, and how every one raves of your *beaux yeux*, and your beauty generally."

"Who wafted so insane a breath as that?" asks Portia, with a suppressed smile.

"Mark Gore. He puts in a good deal of his time here, too."

"Mark Gore never talks anything but the very utterest nonsense," says Portia with a faint blush. "No one minds him. I shall be quite afraid to go down-stairs to present myself to Dicky Browne after all you have said. Consider his disappointment."

"I shan't," says Dulce, calmly, "and you needn't fear him. He is only Dicky. Well, it is five now, and we dine at seven. I shall send your maid to you, and I shall call back for you in an hour, if you wish, to bring you down stairs with me. But, perhaps – "

"Oh! please do," says Portia, graciously. "I shall be just a little strange at first, shan't I?"

"Strange here? *Indeed* no," says Dulcinea, earnestly. "Nobody knows the meaning of that word in this old Court. We all get friends with each other at once, and I don't think we ever fall asunder

again. Now at six do try to be ready, and I will take you to see Uncle Christopher, who is sure to be in just then."

"I shall be ready," says Portia, with determination.

CHAPTER II

"The first and the simplest emotion which we discover in the human mind is curiosity." – Burke.

"Yes, I am quite ready," says Portia.

The hour has flown, and Dulcinea, standing in the doorway of her cousin's room, gazes on her with undisguised admiration. To Dulcinea, anything lovely, be it man, or beast, or flower, is an intense and everlasting delight, and now Portia enchants her. In very truth so well she might, as a fairer picture than she presents at this moment can hardly be imagined.

She is standing before a large glass, let into the wall on one side of the room from ceiling to floor, and, with a back glass in her hand, is leaning slightly to one side, as though lost in admiration of the soft mass of fair, brown hair that lies coiled low down on her neck in high-art fashion. She is like a soft harmony in black and gold, with her filmy robes clinging closely round her, and the old gold, that is so like tarnished yellow, touching her here and there.

"Ah! Mark was right," says Dulce, with a little sigh of intensest pleasure. "Come down now (you *cannot* make yourself more beautiful), and be made known to Uncle Christopher."

It is in the library that Miss Vibart makes herself known. Dulce entering first, with her gay little air, says:

"This is Portia, Uncle Christopher." Thereupon a tall old man, rising from a chair, comes quickly up to them and takes Portia's hand, and, stooping very low, presses his lips to her forehead.

He is a remarkably handsome old man, with light hair, and a rather warm complexion, and choleric, but kindly eyes. Even at the first glance Portia tells herself he would be as harsh a foe as he would be a champion true, and in so far she reads him right. He is hot-tempered, obstinate, at moments perhaps unjust, but at all times kind-hearted, and deserving of tenderest regard.

Now he is holding his new niece's hand, and is gazing down at her with animated eyes, that no age will ever quite dim.

"So glad. *So* glad you have come to us," he says, in a tone that reminds her of Dulce's, though it is so deep and strong and masculine, and hers so very much the reverse in every way, "Bless me, how days go by! Just last week, as it seems to me, I saw you a little girl in short petticoats and frills, and furbelows, and now – "

"I wear petticoats still," says Portia, demurely, with a soft laugh, "and frills sometimes, and often furbelows, I *think*, though I don't in the least know what they mean, but they sound nice. So, after all, I should be now very much as I was."

"Very much. But forgive me," says Sir Christopher, "if I say you were not anything like as good-looking then as you are to-day."

"A speech easy to forgive," said Portia, lightly. Then, after a pause, "I, too, remember what *you* were like in those old days."

"What then?" asked Sir Christopher, giving a sudden pull to his collar, and betraying an increased degree of interest.

"Nothing like so good-looking as you are to-day," retorts she, with a quick smile and a little flicker of her eyelids.

"Ah! we shall be friends," cries Sir Christopher, gaily. "Baby and you and I will ride roughshod over all the others; and we have wanted somebody to help us, haven't we, Baby?" Then he turns more entirely to Dulce; "Eh, a sharp wit, isn't it?" he says.

"Auntie Maud sent her love to you," said Portia.

"Eh? Much obliged, I'm sure," says Sir Christopher. "Very good of her; mine to her in return. A most estimable woman she always was, if short of nose. How she *could* have thrown herself away upon that little insignificant – eh? – though he *was* my brother – eh?"

"She ought to have had you," says Miss Vibart, with soft audacity.

"Eh? eh?" says Sir Christopher, plainly delighted. "Now, what a rogue!" He turns to Dulce, as he always does on every occasion, be it sweet or bitter. "You hear her, Dulce. She flatters me, eh?"

"Uncle Christopher, you are a sad, sad flirt," says Dulce, patting his cheek. "I am glad poor Auntie Maud escaped your fascinations. You would have forgotten her in a week. Do you know what o'clock it is? —*after* six. Now do go up and get ready for dinner, and try to be in time for once, if only to do honor to Portia. He is so irregular," says Dulcinea, turning to Portia.

Miss Vibart, like Alice, begins to think it all "curiouser and curiouser;" yet, withal, the house seems full of love.

"Well, indeed as a rule, I believe I *am* late," says Sir Christopher, in a resigned tone. "But I always put it down upon Mylder; he *can't* tie a cravat!" Then, to Portia, "You are pale and thin, child. You must get rosy and fat, and above all things healthy, before we are done with you."

"She must, indeed," says Dulce, "though I doubt if she will thank us for it by-and-by; when she finds herself (as she shall) with rose-colored cheeks like a dairy-maid, she will be very angry with us all."

"I shall never have red cheeks," says Portia; "and I shall never be angry with you; but I shall surely get strong in this charming air."

"Here you will live forever," says Dulce. "People at ninety-five consider themselves in the prime of life."

"Lucky they!" says Portia; "they must 'wear the rose of youth' upon them forever."

"Oh! we *can* die young," says Dulce, hastily, as though anxious to take a stigma off her country-side. "We have been known to do it, but not much; and the happiest have gone the soonest."

"Yes," says Uncle Christopher, most cheerfully – he is plainly unimpressed, and shows an inclination to whistle

> "Golden lads and girls, all must,
> As chimney-sweepers come to dust!"

"I say, Dulce, isn't Portia like that picture of your grand-aunt in the north gallery?"

"Like who?" asks Portia, anxiously.

"Like the handsomest woman in Europe, of her time," says Sir Christopher, earnestly, with a low, profound bow that might perhaps have been acceptable to "the handsomest woman in Europe," but only serves now to raise wild mirth in the breasts of her degenerate grand-nieces.

When they have reached again the hall outside (leaving Sir Christopher to seek the tender mercies of Mylder) Portia turns to her cousin —

"I am fortunate," she says, in her usual composed fashion that is yet neither cold nor repellant, "I find Uncle Christopher, also, altogether charming!"

The "also" is very happy. It is not to be misunderstood, and is full of subtle flattery. Dulcinea yields to it, and turns, eyes and lips bright with a warm smile, upon Miss Vibart.

"Yes; he is quite everything that is nice," she says, gracefully ignoring the compliment to herself. "Now, shall we come and sit on the balcony until dinner is ready; as a rule, we assemble there in Summer instead of in the drawing-room, which, of course, is more convenient, and decidedly more gloomy."

"I have an all-conquering curiosity to know everything about everybody down here," says Portia, as they reach the balcony. Dulce pushes a low, sleepy-looking chair toward her, and, sinking gracefully into it, she turns her eyes up to her cousin. "Tell me all about your Roger," she says, languidly. "As

I must begin with somebody, I think I shall prefer beginning with – with – what shall I call him? Your young man?"

"It sounds like Martha's baker's boy," says Dulce, laughing; "but you may call Roger what you like. I wish with all my heart you could call him husband, as that would take him out of my way."

They are standing on the balcony, and are looking toward the South. Beyond them stretch the lawns, green and sloping; from below, the breath of the sleeping flowers comes up to greet them; through the trees in the far, far distance comes to them a glimpse of the great ocean as it lies calm and silent, almost to melancholy, but for the soft lap, lapping of the waves upon the pebbly shore.

"Some one told me he was very handsome," says Portia, at a venture. Perhaps she has heard this, perhaps she hasn't. It even seems to her there is more truth in the "has" than in the "hasn't."

"I have seen uglier people," admits Dulcinea, regretfully; "when he has his face washed, and his hair brushed, he isn't half a bad boy."

"Boy?" asks Portia, doubtfully; to her the foregoing speech is full of difficulty.

"I daresay *you* would call him a man," says Dulce, with a shrug of her soft shoulders; "but really he isn't. If you had grown up with him, as I have, you would never think of him as being anything but an overgrown baby, and a very cross one. That is the worst of being brought up with a person, and being told one is to marry him by-and-by. It rather takes the gilt off him, I think," says Dulce with a small smile.

"But why must you marry him?" asks Portia, opening her large black fan in an indolent fashion, and waving it to and fro.

The sun retiring

"On waves of glory, like an ocean god,"

flings over her a pale, pink halo, that renders even more delicately fine the beauty of her complexion. A passing breeze flings into her lap a few rose-leaves from a trailing tree that has climbed the balcony, and is now nodding drowsily as the day slowly dies. She is feeling a little sorry for Dulce, who is reciting her family history with such a doleful air.

"Well, I needn't, you know," says that young lady, lightly; "not if I don't choose, you know. I have got until I am twenty-one to think about it, and I am only eighteen now. I daresay I shall cry-off at the last moment; indeed, I am sure I shall," with a wilful shake of the head, "because Roger, at times, is quite too much, and utterly insupportable, yet, in that case, I shall vex Uncle Christopher, and I do so love Uncle Christopher!"

"But he had nothing to do with the arrangement, had he?"

"Nothing. It was his brother, Uncle Humphrey, who made the mistake. He left the property between us on condition we married each other. Whichever of us, at twenty-one, declines to carry out the agreement, gets £500 a year off the property, and the rest goes to the happy rejected. It is a charming place, about six miles from this, all lakes and trees, and the most enchanting gardens. I daresay Roger would be delighted if I would give him up, but" (vindictively) "I shan't. He shall never get those delicious gardens all to himself."

"What an eccentric will," says Portia.

"Well, hardly that. The place is very large, and requires money to keep it up. If he had divided the income between us, and we had been at liberty to go each our own way, the possessor of the house and lands would not have had enough money to keep it in proper order. I think it rather a just will. I wish it had been differently arranged, of course, but it can't be helped now."

"Is he your first cousin? You know I have heard very little about this branch of my family, having lived so long in India."

"No, my second cousin. Fabian is Uncle Christopher's heir, but if – if he died, Roger would inherit title and all. That is another reason why I hate him. Why should he have even a distant claim to anything that belongs to Fabian?"

"But, my dear girl, you are not going to marry a man you hate?" says Portia, sitting up very straight, and forgetting to wave her fan.

"Not exactly," says Dulce, meditatively; "I really don't think I hate him, but he can be disagreeable, I promise you."

"But if you marry him, hardly tolerating him, and afterwards you meet somebody you can love, how will it be with you then?"

"Oh, I shan't do that," she says; "I have felt so married to Roger for years, that it would be positively indecent of me, even *now*, to fall in love with any one. In fact I couldn't."

"I daresay, after all, you like him well enough," says Miss Vibart, with her low, soft laugh. "Mark Gore says you are exactly suited to each other."

"Mark Gore is a confirmed old bachelor, and knows nothing," says Dulce, contemptuously.

"Yet once, they say, he was hopelessly in love with Phyllis Carrington."

"So he was. It was quite a romance, and he was the hero."

"Phyllis is quite everything she ought to be, and utterly sweet," says Portia, thoughtfully. "But *is* she the sort of person to create a *grande passion* in a man like Mark?"

"I daresay. Her eyes are lovely; so babyish, yet so full of latent coquetry. A man of the world, like Mark, would like that sort of thing. But it is all over now, quite a worn-out tale. He visits there at stated times, and she has thoughts only for her baby and her 'Duke,' as she calls her husband."

"I wonder," says Miss Vibart, with a faint yawn, "if at times she doesn't find that a trifle slow?"

Then she grows a little ashamed of herself, as she catches Dulce's quick, puzzled glance.

"It is a very pretty baby," says Dulce, as though anxious to explain matters.

"And what can be more adorable than a pretty baby?" responds her cousin, with a charming smile. "Now do tell me" – quickly, and as though to change the current of her companion's thoughts – "how many people are in this house, and who they are, and everything that is bad and good about them."

Dulce laughs.

"We come and go," she says. "It would be hard to arrange us. *I* am always here, and Uncle Christopher, and – Fabian. Roger calls this his home, too, but sometimes he goes away for awhile, and Dicky's room is always kept for him. We are all cousins pretty nearly, and there is one peculiarity – I mean, Uncle Christopher makes no one welcome who does not believe – in – Fabian."

Her voice falls slightly as she makes the last remark, and she turns her head aside, and, leaning over the balcony, plays absently with a rosebud that is growing within her reach. In this position she cannot see that Portia has colored warmly, and is watching her with some curiosity.

"You must try to like Fabian," says Dulce, presently. Her voice is sad, but quite composed. She appears mournful, but not disconcerted. "You have no doubt heard his unfortunate story from Auntie Maud, and —*you* believe in him, don't you?" She raises her eyes to her cousin's face.

"I hardly think I have quite heard the story," says Miss Vibart evasively.

"No? It is a very sad one, and quite unaccountable. If you have heard anything about it, you have heard all I can tell you. Nothing has ever been explained; I am afraid now nothing ever will be. It rests as it did at the beginning – that is the pity of it – but you shall hear."

"Not if it distresses you," says Portia gently. A feeling of utter pity for Fabian's sister, with all her faith and trust so full upon her at this moment, touches her keenly. As for the story itself, she has heard it a score of times, with variations, from Auntie Maud. But then, when brought to bay, what *can* one say!

"It will not distress me," says Dulce, earnestly; "and I would so much rather you knew everything before you meet him. It will make things smoother. It all happened four long years ago – years that

to him must seem a lifetime. He is twenty-nine now, he was only twenty-five then, just the time, I suppose, when life should be sweetest."

"It is mere accident makes life sweet at times," says Portia. "It has nothing to do with years, or place, or beauty. But tell me about your brother."

"He had just come home for his leave. He was so handsome, and so happy – without a care on earth – and was such a pet with the men in his regiment. I was only a child then, but he never seemed too old to talk to me, or to make me his companion. And then one morning it all happened; we were at breakfast – as we might be to-morrow" – says poor Dulce, with a comprehensive gesture, "when one of the men came in and said somebody wanted to speak to Uncle Christopher. When I think of it" – with a long-drawn sigh – "my blood seems to run cold. And even now, whenever Harley comes in at breakfast and bends over Uncle Christopher in a confidential way to tell him – it may be – about the puppies or the last filly, a sensation of faintness creeps over me."

"I don't wonder," says Portia, feelingly. "How could one ever forget it? You are making yourself unhappy; go no farther now, but tell me about it another time."

"As I have begun I shall finish," says Dulce, heroically, "even at the risk of boring you. But" – wistfully – "you will forgive me that."

"Go on; I *want* to hear," says Portia, strangely moved. Yet it seems cruel to make her repeat what she knows so well already, and what is so bitter to the narrator.

"Well, Uncle Christopher went out to see the man who wanted him, and after a little bit came back again, with a white face, and told us one of the clerks at the County Bank had dared to say Fabian had forged his – Uncle Christopher's – name for £500. I think I hardly understood; but Fabian got up, and first, he grew very red, and then very white, but he said nothing. He only motioned to me not to stir, so I sat quite still, and then he went up to Uncle Christopher, who was very angry, and laid his hand upon his arm and led him out of the room."

She pauses.

"Dulcinea," as yet the more familiar appellation "Dulce" is strange to Miss Vibart. "Dulcinea," she says, very sweetly, holding out a soft, pale, jewelled hand, with tender meaning, "come and sit here beside me."

Dulce is grateful for the unspoken sympathy, but instead of accepting half the lounging chair, which is of a goodly size, she sits down upon a cushion at Portia's feet, and leans her auburn head against her knee.

"It was quite true that somebody had forged Uncle Christopher's name for £500, but who it was has never transpired. Uncle Christopher wanted to hush it up, but Fabian would not let him. The writing was certainly Fabian's, I mean the imitation was exactly like it. I saw it myself; it was so like Fabian's that no one could possibly know one from the other. You see" – wistfully – "I am terribly honest, am I not? I do not pretend to see a necessary flaw."

"I like you the better for that," says Portia; involuntarily she lays her hand on Dulcinea's throat, just under her chin, and presses her gently towards her. "If it will make you happier tell me the rest," she says.

"Unfortunately at that time Fabian *did* want money. Not much you know, but the fact that he wanted it at all was fatal. He had lost something over the Grand National – or one of those horrid races – and people heard of it; and then, even after long waiting and strictest inquiry, we could not discover who had been the real offender, and that was worst of all. It seemed to lay the crime forever upon Fabian's shoulders. He nearly went mad at that time, and we, who loved him, could do nothing to comfort him."

"Ah! that was hard," says Portia, leaning over her. "Not to be able to lift the burden from those whose life is dear to us as our own is almost more than one can bear!"

"How you understand," says Dulce, gratefully. "And then, you see, somehow every one got to know about it; Fabian could not prove his innocence, and – I suppose – the story sounded badly in

alien ears. And then there came a day when somebody – Lord Ardley I think – cut Fabian publicly, and that made an end of all things. Uncle Christopher wanted to take notice of that, too – wanted I think" (with a wan smile that has no mirth in it) "to challenge Lord Ardley and carry him over to France and fight it out with him *à la mort*, but Fabian would not allow it, and I think he was right."

"Quite right." There was quite a ring in Miss Vibart's tone as she says this, but Dulce is too occupied with sad retrospect to notice anything at this moment. "How could the writing have so exactly resembled Fabian's?" she says, presently; "it was Uncle Christopher's name was forged, was it not?"

"Yes, but Fabian writes exactly like him. He makes his capitals quite the same. Anyone trying to copy Uncle Christopher's writing would probably succeed in imitating Fabian's perfectly."

"Ah! he writes like Uncle Christopher," says Portia, slowly, as though adding another link in her own mind to a conclusion already carefully formed.

"You will like him, I think," says Dulce, getting up from her low position as though restless and desirous of change. She leans her back against the balcony and faces her cousin. "Though he is terribly altered; so different to what he used to be. He is so grave now, and silent and moody. He seems to be ever brooding over the mystery of his own life, and trying – trying to get away from everybody. Oh! how he suffered, how we all suffered just then, knowing him to be innocent."

"You knew he was innocent?" says Miss Vibart. Unfortunately her tone is one of inquiry. She has her hands clasped in her lap and is looking steadily at Dulce, who is watching her intently from the railings of the balcony, where she stands framed in by roses. Miss Vibart's fan has slipped to the ground; she is really interested in this story. May not the hero of it prove an absorbing study? Her tone, however, grates upon the ears of the "absorbing study's" sister. Dulce flushes perceptibly; opens her lips hastily as though to speak, and then suppresses herself.

"I forgot," she says, quietly, after a moment's reflection, "you have never seen him."

The faith in this small remark touches Portia keenly – the more in that she has already formed her own opinion on the subject in hand.

"I wonder he stayed here after it happened," she says, with some faint acceleration of manner. Haste to Portia, is a word unknown.

"He is a hero, a martyr," says Dulce, earnestly, two large tears gathering in her eyes. "He was in the K.D.Gs., as you know, but of course he flung up his commission then, and was going abroad, when Uncle Christopher fell ill. So ill, that we despaired of him. And when even the doctor from London refused him hope, he called Fabian to his bedside and made him swear he would not leave him while he lived – and then he recovered. But he has always held Fabian to his word; and, indeed, it was a very necessary promise, because I don't think Uncle Christopher could live without him now. It is all terribly sad; but it would be worse if Fabian were really in fault, would it not?"

"It is all very sad," says Portia. Her eyes are bent, and she is slowly turning a ring round and round upon her finger.

"It has ruined Fabian's life, and broken his heart," says Dulce, in a low tone. "It is more than sad."

"But if innocent, why should it weigh so heavily upon him?" asks Portia, gently.

"*If*," says Dulce, quickly, the hot blood mounting to her cheeks. Then – very coldly – "There is no 'if' about it; he *is* innocent. However mysterious his unhappy story may sound in a strang – in your ears, nevertheless, our Fabian has nothing to do with disgrace. It could not touch him."

"I put it badly," says Portia, correcting her mistake with much grace. "I should have said *as* he is innocent. Forgive me."

"It was all a mistake," says Dulce, who is now very pale, "But we are so unaccustomed to even the faintest doubt of Fabian. Even Mark Gore, the sceptic, believes in him. How tired you look; would you like another cushion to your back?"

"No, thank you. I am quite comfortable and quite happy. Do you know," with a slow, lovely smile, "I rather mean that last conventional phrase: I *am* happy; I feel at rest. I know I shall feel no want here in this delicious old place – with you!" This is prettily toned, and Dulce smiles again. "I am so tired of town and its ways."

"You will miss your season, however," says Dulce, regretfully – for *her*.

"Yes, *isn't* that a comfort?" says her cousin, with a devout sigh of deepest thankfulness.

"A comfort!"

"Yes. I am not strong enough to go about much, and Auntie Maud has that sort of thing on the brain. She is like the brook – she goes on for ever, nothing stops her. Ah! See now, for example, who are those coming across the lawn? Is one your brother?"

"No! It is only Dicky Browne and – "

"Your Roger?"

"Oh! yes; my Roger," repeats Dulce, with a distasteful shrug.

Then she leans over the balcony, and says:

"Roger, come up here directly; for once in your life you are wanted by somebody. And you are to come, too, Dicky, and please put on your Sunday manners, both you boys, because I am going to introduce you to Portia!"

CHAPTER III

"Whether youth can be imputed to any man as a reproach, I will not, sir, assume the province of determining." – W. Pitt.

The boys, as Miss Blount – that is Dulce – irreverently terms them, are coming slowly across the grass, trampling the patient daisies. The sun has "dropped down" and the "day is dead," and twilight, coming up, is covering all the land. A sort of subtle sadness lies on everything, *except* "the boys," they are evidently full of the enjoyment of some joke, and are gay with smiles.

Mr. Browne is especially glad, which convinces his pretty cousin on the balcony that he has been the perpetrator of the "good thing" just recorded. At her voice, both he and his companion start, and Roger, raising his eyes, meets hers.

He is a tall, slight young man, handsome, indolent, with dark eyes, and a dark moustache, and a very expressive mouth.

Dicky is distinctly different, and perhaps more difficult of description. If I say he is a little short, and a little stout, and a little – a *very* little – good looking, will you understand him? At least he is beaming with *bonhommie*, and that goes a long way with most people.

He seems now rather taken by Dulce's speech, and says:

"No! Has she really come?" in a loud voice, that is cheery and comfortable to the last degree. He can't see Portia, as she is sitting down, and is quite hidden from view by the trailing roses. "Is she 'all your fancy painted her?' is she 'lovely and divine?'" goes on Mr. Browne, gaily, as though seeking information.

"Beauties are always overrated," says Roger, sententiously, in an even louder voice – indeed, at the very top of his strong young lungs – "just tell somebody that somebody else thinks so-and-so fit to pose as a Venus, and the thing is done, and so-and-so becomes a beauty on the spot! I say, Dulce, I bet you anything she is as ordinary as you please, from the crown of her head to the sole of her foot!"

"I can't follow up that bet," says Dulce, who has changed her position so as effectually to conceal Portia from view, and who is evidently deriving intense joy from the situation, "because I have only seen her face and her hands; and they, to say the least, are passable!"

"Passable! I told you so!" says Roger, turning to Dicky Browne, with fine disgust. "Is she æsthetic?"

"No."

"Fast?" asks Dicky, anxiously.

"No."

"Stupid – dull – impossible?"

"No, no, no."

"I thank my stars," says Dicky Browne, devoutly.

"Can't you describe her?" asks Roger, impatiently staring up from the sward beneath at Dulce's charming, wicked little face.

"She has two eyes, and a very remarkable nose," says Miss Blount, with a nod.

"Celestial or Roman?" demands Roger, lazily. By this time he and Dicky are mounting the stone steps of the balcony, and discovery is imminent.

"I think it is a little unfair," murmurs Portia, in a low whisper, who is, however, consumed with laughter.

At this moment they reach the balcony, and Dulce says, blandly, *àpropos* of Roger's last remark, "Perhaps if you ask her that question, *as she is here*, she will answer you herself!"

She waves her hand towards Portia. Portia rises and comes a step forward, all her soft draperies making a soft *frou-frou* upon the stone flooring; and then there is a good deal of consternation! and a *tableau* generally.

"I'm sure I beg your pardon," says Roger, when breath returns to him, casting an annihilating glance at Dulce, who catches it deftly, plays with it for a moment, and then flings it carelessly over the balcony into the rising mist and night.

"Whatever you beg you shall have," says Portia, coming nearer to him and holding out a slim white hand. "How d'ye do, Roger?"

"It is quite too good of you to forgive me so soon," says that young man, pressing with deep gratitude the slim, friendly hand. "It was beastly mean of Dulce, she *might* have told us" – this with another glance, meant to wither, at that mischievous maiden, who rather revels in her guilt. "My only apology is that I didn't know you – had never seen you, or I could not so have expressed myself."

"What a clever apology," murmurs Portia. "And what flattering emphasis!" She smiles at him pleasantly through the fast gathering gloom. "You will now introduce me to your friend, will you not?"

"Dicky, come forward and make your best bow," says Dulce. Whereupon, Mr. Browne, with a shamefaced laugh, comes to the front, and, standing before Miss Vibart like a criminal at the bar of justice, bends very low.

"Miss Vibart – Mr. Browne," says Roger, seriously. But at this Dicky forgets himself, and throws dignity to the winds.

"She called *you* Roger! I'm as much her cousin as ever you were!" he says, indignantly. "*Mr.* Browne, indeed!"

At this, both girls laugh merrily, and so, after a bit, does Dicky himself, to whose soul the mildest mirth is an everlasting joy.

"I am then to call you Dicky?" asks Portia, smiling, and lifting her eyes as though half-reluctantly to his; she has quite entered into the spirit of the thing.

"If you will be so very good," says Dicky Browne.

"You really had better," says Dulce, "because you are likely to see a good deal of him, and perpetually addressing people by their proper names *is* so tiring."

"It is true," says Portia; then turning to Dicky Browne, with half-closed lids and a subdued smile, she says, slowly:

"I am very pleased to make your acquaintance."

It has its charm, this lowered tone. Dicky gives in to it; and – metaphorically speaking – instantly prostrates himself at Miss Vibart's feet.

Perhaps he might have done so actually without metaphor, Dicky's conduct being at times uncertain, but for a timely interruption.

"Any chance of dinner to-night?" says a cheery old voice behind them, and turning, they see Sir Christopher standing inside the open window of the drawing room, smiling upon them with the utmost benignity. "Portia, my dear," he says, genially, as though he and she have been intimate for years, "we are all so young here, we hardly require sustenance. Nevertheless, let me take you into the dining-room, if only to see what cook has provided for us."

Portia lays her hand upon his arm, and, followed by the others (who are plainly quarreling in a warm, if subdued fashion), goes into the grand old dining-room. Roger takes the foot of the table; Dicky seats himself next Portia; Dulce, as she always does when no foreign guests are present, or, as she terms it, on "off-days," seats herself near Uncle Christopher.

One place, however, is empty; by right it is Roger's, who, except when Fabian is absent, never sits at the foot of the table.

Sir Christopher fusses a little, grows discontented, and finally says uneasily —

"Where is Fabian?"

"He has a headache, dear," says Dulce, gently. "He hopes we will all excuse him – especially Portia."

She turns with a sweet glance to Portia, who murmurs something civil in return.

"He would be better here than moping in his own room," says Sir Christopher, in a low voice. His spirits are evidently damped, though he makes an effort to suppress the fact; his smile grows faded, and less frequent, and presently dies away altogether. Every one makes a noble effort at conversation, and every one, after a bit, breaks down ignominiously and looks at his or her fish, as though in it lies some hidden charm.

Dicky Browne alone remains unimpressed by the gloom of the surroundings. He is thinking the filleted sole very good indeed, and is lost to all other ideas.

"Tell you who I saw to-day," he says, airily, "Boer. That clergyman fellow, you know, who married that annoying girl who used to be always at Chetwoode. I spent half an hour with him in the High Street, just opposite the club."

"How you *must* have enjoyed yourself!" says Roger, feelingly. "How I wish I could have put myself in your place at that moment."

"Don't you! Not being selfish, I would willingly have resigned to you the intellectual treat I endured! All things have their end, however, even my patience, which is known to be elastic like my conscience; so, as a last resource, I offered him a brandy and soda, and, as it turned out, it was quite the best thing I could have done under the circumstances. He looked awfully angry, and went away directly."

"Clever boy!" says Roger. "For the future I shall know exactly what to do when the reverend Boer inflicts his small talk on *me*. Dead sell, though, if he accepted your offer. One would have to sit it out with him, and, probably, he takes his brandy slowly."

"I don't believe he ever took any in his life," says Dulce, idly. "That is why the chill has never been removed from him. How I wish he could be thawed."

"I always feel so sorry for Florence," says Portia, languidly; she is feeling very tired, and is hardly eating anything. From time to time she looks at Sir Christopher, and wonders vaguely if it is her presence has kept Fabian from dinner to-night. "But Mr. Boer reads very well."

"When he doesn't turn over two pages at once," says Dicky Browne. "That is a favorite amusement of his, and it rather makes a mess of the meaning contained in holy writ. He is rather touchy about that last little *fiasco* of his when reading before the bishop the other day, so I thought I would tell him a story to-day that chimed in deliciously with his own little mistake, and, I doubt not, brought it fresh to his mind."

"What a wicked humor you must have been in," says Portia. "Tell the story to us now."

"You have heard it, I daresay. I only repeated it to Boer in the fond hope he would go away if I did, but it failed me. It was about the fellow who was reading the morning lesson – and he came to the words, 'and he took unto him a wife' – then he turned over two pages by mistake, and went on, 'and he pitched her with pitch within and without!' I don't think Boer liked my little story, but still he wouldn't go away."

"He is a dreadfully prosy person, and very material," says Portia, when they have all laughed a little.

"He is a jolly nuisance," says Mr. Browne.

"He hasn't got much soul, if you mean that," says Roger —

"'A primrose by a river's brim,
A yellow primrose is to him
And it is nothing more.'"

"That *is* such utter nonsense," says Dulce, tilting her pretty nose and casting a slighting glance at her *fiancé* from eyes that are

"The greenest of things blue,
The bluest of things gray."

"What more *would* it be? – a hollyhock, perhaps? or a rhododendron, eh?"

"Anything you like," says Roger, calmly, which rather finishes the discussion.

The night belongs to warm, lovable June; all the windows are wide open; the perfume of flowers comes to them from the gardens beneath, that are flooded with yellow moonshine. So still it is, so calm, that one can almost hear the love-song the languid breeze is whispering to the swaying boughs.

Across the table come the dreamy sighs of night, and sink into Portia's heart, as she sits silent, pleased, listening to all around, yet a little grieved in that her host is strangely silent, too, and looks as one might who is striving to hear the sound of a distant footstep, that comes not ever.

"He is always that way when Fabian absents himself," says Dicky Browne, with so little preface that Portia starts. "He adores the ground he walks on, and all that sort of thing. Speak to him and get him out of it."

"What shall I say?" asks Miss Vibart, somewhat taken aback. "Moods are so difficult."

"Anything likely to please him."

"My difficulty just lies there," says Portia.

"Then *do* something, if you can't say it. Exertion, I know, is unpleasant, especially in June, but one must sacrifice one's self sometimes," says Dicky Browne. "He'll be awfully bad presently if he isn't brought up pretty short by somebody during the next minute or so."

"But what can I do?" says Portia, who is rather impressed by Mr. Browne's earnestness.

"You hate port, don't you?" asks he, mysteriously.

"Yes. But what has that got to do with it?"

"Take some presently. It is poison, and will make you dreadfully ill; but that don't count when duty calls. We all hate it, but he likes it, and will feel positively benevolent if you will only say you like it too. 'Pride in his *port*, defiance in his eye!' – that line, I am convinced, was written for him alone, but modern readers have put a false construction upon it."

"It will make me *so* unhappy," says Portia, looking at Uncle Christopher with a pitying eye. The pity is for him, not for herself, as Dicky foolishly imagines.

"Don't think about that," he says, valiantly. "Petty inconveniences sink into nothingness when love points the way. Take your port, and try to look as if you liked it, and always remember, 'Virtue is its own reward!'"

"A very poor one, as a rule," says Portia.

"Have some strawberries, Portia?" asks Roger at this moment, who has been sparring with Dulce, mildly, but firmly, all this time.

"Thank you," says Portia.

"They don't go well with port, and Portia adores port," says Mr. Browne, hospitably, smiling blandly at her as he speaks.

She returns his smile with one of deep reproach.

"Eh? No, do you really?" asks Sir Christopher, waking as if by magic from his distasteful reverie. "Then, my dear, I can recommend this. Very old. Very fruity. Just what your poor father used to like."

"Yes – your *poor* father," says Dicky Browne *sotto voce*, feelingly and in a tone rich with delicate encouragement.

"Thank you. Half a glass please. I – I never take more," say Portia, hastily but sweetly, to Sir Christopher, who is bent on giving her a goodly share of what he believes to be her heart's desire.

Then she drinks it to please him, and smiles faintly behind her fan and tells herself Dicky Browne is the very oddest boy she has ever met in her life, and amusing, if a little troublesome.

Sir Christopher once roused, chatters on ceaselessly about the old days when he and Charles Vibart, her father, were boys together, and before pretty Clara Blount fell in love with Vibart and married him. And Portia listens dreamily, and gazing through the open window lets part of the music of the scene outside sink into his ancient tales, and feels a great longing rise within her to get up and go out into the mystic moonbeams, and bathe her tired hands and forehead in their cool rays.

Dulce and Roger are, as usual, quarreling in a deadly, if carefully-subdued fashion. Dicky Browne, as usual, too, is eating anything and everything that comes within his reach, and is apparently supremely happy. At this moment Portia's longing having mastered her, she turns to Dulce and asks softly:

"What is that faint streak of white I see out there, through, and beyond, the branches?"

"Our lake," says Dulce, half turning her head in its direction.

"Our pond," says Roger, calmly.

"Our *lake*," repeats Dulcinea, firmly; at which Portia, feeling war to be once more imminent, says hastily —

"It looks quite lovely from this – so faint, so silvery."

"It shows charmingly when the moon is up, through that tangled mass of roses, far down there," says Dulce, with a gesture toward the tangle.

"I should like to go to it," says Portia, with unusual animation.

"So you shall, to-morrow."

"The moon will not be there to-morrow. I want to go now."

"Then so you shall," says Dulce, rising; "have you had enough strawberries? Yes? Will you not finish your wine? No? Come with me, then, and the boys may follow us when they can tear themselves away from their claret!" This, with a scornful glance at Roger, who returns it generously.

"I shall find it very easy to tear myself away to-night," he says, bent on revenge, and smiling tenderly at Portia.

"So!" says Dulce, with a shrug and a light laugh that reduces his attempt at scorn to a puerile effort unworthy of notice; "a compliment to *you* Portia; and – the other thing to me. We thank you, Roger. Come." She lays her hand on Portia's, and draws her toward the window. Passing by Uncle Christopher's chair, she lets her fingers fall upon his shoulder, and wander across it, so as just to touch his neck, with a caressing movement. Then she steps out on the verandah, followed by Portia, and both girls running down the stone steps are soon lost to sight among the flowers.

CHAPTER IV

"'Tis not mine to forget. Yet can I not
Remember what I would or what were well.
Memory plays tyrant with me, by a wand
I cannot master!"

– G. Mellen.

Past the roses, past the fragrant mignonette they go, the moon's soft radiance rendering still more fair the whiteness of their rounded arms.

The dew lies heavy on leaf and flower. Motionless stand the roses, and the drooping lilies, and the pansies, purple and yellow. "God Almighty," says Bacon, "first planted a garden; and indeed it is the purest of human pleasures; it is the greatest refreshment to the spirits of man!"

Here, now, in this particular garden, where all is so deeply tranquil, it seems as if life itself is at a standstill, and sin and suffering, joy and ambition, are alike unknown. A "pure pleasure" it is indeed to gaze upon it, and a great refreshment to any soul tired, or overwrought, or sorrowful.

The stars are coming out slowly one by one, studding brilliantly the pale, blue vault of heaven, while from a

"Thin fleecy cloud,
Like a fair virgin veil'd, the moon looks out
With such serene and sweet benignity
That night unknits his gloomy brows and smiles."

Dulce, plucking some pale blossom, lifts it to her lips, and kisses it lightly. Portia, drawing a deep breath of intensest satisfaction, stands quite still, and letting her clasped hands fall loosely before her, contemplates the perfect scene in mute delight.

Presently, however, she shivers, a passing breeze has cast a chill upon her.

"Ah! you are cold," says Dulce, anxiously; "how thoughtless I am; yes, you are quite pale."

"Am I?" says Portia. "It was the standing here, I fancy. India gave me bad habits, that, after three years, I find myself unable to conquer. Every silly little wind strikes a chill to my heart."

"I shall get you a shawl in no time," says Dulcinea; "but keep walking up and down while I am away, so as to keep your blood warm."

"Your command shall be obeyed," says Portia, smiling, and then Dulce, turning, disappears quickly amongst the shadows, moving as swiftly as her light young feet can carry her.

Portia, left alone, prepares to keep her promise, and walks slowly along the graveled path once more. Turning a corner, again a glimpse of the distant lake comes to her. It is entrancing; calm as sleep, and pure as the moon above, whose image lies upon its breast.

Even as she looks the image fades – the "fleecy cloud" (jealous, perhaps, of the beauty of the divine Artemis, and of Portia's open admiration of her) has floated over her again, and driven her, for a little moment, into positive obscurity.

The path grows dark, the lake loses its color. Portia, with a sigh, moves on, confessing to herself the mutability of all things, and pushing aside some low-lying branches of a heavily-scented shrub, finds herself face to face with a tall young man, who, apparently, is as lost in wonder at her appearance as she is at his!

She starts, perceptibly, and, only half-suppressing a faint exclamation of fear, shrinks backwards.

"I beg your pardon," says the stranger, hastily. "I am afraid I have frightened you. But, really, it was all the fault of the moon."

His voice is reassuring, and Portia, drawing her breath more freely, feels just a little ashamed of her momentary terror.

"I am not frightened now," she says, with an upward glance, trying to read, through the darkness, the face of him she addresses. The clouds are scurrying swiftly across the sky, and now the moon shines forth again triumphant, and all things grow clearer. She can see that he is tall, dark, handsome, with a strange expression round his mouth that is surely more acquired than natural, as it does not suit his other features at all, and may be termed hard and reckless, and almost defiant. His jaw is exquisitely turned. In his eyes is a settled melancholy – altogether his face betrays strong emotions, severely repressed, and is half-morbid and wholly sad, and, when all is said, more attractive than forbidding.

Portia, gazing at him with interest, tells herself that years of mental suffering could alone have produced the hard lines round the lips and the weariness in the eyes. She has no time for further speculation, however, and goes on quickly: "It was more than foolish of me; but I quite forgot, I" – with some uncertainty – "should have remembered."

"What do you forget? and what should you have remembered?"

"I forgot that burglars do not, as a rule, I suppose, go about in evening clothes; and I should have remembered" – with a smile – "that there was yet another cousin to whom I had not been introduced."

"Yes; I am Fabian Blount," he says indifferently. He does not return her smile. Almost he gives her the impression that at this moment he would gladly have substituted another name for his own.

"Ah! you are Fabian," she says, half-puzzled by his manner.

"If you will take my word for it." His tone is even more strange as he says this, and now he *does* smile, but disagreeably.

Portia colors faintly.

"You have not asked me my name?" she says quietly. "I am Portia."

"What a very pretty name!" He has had a half-smoked cigar behind his back all this time; now remembering it, he looks at it, and flings it far from him. "It reminds one of many things; Shakespeare, I suppose principally. I hope," looking at her, "*you* will choose the right casket."

"Thank you. That is a very kindly wish."

"How does it happen that you are here all alone?"

"I was cold; I always am. Dulcinea saw me shiver, I think, and ran to get a shawl or some covering for me. That is all."

"She is a long time getting it, is she not?"

"Is she?" says Portia. This speech of his piques her a little. "Does it seem long?"

"Very long, if one is to shiver all the time," replies he, calmly, reading her resentment in her face, but taking no notice of it. "Much too long to be out in this chilly night-air without sufficient clothing, and with a wholesome dread of possible burglars full upon you. May I stay with you till Dulce returns, and will you walk on a little? It is foolish to stand still."

"I am sorry you threw away your cigar on my account. I am sure you want it now."

"I don't believe I ever want anything," says Fabian, slowly; and then they walk on again, returning by the way she had come. The night-wallflower is flinging its perfume abroad, the seringas are making sweet the air, a light eager wind rushes softly past them.

"It was a long drive," says Fabian, presently, with all the air of a man who is determined to rouse himself – however against his will – and carry on conversation of some sort. "Are you tired?"

"It *was* long. But everything here is so new, so fresh, so sweet, that I have forgotten to be tired."

"You are one of those, perhaps, who always find variety charming." As he speaks he carefully removes a drooping branch of roses out of her way.

"Not quite always." She smiles as she defends herself. "I like old friends, and old songs best. I am not absolutely fickle. But I have always had a great desire to live in the country."

"People who have never tried it, always do have that desire."

"You think I shall be *desillusionne* in a week? But I shall not. When George had to return to India, I was so unhappy in the thought that perhaps I should have to live in town until his return. Of course I could have gone somewhere to live by myself, and could have found some charming old lady to take care of me, but I am not fond of my own society, and I can't bear charming old ladies."

"One feels quite sorry for the old ladies," says Fabian, absently.

"I was afraid I should have to put in my two years of waiting for George, with Auntie Maud, and that would have been terrible. It would mean seasons, and months at fashionable watering-places, which would be only town out of town – the same thing all over again. I was so glad when Uncle Christopher wrote to say he would like me to come here. I have often wondered since," she says, suddenly – smiling somewhat wistfully, and flushing a warm crimson, – "whether all of *you* didn't look upon my coming with disfavor."

"What put such a thought as that into your head?"

"A very natural one I think. A stranger coming to a household always makes such a difference; and you had never met me, and you might not like me, and – . Did any of you resent my coming?"

"No," says Fabian. There is no energy in his reply, yet it is impossible to doubt that he means exactly what he says. "You must not begin by thinking unkindly of us," he goes on, gently. "You may believe me when I say none of us felt anything but pleasure at the idea of your coming."

"Yes? That was very good of you all." She is longing to say, "Yet you see I kept you from dinner to-night," but after a moment's reflection leaves it unsaid.

"I hope the country will not disappoint you," he says, after a slight pause. "It is unwise to begin by expecting too much."

"How can it disappoint?" says Portia, with some intensity. She says nothing more, but she lifts her lovely face to the starry sky, and puts out her hands with a faint gesture, fraught with admiration, towards the heavy flowers, the distant lake, the statues half hidden by the drooping shrubs, and the moonlight sleeping upon all!

"There is always in the country, the sun, the flowers, and at night, the moon," she says.

"Yet, the day will come, even for you, when there will be no sun, and when the moon will refuse to give its light." He speaks peculiarly and as though his thoughts are wandering far from her to other scenes in which she holds no part.

"Still, there will always be the flowers," she says, quickly, impressed by his tone, and with a strange anxiety to prove to herself that surely all things are not in vain.

"Oh, no! They are the frailest of the three," returns he; "they are like our dearest hopes. At the very time they should prove true, when the cold Winter of our discontent is full upon us, they forsake us – never to return."

"Never? Does not the Summer bring them again?" She has stopped in the middle of the path, and is asking her question with an anxiety that astonishes even herself. "This rose bush," she says, pointing to one close beside her, "now rich in glory, and warm with golden wealth, will it not bloom again next year, in spite of the death that must pass over it?"

"It may. But you will never see again those roses over there, that you love and rejoice in now! Others may be like them, but they cannot be quite the same."

Portia makes no reply. The moonlight is full upon him, and she can see that his lips have lost their hardness, and are as full of melancholy as his eyes. She is looking curiously at him, regarding him perhaps in the light of a study – he is looking, not at her at all, but at something that surely has no place in this quiet garden, lying so calm and peaceful beneath the light of heaven.

A terrible expression, that is despair and grief commingled, covers his face. Some past horror, that has yet power to sting, is holding him captive. He has forgotten Portia, the beauty of the night,

everything! He is wrapt in some miserable memory that will not be laid. Surely, "the heart may break, yet brokenly live on."

Be he guilty (as she believes him) of this crime that has darkened his life, or only the victim of unhappy circumstances, at this moment Portia pities him with all her heart.

Voices in the distance! Roger and Dulce still high in argument; a faint perfume of cigarettes; Dicky Browne's irrepressible laugh; and then they all come round the corner, and somebody says, "Ah, here she is," and Dicky Browne places a shawl round Portia's shoulders.

"You here, Fabian?" says Dulce, gladly. "And making friends with Portia? That's right."

"Taking a mean advantage of us all I call it," says Dicky Browne. "*We* got introduced in the cruel glare of day, with all our imperfections on our heads. *You* waited for moonshine, balmy air, scent of roses, poetical effect, and so on! That's why you stayed away from dinner. And to think none of us saw through you! Well, I always said I was very innocent; quite unfit to go about alone!"

"Not a doubt of it," said Roger, cheerfully. "But you won't have to complain of that long. We are all on the look-out for a keeper for you, and a straight waistcoat." Then, turning to Fabian, "Your headache better, old man?"

"Thank you – yes. Your cousin is tired, I think, Dulce. Take her in and make her rest herself."

"Ah! You are worn out," says Dulce to Portia, with contrition. "I have been so long getting you the shawl; but I could not help it. You must not stay up, you know, to do manners to us, you must go straight to bed this moment, and come down like a rose in the morning. Now confess you are tired."

"Well, yes, I am afraid I am," says Portia, who is feeling faintly disappointed for the first time since her arrival. Why, she scarcely knows.

"She said 'I am a-weary, a-weary; I would I were a-bed,'" quotes Mr. Browne, feelingly. Whereupon everyone feels it his duty to take Portia at once back to the house, less Mr. Browne, by any ill-luck, should commit himself still further.

It is only when Portia is at last alone in her own room that she recollects that Fabian forgot to shake hands with her. Or was it she with Fabian?

CHAPTER V

"Oh, how full of briars is this working-day world!"

– "As You Like It."

"I wish you would *try* to remember," says Dulce, a little hastily. She is sitting in a rather Gothic chair, and the day is ultra-hot, and the strain upon her mental powers is greater than she can bear. Hence the haste.

She is leaning back in the uneasy chair now, pencil in hand, and is looking up at Roger, who is leaning over the table, in a somewhat supercilious manner, and is plainly giving him to understand that she thinks him a very stupid person, indeed.

This is irritating, and Roger naturally resents it. A few puckers show themselves upon his forehead, and he turns over a page or two of the gardener's book before him with a movement suggestive of impatience.

"I *am* trying," he says, shortly.

"Well, you needn't tear the book in pieces," says Dulce, severely.

"I'm not tearing anything," retorts Mr. Dare, indignantly.

"You look as if you wanted to," says Dulce.

"I don't want anything except to be let alone," says Mr. Dare.

The windows are all wide open. They were flung wide an hour ago, in the fond hope that some passing breeze might enter through them. But no breeze cometh – is not, indeed, born – and the windows yawn for it in vain. Outside, all Nature seems asleep; inside, the very curtains are motionless.

In a low rocking-chair, clad in the very lightest of garments permitted by civilization, sits Sir Mark Gore. He arrived at the Court only yesterday, in a perfect torrent of passionate rain, and was accused on all sides of having brought ill weather in his train. But to-day having asserted itself, and dawned fairly, and later on having burst into matchless beauty, and heat of the most intense, he is enabled to turn the tables upon his accusers, who look small and rather crushed.

"Have they had such a day this season?"

"Never! Oh, never!"

"Have they ever seen so lovely a one?"

"Never – at least, *hardly* ever!"

They are vanquished. Whereupon he tells them they were distinctly ungrateful yesterday, and that he will never put in a good word for them with the clerk of the weather again. *Never!*

Just now he is nodding drowsily over his *Times*, and is vainly trying to remember whether the last passage read was about Midhat Pasha, or that horrid railway murder, or the Irish Land League.

In the next window sits Portia, clad in a snowy gown that suits her to perfection. She has been here now for a fortnight, and feels as if she had been here forever, and almost wonders if in reality she ever knew another home. She is lounging in the very easiest of cushioned chairs, and is making a base attempt at reading, which attempt is held up to public scorn every other minute by Dicky Browne, who is sitting at her feet.

He is half in and half out of the room. His feet being on the verandah, his head and shoulders in the room. He is talking a little, and fidgeting a little, and laughing a little, and, in fact, doing everything in the world except thinking a little. Thought and Dicky Browne are two.

The room in which they are all sitting is long and very handsome, with three windows and two fire-places. It is always called the blue room at the Court, for no earthly reason that any one can see, except that it is painted green – the very most impossible green, calculated to create rapture in the breasts of Oscar and his fellows; a charming color, too, soothing, and calm, and fashionable, which, of

course, is everything. There are tiny cabinets everywhere, gay with majolica ware and many a Palissy dish; while Wedgewood, and Derby, and priceless Worcester shine out from every corner. There are Eastern rugs, and Japanese screens, and, indeed, everything that isn't Japanese is old English, and everything that isn't old English is Japanese – except, perhaps, a few lounging-chairs of modern growth brought in to suit the requirements of such unæsthetic beings as prefer the comfortable satin-and-down lounge to the more correct, if more trying oak.

"Perhaps it was the Duke of Edinburgh," says Roger, breaking the silence that has lasted now for a full minute. "I see he is very handsome, of robust habit and constitution, and of enormous size and length. Is that what you want?"

"No; I am sure it was not the Duke of Edinburgh. It doesn't sound like him. I wonder why you can't think of it. I am sure if I once eat anything I should remember all about it."

"Good gracious!" says Dicky Browne, from his lowly seat, glancing solemnly at Portia, "have they eaten the Duke of Edinburgh? It sounds like it, doesn't it? They must have done it on the sly. And *what* a meal! Considering they acknowledge him to be of enormous size and length!"

"Perhaps it was Sir Garnet Wolseley," says Roger, moodily, in the discontented tone of one who is following out a task utterly repugnant to his feelings. "He has an excellent flavor, but is entirely destitute of shank or shoulder."

Sir Mark Gore, at this dreadful speech, lowers his paper and lifts his head. Portia looks faintly startled. What can Roger be talking about?

"Ain't it awful," says Mr. Browne, "who'd have thought it of them. They look quite mild – and – er – like other people. Positively they are cannibals! And (did you remark?) it is *roast shoulder* they prefer, because they are grumbling at the want of it in the unfortunate General who has evidently been enticed from his home and coldly murdered by them. I wonder it wasn't in the papers – but doubtless the family hushed it up. And how heartlessly they speak! But, by the way, what on earth is a *shank?*– "

"The neck is splendid, and, indeed, there is no waste whatever," goes on Roger, in a wooden tone.

"No waist whatever! Did you hear that? I always thought poor Sir Garnet was a lean man," says Dicky, *sotto voce*. "Poor, poor fellow, can nothing satisfy them but rank and talent?"

"Not a bit like it," breaks in Dulce, petulantly tapping her foot upon the floor. She is never petulant with any one but Roger, being indeed, by nature, the very incarnation of sweetness and light.

"Give it up," says Roger, rising hope in his tone – hope that, alas, is never verified.

"And meet McIlray with such a lame story as that! Certainly not," says Dulce, warmly. "It must be found out. Do try again."

"Well, this must be it," says Roger, in despair, "The Marquis of Lorne, exquisite short neck, smooth skin, very straight, nice white spine."

At this Sir Mark rises to his feet.

"Really, my *dear* Roger!" he says, impulsively – but for the excessive laziness of his disposition it would have been severely.

"Ah," says Roger, glad of anything in the shape of a reprieve, even though it be unpleasant argument.

"How *can* Dulcinea find any interest in the color of the Marquis's spine?" says Sir Mark, reprovingly. "Forgive me if I say I think you are going a little too far."

"I shall have to go farther," says Roger, desperately, "There is no knowing where I shall end. She can't find it out, and neither can I, and I see no hope of our arriving at anything except a lunatic asylum."

"I can look it up by myself," says Miss Blount, grandly, "I don't want your help – much. I daresay I can manage by myself, after all. And even if I can't, I daresay Mark will come to my assistance if you forsake me."

"I won't," says Gore, decidedly; "I won't indeed. I would do anything in the world for you, Dulcinea, as you know, but for this work unfortunately I am too modest. I *couldn't* go about making inquiries about the color of people's spines. I couldn't, indeed. As a matter of science I daresay it would be interesting to know the exact number of shades, but – I feel I am unequal to the task."

"The Duke of Connaught," goes on Roger, wearily, hope being stifled in his breast, "bright green skin, well covered with bloom; small neck and – "

"Oh! hang it all, you know," says Dicky Browne, forgetting himself in the excitement of the moment, "I don't believe his Royal Highness *has* a green skin, do you, Portia? – saw him only a fortnight ago, and he looked all right then, just as white as the rest of us."

"It's cucumbers," says Miss Blount, with dignity.

"Yes, cucumbers," responds Mr. Dare, with a sigh; he is evidently in the last stage of exhaustion. "McIlray has forgotten the name of some particular seed he planted in the Spring that we all liked immensely (how I wish we *hadn't*), and he has compelled Dulce to try and discover it. So we are looking for it in these infer – I mean these very prettily-illustrated books that the seedsman has kindly sent us (how I wish he hadn't), and hope to find it before the millenium. I daresay any time next month you will still find us here poring over these identical books, but we shall be *dead* then – there is at least comfort in that thought."

"One wouldn't think so, to look at you," said Gore, pleasantly.

"You can go away, Roger, you really can," says Dulce, irritably. "You are not the least use to me, and I hate grumblers."

"Perhaps it is the Empress of India," says Dicky Browne, who has come over to the table, driven by sheer curiosity, and is now leaning on Roger's shoulder. "She 'is of enormous length, and the handsomest this year. She is beautifully shaped throughout, with scarcely any handle.' Oh, I say, hasn't the Queen a handle to her name? What an aspersion upon her royal dignity."

"Ah! here is Fabian! Now, you may go away, all of you," said Dulce, with fine contempt. "He will really be of some use to me. Fabian, what is the name of the cucumber that tiresome McIlray wants? I am worn out, almost in hysterics, trying to remember it."

"What a pity you didn't ask me sooner," says Fabian. "It is all right. I made it out this morning, and told McIlray. He says now he remembers all about it perfectly."

"Fabian, may I shake hands with you. You are a man and a brother," says Roger, effusively, with a sudden return of animation. "I should, indeed, like to kiss you, but it might betray undue exhilaration. You have saved me from worse than death. Bless me, isn't it warm?"

"Just a little sultry," says Mr. Browne. "Show me that book you were looking at? Carter's, eh? How I love a work of that sort! I think I love Carter himself. I daresay it is he designs those improbable vegetables and fruits that would make their fortunes as giants at a penny show. You see there *are* giants in these days."

"Are there?" says Dulce. "I think there aren't."

"Well, it's just as simple," says Dicky, amiably. "Not a bit more trouble. It is quite as easy to suppose there aren't, as to suppose there are. *I* don't mind. But to return to our muttons. I really do esteem our Carter – in anticipation. It occurs to me he yet may grow peaches as big as my head, and then what a time we'll 'ave, eh? – Eating fruit is my forte," says Mr. Browne, with unction.

"So it is," says Dulce. "Nobody will dispute that point with you. You never leave us any worth speaking about. McIlray says you have eaten all the cherries, and that he can't even give us a decent dish for dinner."

"What vile alliteration," says Mr. Browne, unabashed. "Decent, dish, dinner. You ought to be ashamed of yourself."

"Well, I'm not," says Dulce.

"Just shows your moral depravity. If you aren't you ought to be. Three great big D's in a breath! Shocking, shocking," says Dicky, gravely.

"What a heavenly day, and how depressing. We are never satisfied," says Mark Gore, flinging his arms above his head with a lazy gesture, and looking with almost comic despair at the pale-blue-and-gold glory in the heavens above.

Fabian, who has been standing near him, lost in a daydream, starts perceptibly at his tone, and moves as though he would go towards the door. Then, though still a little absent, and still wrapt in the dream from which he has sought to free himself, he looks round the room as though in search of something. Perhaps he finds it as his eyes light upon the window where Portia sits, because they linger there, and the restless expression, that has characterized his face up to this, vanishes.

He hesitates; pushes a book upon a table near him backwards and forwards gently two or three times, as though in doubt, and then walks straight to the window where Portia is, leans against the sash, just where he can see the lovely, downcast face before him.

After Dicky's defection (or was it on Fabian's entrance?) Miss Vibart returned to her neglected book, and has been buried in it ever since. Even when Fabian comes and stands close to her, she is so engrossed with the beauty of the story that she forgets to lift her eyes to look at him. So determinedly do they seek the page beneath them, that Fabian tells himself she must indeed have got to a thrilling part of her tale.

Her long, dark lashes lie like shadows on her cheeks. Her lips are closed. The hand that lies beneath the book trembles slightly.

They are all laughing at the upper end of the room at one of Dicky's absurdities. Down here by the far window, there is a silence marked enough to make itself felt. I think at last even Mark Gore feels it, because he rises from his comfortable rocking-chair with a faint yawn, and, walking down the room, comes to anchor behind Portia's chair.

Leaning over it, he says, pleasantly:

"Is that book of James' so very charming as to make you deaf and blind to us poor mortals?"

"I am never deaf or blind to you," says Portia, sweetly, glancing up at him over her shoulder. Her rounded chin is slightly tilted, a soft smile curves her lips.

At the Court Mark is a special favorite, yet so pretty a speech coming from Portia, who is usually so cold and indolent, strikes one as strange. Fabian regards her earnestly. How beautiful she is, yet how unsympathetic; has she no soul, no feeling? Surely her eyes, so large, so deep, so intense, belie this thought.

As though compelling himself, he says, with a visible effort:

"Have you been indoors all this lovely day? Has the sun had no power to tempt you to come out?"

"No;" she shakes her head as she answers him, and smiles, too, but the smile is cold as death, and though perfect, is altogether different from the one bestowed only a minute since upon Sir Mark.

"Then come out now," says Gore, as though pleasantly impressed by the suggestion conveyed in Fabian's speech. "Let us all shake off dull sloth and make a tour right round the gardens."

"A charming idea," says Portia, sitting more upright, and brightening visibly. She grows even animated, and animation, even of the faintest, is to be commended on such a day as this.

"Take your cousin to see the new carp-pond," says Gore, addressing Fabian, but watching Portia attentively. "You will like to see it, Portia?"

"So *very* much," says Portia. "But if I do go it must be with Dicky."

Her manner as she says this gives both the men fully to understand that early in the day she had pledged herself to go for a walk some time in the afternoon. So far, so good – it *might* have so explained itself – but, unfortunately, at this moment Dicky Browne (who, as Dulce says, is always in the wrong place at the wrong time) comes up behind them, and addresses them generally:

"What are you all conspiring about?" he says, genially. "Roger and Dulce, for the fourteenth time to-day, have again agreed to differ, so I seek refuge here. Take me in, will you? And, by-the-by, what shall we do with ourselves this grilling day!"

"I have just been suggesting a quiet stroll," says Sir Mark.

"The very thing," exclaims Mr. Browne, who is amiability itself. "Why on earth didn't we think of that before? Portia, if you will come with me, if you have not promised," with a glance at Sir Mark, "to go with anyone else, I will show you a new tennis court that will draw tears of admiration from your eyes."

This is the unfortunate part of it. It now becomes apparent to every one that Dicky did *not* ask her early in the morning to go for a walk anywhere. Silence follows Dicky's speech. A faint-pink color, delicate but distinct, creeps into Portia's cheeks; she does not lower her head, however, or her eyes either, but gazes steadily through the open window at the hills in the far, far distance, misty with heat and coming rain.

She feels that Fabian's eyes are on her, and inwardly resents his scrutiny. As for Fabian himself, his brow contracts, and a somewhat unpleasant expression mars the beauty of his face; yet, turning to Dicky with the utmost composure, he says, calmly:

"Take Portia to see the carp-pond; that may interest her."

"So I will," says Dicky. "But you come, too, old man; won't you? You understand all about fish, you know, and that, and I don't a little screw. Make him come, Portia; he talks like a book when he has got to explain things."

"Don't trouble Portia," says Fabian, quietly. "*Even she* could not persuade me to leave the house to-day, as I have business on hand that must be done."

There is the very faintest touch of sarcasm in his tone. The "even she," though very slightly done, is full of it. Portia, at least, is conscious of it. She unfurls her huge, black fan with a lazy gesture, and then turns her large eyes full upon him.

"So sorry my persuasions have failed," she says, slowly, not having persuaded him at all; and, satisfied with this speech, waves the fan indolently to and fro, and with half-closed eyes watches the merry little sunbeams outside as they run hither and thither over the grass.

"Oh! let us do something," says Dulce, from the distance. "I shall go mad if I am left here to talk to Roger all day."

"I am sure I don't want you to talk to me if it disagrees with you," says Roger, with ill-suppressed ire.

Then they tell her they are going for a gentle stroll before tea is ready, and she consents to go with them if Sir Mark will walk with her instead of Roger; and Roger, having indignantly disclaimed all anxiety to be her companion on this occasion, peace is restored, and they all sally forth armed with big, white umbrellas, to inspect the stupid carp.

Fabian alone remains indoors to transact the mysterious business, that I think would have been gladly laid aside had Portia so willed it. That she had absolutely refused to have him as her companion in her walk, was so evident at the time of her expressed desire to go to see the carp with Dicky Browne, that Fabian could not be blind to it. Standing in the window of the library now, with the dying sunset reddening the scene without, and shedding upon the flowers its tenderest tints of fair array, Fabian reminds himself of each word she had said, of each smallest smile and glance that had belonged to her, and at this moment hates her with a hatred that is exceptionally bitter.

Then a little wave flows over his soul, and he tells himself how that he is unjust, and a stranger cannot be reasonably expected to think him innocent of a crime he himself has been unable to refute.

The day wanes. Twilight falls; a flush of soft violet color deepens the sky. The sound of footsteps echoes again in the long hall without; they have returned from the carp and the new tennis ground, and are asking eagerly for their tea. The sun has gone down behind the Western hills, and the stained-glass windows are throwing a sombre light over the antlers and Gothic chairs, and mediæval furniture, in which the halls delight. Fabian, hearing the footsteps, pulls himself together somewhat roughly, and, opening a door that leads to a passage in little use, makes his way to a distant office, where he tells himself, bitterly, he is "far from the madding crowd," and free from intrusion.

Dulce and Portia, crossing the hall, go down the north corridor that leads to the library Fabian has just vacated. A heavy crimson curtain conceals a door on one side, and, as they pass, a figure, emerging from behind it, brushes somewhat brusquely against Portia, filling her with sudden alarm.

This figure, as it appears in the vague gloaming, is bowed and bent, and altogether uncanny.

Portia, shrinking closer to Dulce, lays her hand upon her arm.

"Ah! what was that?" she says, fearfully.

"Only Gregory Slyme," returns Dulce, quickly, "you are not frightened at *him*, poor old thing, are you? Have you not seen him before?"

"No," says Portia, with a shudder and a backward glance at the shrunken figure creeping away down the corridor as if ashamed of itself.

"No? – that is strange; but he has affected his own room a good deal of late."

"But who is he?" anxiously.

"He was Uncle Christopher's secretary for years, and calls himself that still, but Fabian does all the writing now."

"What a start he gave me," says Portia, putting her hand hurriedly to her heart as though in pain. "A chill seemed to rush all through my blood. It was as though I had met something that had worked, and would work, me harm!"

"Fanciful baby," says Dulce, with very superior scorn; "old Slyme could not work ill to anyone. He has lived with us for years; but lately, within the last eight months, he has become – well, a little uncomfortable; indeed, perhaps, unbearable is the word."

"How so? – what has he done?" asks Portia, unaccountably interested in this shadow that has crossed her path.

"I think he is very fond of brandy," says Dulce, reluctantly, and in a very grieved little tone. "Poor old Gregory!"

CHAPTER VI

"Present mirth hath present laughter,
What's to come is still unsure."

– *Shakespeare.*

"Julia is coming to-day," says Dulce, looking at them all, with the tea-pot poised in her hand. It is evident that this sudden announcement has hitherto been forgotten. "I heard from her this morning," she says, half apologetically, "but never thought of telling you until now. She will be here in time for dinner, and she is bringing the children with her."

"Only the children?" says Roger, the others are all singularly dumb.

"Yes. The *ayah* has gone home. Of course she will bring a nurse of some sort, but not Singa."

"For even small mercies we should be thankful," says Roger.

"Who is Julia?" asks Portia, idly.

"'Who is Julia? What is she
That all our swains commend her?
Holy, fair, and wise is she,
The heavens such grace – '"

"Oh, that will do," says Dicky Browne, turning impatiently to Roger, who has just delivered himself of the above stanza.

"Don't be severe," says Dulce, reprovingly; "extravagant praise is always false, and as to the swains, that is what she *wants* them to do, only they won't."

"Now, who is severe?" says Roger triumphantly.

"As yet, you have hardly described her," says Portia.

"Let me do it," entreats Mr. Browne, airily, "I feel in the very vein for that sort of thing. She is quite a thing to dream of; and she is much too preciously utter, and quite too awfully too-too!"

"That's obsolete now," says Dulce, "quite out of the market altogether. Too-too has been superseded, you should tell Portia she is very-very!"

"Odious," says Roger, in a careful aside as though determined to think Miss Blount's speech unfinished.

"She is like Barbauld's *Spring*," put in Sir Mark, lazily, coming up to have his cup refilled. "She is the 'sweet daughter of a rough and stormy sire.' Do any of you remember old Charley Blount?"

Plainly, nobody does. Everybody looks at everybody else, as though *they* should have known him, but nothing comes of it.

"Well, he was just the funniest old thing," says Sir Mark, laughing, at some absurd recollection. "Well, he is gone now, and

'I know it is a sin
For me to sit and grin
At him here;
But the old three-cornered hat
And the breeches, and all that,
Were so queer.'

"And bless me, what a temper he had," says Sir Mark, laughing again at his quotation. "His clothes and his temper were old Blount's principal features. Hideous old monster he was too."

"Is she hideous?" ask Portia.

"N-o. She is well enough; she isn't a bit like him, if we forget the clothes and temper. She says her mother was very beautiful."

"I never knew a woman whose mother wasn't beautiful, once the mother was dead," says Roger. "Sort of thing they tell you the moment they get the chance."

Five o'clock has struck some time ago. Evening is coming on apace. On the dry, smooth-shaven lawn, outside, the shadows are lengthening, stretching themselves indolently as though weary from all the hide-and-seek they have been playing, since early dawn, in the nooks and corners of the quaint old garden.

June has not yet quite departed; its soft, fresh glory still gilds the edge of the lake, and lends a deeper splendor to the golden firs that down below are nodding to the evening breeze; it is the happiest time of all the year, for

> "What is so rare as a day in June?
> Then, if ever, come perfect days;
> Then heaven tries the earth, if it be in tune,
> And over it softly her warm ear lays."

"Well, the mother is dead and gone now, this many a year," says Sir Mark, "and the old fellow went nearly out of his mind when Julia married Beaufort."

"Oh! she is married?" says Portia.

"Dear Portia, didn't I *tell* you she had children?" says Dulce, reproachfully. "She married an Indian Nabob with an aristocratic name and a *lac* of rupees, as she believed, but there was a flaw somewhere, and – er – how was it Dicky?"

"Simplest thing out," says Dicky. "He had a lack of rupees, indeed, as she found out when he died. It is only the difference of one letter after all, and that can't count for much."

"Her father, old Charley, left her everything, so she isn't badly off now," says Sir Mark, "but the Nabob was a sell."

"I wonder if Portia will like her," says Dulce, meditatively, laying her elbows on the table and letting her chin sink into her palms.

"Tell me something about her personally," entreats Portia, turning to her with some show of interest.

"What can I tell you? She is pretty in her own way, and she agrees with everyone, and she never means a word she says; and, when she appears most earnest, that is the time not to believe in her; and she is very agreeable as a rule, and she is Fabian's pet aversion."

("Not now," says Portia to herself).

"I don't think there is anything else I can tell you," continues Dulce, with a little nod.

"I wonder you have her," says Miss Vibart, disagreeably impressed by this description.

"Why, she is our cousin! And, of course, she can come whenever she wishes – she knows that," says Dulce. "It is not with her, as with you, you know. You are a joy, she is a duty. But the children *are* so sweet."

"How many of them?" asks Portia, who knows a few things she prefers to children.

"Three. Pussy, Jacky, and the Boodie. The Boodie is nothing short of perfection."

"That is the one solitary point on which Dulce and I agree," says Roger. "We both adore the Boodie. Wait till you see her; she is all gold hair, and blue eyes, and creamy skin, and her nose is a fortune in itself. I can't think where Julia found her."

"Fabian is so fond of her," says Dulce, whose thoughts never wander very far from the brother for whose ruined life she grieves incessantly, day after day.

"How old is she?" asks Portia – "this little beauty you speak of – this harmony in blue and gold?"

"Five, I think. She is not in the least like her mother, who goes in for æsthetics, with a face like a French doll, and who will love you forever, if you will only tell a lie, and say you think she resembles Ellen Terry."

"With a soul given entirely to French bonnets and Louis Quinze shoes, she would be thought ultra-mundane," says Sir Mark, who is trying to make Dulce's little toy terrier, Gilly, stand on his hind legs, in search of cake.

"My goodness! what a long word," says Dicky Browne, who is now eating bread and butter, because he has finished the cake. "Does it mean anything edible? Because if so, I don't quite follow you; *no* one could masticate Julia!"

"I hope she will be in a good temper when she comes," says Roger. "Last time she terrified us all into fits."

"If the children have behaved nicely in the train, and if anyone has taken any notice of her, she will be charming," says Dulce, moodily. "If not, she will be – the other thing."

"And the other thing isn't nice," puts in Dicky, in his pleasantest tone.

"Then what shall we do with her just at first?" says Miss Blount, who is evidently in fear of breakers ahead.

"Look here," says Mr. Browne, who couldn't hold his tongue to save his life, "I'll tell you the first thing to say to any fellow who arrives at your house. Don't go worrying him about the health of his sister, and his cousins, and his aunts, but just ask him if he will have a B. and S. He *will*, you know – and – and there you are. He won't forget it to you afterwards."

Sir Mark laughs. Portia unfurls her fan, and smiles faintly behind it.

"Julia isn't a fellow, and I'm sure she wouldn't like brandy," says Dulce, who is feeling a little hopeless as she contemplates the coming of this new guest.

"The more fool she," says Dicky. "Try Madeira, then. She has a tenderness for Madeira; and tell her her hat is lovely. That'll fetch her."

"Come and sit here, Dicky," says Portia, motioning to the footstool near her. "Your advice is not to be surpassed."

"It's not so bad," says Mr. Browne, comfortably settling himself on the cushion at her feet, just as Fabian enters the room; "but I'm sorry she won't entertain the brandy idea. That never fails. It's friendly, homely, you know, and that."

"Dicky says if you drink rum and new milk every morning before breakfast, you will live forever," says Dulce, thoughtfully.

"What a miserable idea," says Fabian, in his usual soft voice, that has yet something stern about it. "It suggests the Wandering Jew, and other horrors. Who would live forever?"

"*I* would," says Dicky, with a sentimental glance at Portia, "if I might only remain here."

"Get up, Dicky, and don't make an ass of yourself," says Sir Mark, a little sharply for him, considering his natural laziness, and his tendency to let all things slide. As a rule he makes indolence his god, and sacrifices everything to it. Now, some superior influence compels him to make this speech, and to regard Dicky with a glance that bespeaks disfavor. Fabian is standing somewhat apart, his eyes as usual fixed upon the flickering shadows and the touch of green in the ocean beyond, but with his mind many leagues away. Yet now he turns, and looks with wonder at Sir Mark, as though astonished at his tone, and Sir Mark looks at him. There is a certain amount of longing, and hope, and affection, in Sir Mark's glance.

"At all events she will be in time for our ball," says Roger, "and, besides that, there will be another element of amusement. Stephen Gower is coming back to the Fens at last. She can get up a

little flirtation with him, and as he is a right-down good sort. I daresay, if I gave him the right cue, he would take her off our hands for a little while."

"Is your friend coming?" says Dulce, with some surprise. "You never told us. And that pretty place is to have a master at last? I am rather glad, do you know; especially as he is a friend, too, of Fabian's."

"I have no friends," says Fabian, suddenly, with a small frown.

"Oh yes, you have, whether you like it or not," says Gore, quickly. "I can swear to one at least. My dear fellow, this is one of your bad days; come with me; a walk through the evening dews will restore you to reason once more."

He passes his arm through Fabian's, and leads him down the balcony steps into the dew-steeped gardens. A moan from the sea comes up to greet them as they go. No other sound disturbs the calm of the evening air.

"I think Fabian has the most perfect face I ever saw," says Roger, suddenly. But Portia makes no reply. She is watching Fabian's figure as it disappears in the dusk. Dulce, however, turns quickly, and looks at Roger, a strange gleam in her great, blue eyes.

CHAPTER VII

"He is a fool who is not for love and beauty. I speak unto the young, for I am of them, and always shall be." – Bailey.

Slowly, decorously, they march into church, one by one – Dulce first, and then Sir Christopher, and then Julia Beaufort and Portia, and so on, down to the children, who are evidently consumed with a desire to know more than seems, and who are evincing a dangerous longing to waltz up the smooth stone aisle.

The Boodie (who has not been overdrawn by Dulce and Roger, and who really *is* like an angel, with her sapphire eyes and corn-colored hair, and the big white bonnet, with its blue bow, that surrounds her face like a cloud) rather loses her presence of mind. It is either this, or a sudden accession of ambition, that overcomes her, because, without a moment's notice, she turns gently on her left heel, and executes a tiny pirouette on her small Hessian boots. A frown from her mother suppresses further evolutions, and, with a sigh, she returns to decorum and the family pew.

In a corner of it the children are comfortably stowed away, while all the others following suit, fall into their proper places. They are only barely in time. The organ plays them up the aisle, and they have only just a second to scramble through the preliminary prayers (so distinct a token of respectability), when the rector's voice breaks forth.

Portia, who has not been to church before, looks up at Mr. Grainger, while he is confessing everybody in a tone severe but bilious, and tells herself he is as like a superannuated old crow as ever he can be. He is flanked by the curate, a mediæval young man, with a pallid countenance and an irreproachable gown, cut in the latest fashion, who stands in an attitude of the most approved, with his eyes fixed immovably upon a side pillar. The fixity of his gaze is so intense as to suggest the idea that he never again means to remove it until death claims him for his own.

Then a hymn is sung by the village choir, led by the organist's high soprano. It is a hymn very unique in its way, and sung with much fervor, if little tune, and pierces even to the brains of its hearers. The organ beats a solemn accompaniment to this delicacy, and whether the strains from the ancient instrument – that squeaks like a dilapidated bagpipes – is too much for the curate, I know not; but, at the last verse, he removes his eyes from the pillar of the church and concentrates them upon Portia.

Portia, at this particular moment, I regret to say, is smiling broadly. A brilliant smile that illuminates her whole face, rendering her as lovely as a dream. She is plainly deriving great consolation from the village choir?

The curate, smitten by the sight of her levity, or by the consciousness of his own lapse from the path of duty, in so far letting his mind wander to mundane matters, turns pale, and, lowering his eyes until they reach the tesselated pavement at his feet, grows sad and thoughtful, and perhaps decides on eating no meat again to-day as punishment for his fault.

The church is old, quaint, curious. It is like a thing forgotten. It looks as if it had been dug up by somebody and planted just here, no one knows why. The windows are narrow and elongated, and admit but little light. The pillars in the more distant corners are wrapt in gloom. A cobweb falling from the roof, spun by some enterprising spider, hangs over the gaunt pulpit, as though desirous of coming in contact with whosoever may enter it.

The cobweb, as it waves lazily backward and forward with every breeze that assails it, is a thing of joy to Roger and Dicky Browne, who are sitting side by side. It is an unspeakable boon, a sweet attraction, an everlasting resource to them throughout the service. As it goes to and fro their eyes follow it; they would willingly bet upon it were such a thing practicable; and they wait in a charmed suspense until such time as some one will enter the pulpit, to see whether the some one will attack the cobweb, or the cobweb attack the some one.

Besides the cobweb there is a clerk and a sexton. Sometimes they say Amen when the idea strikes them; sometimes they don't; it is awkward when they *don't*. Then a lull in the performance makes itself felt, though it is always somewhat broken by the voice of the curate, which is monotonous in the extreme.

A few stray sunbeams are straggling in through the narrow windows, and are holding high festival in Dulce's bonnet; a perfect crown of glory envelops her head. The day being exceptionally warm, everything and every one is drowsy and sleepy, and a trifle inattentive.

Meanwhile, the service progresses surely, if slowly. Uncle Christopher's head is courting his chest; Fabian, who always sits next to him, is unmistakably wide-awake, but has his head lowered, and his eyes fixed moodily upon the carpet at his feet. He looks attentive, but is really miles away from the Commandments and from everything.

Portia, in her white gown, is looking more than ordinarily lovely, and just now is gazing oddly at Fabian. She is vaguely wondering how he would look if he permitted himself to smile. He is always so preternaturally grave that she is curious to know if a smile – once indulged in – would imbitter or sweeten his face. Yes; Roger was quite right when he said the other day that Fabian's face was perfect. Perhaps even the smile she desires to see upon it could not improve it. Nay, it might even mar it, so severe are its lines; but were they *always* so? She is lost in impossible speculation!

Dulce, clad all in severe black, with her hands crossed upon her knees, like a small devotee, is looking straight before her at nothing particular, and is utterly unconscious that the strange young man in the "Fens" pew is regarding her with an amount of attention he has certainly not expended on his prayers.

The children have behaved wonderfully well, all things considered. The Boodie has only once laughed out loud, and only twice have Jacky and Pussy indulged in a deadly scuffle; altogether, there is deep cause for thankfulness.

The cobweb is still waving to and fro, and now (as Mr. Grainger ascends the stairs and enters the pulpit), driven, perhaps, by some stronger current of air, moves rapidly to the right, so that the rector reaches his place and arranges himself therein, without coming into collision with it, to Roger's and Dicky's everlasting chagrin.

"A narrow escape," says Dicky, in a careful undertone, to Roger, who, too, has been breathlessly watching the *denouement*.

"Yes, just like our dismal luck," responds that young man, in an aggrieved tone. "I'd have bet anything on its catching him by the wig."

Mr. Grainger standing up, after a short and private prayer, looks as if he was making his bow to the audience, and having surveyed them leisurely for an embarrassing moment (during which the farmers' wives fidget, and look as if they would gladly inhabit their boots), he gives forth his text.

Silence ensues; the curate arranges himself in a purely ascetic attitude; the rector stamps his foot, in a preparatory sort of way, on the floor of the massive pulpit, which is as hideous as it is clumsy to the last degree. There are a few meagre little carvings all round it, suggestive of tares, and wheat, and good Samaritans, and there is an impossible donkey in the foreground. It is a very depressing pulpit, but certainly solid.

"No chance of a breakdown," says Roger, gloomily, fixing, his eye-glass in his left eye, and surveying with ill concealed disgust the unwieldy structure before him.

"You're a brave boy," returns Mr. Browne, with exaggerated admiration. "Fancy your looking for excitement *here*."

"It may be nearer than you think," says Roger, *so* meaningly, that his companion applies himself to the translating of his glance. It is fixed, and fixed on the cobweb, too, which is slowly, slowly floating towards the rector's head. It comes nearer to it, catches in a rising lock (that has elevated itself, no doubt, because of the preacher's eloquence), and lingers there, as though bent on lifting pulpit, Grainger and all to the ceiling with the next puff of wind.

Roger forgets his grievance, his *ennui*, everything! The situation has its charm. To his delight he finds Dicky as wrapt in the possible result as himself. The cobweb sticks fast. Mr. Grainger, lifting his hand, smooths his ear, under the mistaken impression that the ticking feeling is there, and then goes on solemnly with his discourse, which is dryer than the weather, which is saying a good deal. He moves his head impatiently from side to side, but gains nothing by this, as the cobweb is apparently of an affectionate disposition, and goes with him wherever he listeth.

Dicky Browne is entranced. *Such* an interlude was more than he had hoped for. Involuntarily he lays his hand on Dulce's arm, and, giving her a mild pinch, shows her the cause of his apparent joy.

"If the flooring gives way he'll die the death of Absalom," he says, gravely, whereupon Miss Blount also, I grieve to say, gives way to silent but wild mirth.

The rector waxes warm. The cobweb, giving up the hair as a bad job, has relinquished its hold, and is now mildly touching his cheek, in a somewhat coquettish fashion. Mr. Grainger, with a short but decisive gesture, drags it, and its many yards of spider-workmanship to the ground. The cobweb and the spider suffer – but they have their revenge. Mr. Grainger is embarrassed with the cobweb, which has twined itself loving round his finger, and not until he has lost his place in his sermon and grown very red in the face, is serenity restored.

The rural congregation shows every symptom of being able to fall at a moment's notice into the arms of Morpheus. The curate grows leaner, more toil-worn, more ascetic. The rector drones away. The Boodie, having walked up and down the pew several times, has finally come to anchor in Uncle Christopher's arms, and having flung her little white bonnet from her, has now snuggled her head inside his coat, and is intently listening to what appears to be a very lengthened whisper from him. It seems to be a whisper without an end, and one undesirous of response. Indeed, there is a legend extant that Uncle Christopher employs his time during the sermon, whenever the Boodie is with him, in telling her tales of fairyland, not to be surpassed by Grimm or Andersen!

The rector bleats on incessantly; faintly and more faintly his voice seems to reach his flock. The sun beats with undying fervor upon the gables outside and the bald heads of the parishioners within. There is a great sense of quiet everywhere, with only the rector's voice to disturb it, when suddenly upon the startled ear falls a sound, ambiguous, but distinct.

It is a snore! An undeniable snore! and it emanates from Jacky! He has succumbed to heat and Mr. Grainger, and is now travelling in lands where we poor waking mortals cannot enter. Apparently he is happy, but he certainly is not as pretty as he need be, with his short and somewhat aggressive nose uplifted, and his mouth at its widest stretch.

Everyone in the pew gives a decided jump – be the same small or great – but Pussy alone finds herself equal to the occasion. She is a child of extreme promise, and, seeing her opportunity, at once embraces it. She seizes Jacky mildly, but firmly, by the hair, and administers to him three severe shocks.

The result is everything she can possibly have desired. Jacky, awakening, comes to his senses with the aid of a partially suppressed yell, and falling upon Pussy with an evident desire to exterminate her there and then, rolls with her off the seat, and disappears with her heavily under it.

An awful moment, fraught with agony for the survivors ensue: and then the belligerents are once more brought to light by Fabian; who, after much search and expostulation, restores them to their proper places. Being nearest to them, he plants them again upon their cushions with only this precaution – that he himself now sits between them. This is hardly to their liking, and from their several positions, and right across poor Fabian's chest, they breathe fire and war, and death and destruction upon each other.

How it will all end everyone refuses to dwell upon; but, just at the most critical moment, Fabian, stooping his dark, grave face, whispers something to the irate little damsel that, as if by magic, reduces her to order.

She looks at him a little while, then sighs, and finally, slipping her hand through his arm, lays her blonde head against him, and is the personification of all things peaceful, until the service ends.

She looks up at him, too, as though desirous of his forgiveness, and Fabian, taking her slim little baby hand in his, assures her with a glance that she *is* forgiven; and then she smiles at him, and nestles a degree closer, and then Fabian, though always unsmilingly, passes his arm round the child, and draws her into a more comfortable position.

Portia, who has watched it all, feels a strange pang at her heart; it is as though he is glad to be friends with these children, to be at peace with them, because they, at least (sweet, trusting souls), believe in him. And what a tenderness he betrays towards them! this dark, moody, concentrated man, whose whole life is burdened with an unsavory mystery. What a power, too, he possesses over them; even that untractable Pussy was calmed, charmed into submission by a word, a glance. Yet children and dogs, they say, have keenest instincts!

While she still wonders, Fabian lifts his eyes and meets hers, and as though drawn by some magnetic influence each towards the other, though sorely against their wills, they gaze into each other's faces for more time than they care to calculate afterwards, until at last Fabian (who is the first to recover himself) lets his glance fall, and so the spell is broken.

After this, Portia sits quiet and thoughtful until the last Amen is uttered, and they all go eagerly, but with a meritorious attempt at regret, into the open air once more.

CHAPTER VIII

"None here are happy, but the very fool,
Or very wise: I am not fool enough
To smile in vanities, and hug a shadow;
Nor have I wisdom to elaborate
An artificial happiness from pains." – Young.

They are all standing in the porch, saying "How d'ye do" to half a dozen of their neighbors, and being introduced to the dark young man in the Fens pew. He is a very handsome young man, and very light-hearted apparently, and looks very frequently at Miss Blount, who smiles at him very graciously, and tells him he must "really come up to luncheon at the Court, or Uncle Christopher will be *so* disappointed. *Any* friend of Roger's" – and so on.

"Portia," says Sir Christopher, suddenly – when Stephen Gower has expressed his extreme pleasure at the thought of lunching at the Court, always with his dark eyes fixed curiously upon Dulce – "Come with me; I want to show you your poor mother's last resting-place."

"Ah! yes; I shall like to see that," says Portia, tenderly, though the dead mother is only a bare memory to her. "Yes, take me to see it."

They separate from the others, and go around an angle of the old church, and past an ivied corner, and so come to the quiet spot where stands the vault of the Blounts.

"It was too far to send her to the Vibarts' burying-place," says Sir Christopher; "at least we tried to think so, because we tried to keep her with *us*. And your father was dead. And at the very last, she murmured something about being laid beside her mother; poor, dear girl!" To Sir Christopher, Portia's mother has always been a girl, and a poor soul. I think, perhaps, Portia's father had been "*breezy*" in the way of temper.

Then Portia asks many questions, trivial in themselves, yet of mighty interest to these two, to whom the dead had been dear. And the questions and answers occupy some time, insomuch that when at length they return to the church porch, they find the others have all disappeared, and the sexton preparing to lock the church door.

"Where have all my people gone to?" asks Sir Christopher of this functionary, in an elevated tone, the functionary being, as he himself would describe it, "hard of hearing." Whereupon they are informed that the "Court folk" went "away home through yon small iron gate," and into the woods beyond, and are now presumably sauntering lazily homeward beneath the shade of the spreading oaks and elms.

"Then we cannot do better than follow their example," says Sir Christopher, but almost before they come to the iron gate they see Fabian, who, unmindful of their presence, nay, rather, utterly unaware of it, is walking steadily, but slowly, onward, as though lost in thought.

Presently, hearing footsteps behind him, he turns, and seeing Portia, starts perceptibly, and comes to a standstill.

"I thought you would all be at home long before this," he says, involuntarily. Involuntarily also his tone conveys the idea that his wish was "father to his thought." There is a note in it that is distinct disappointment. Portia lets her lids fall over her eyes, and lets her lips form themselves into an almost imperceptible smile. Plainly he had loitered in the churchyard in the fond hope of avoiding them all (her especially it may be), and here is the result.

"We thought the same of you," says Sir Christopher, cheerily, coming to the front bravely, "we believed you at the Court before this. Very lucky you aren't though, as I want you to see Portia home. I must go and interview Bowles about that boy of his – a duty I hardly admire."

"It is late now. If you delay any longer you will miss your luncheon," says Portia, hurriedly. Her face betrays unmistakable anxiety.

It is now Fabian's turn to smile, but his lips are rigid, and the commonest observer may read, that mirth of even the grimmest description is far from him.

"Luncheon, eh? I don't care a fig about luncheon," says Uncle Christopher, gaily, "unless I'm shooting, or that. No. Better see Bowles now if I am to see him at all. Sunday is his only visible day, I've been told. His '*At home*,' in fact – as all the rest of the week he lies in bed, and refuses to wash himself."

"Horrid man!" says Miss Vibart, merely for the sake of saying something. In reality had Bowles felt it his duty to lie a-bed all the year round, and never indulge in the simplest ablutions, it would not have given her a passing thought.

"On the Sabbath he rouses himself, and in a spotless shirt (washed by that idiot of a wife of his, who still will believe in him), and with a pipe in his mouth, he struts up and down the pavement before the door of his palatial residence," says Uncle Christopher. "I am sure to find him to-day."

"Let me go with you," says Portia, as a last resource. "I should like to be made acquainted with this incomparable Bowles." She smiles as she speaks, but the smile is somewhat artificial, and is plainly conjured up with difficulty for the occasion.

"Well, come," says Sir Christopher, who always says "yes," to every one, and who would encourage you warmly if you expressed a desire to seek death and the North Pole.

"It is quite impossible," says Fabian, quietly, not raising his voice, and not moving as he speaks. "Portia cannot go with you to Bowles' house. The man is insupportable."

Portia has her hand upon Sir Christopher's arm; her eyes are alight; something within her – some contradictory power – awakens a determination to see this Bowles. Yet it is hardly so keen a desire to see a man in a clean shirt and a "churchwarden" that possesses her, as a desire to circumvent the man who has opposed her expressed wish. Fabian, on his part, though pained, is equally determined that she shall not be brought face to face with the unpleasant Bowles. She has her eyes on him, but he has his on Sir Christopher.

"I should like to go with you," she says, in clear tones, taking no heed of Fabian's last remark; "I like country people, and strange village characters, and – and that." This is somewhat vague.

"You remember the last time Dulce went to see *Mrs.* Bowles?" says Fabian, who has caught Sir Christopher's eye by this. Whatever Dulce may have endured during that memorable visit is unknown to Portia, but the recollection of it, as forced upon Sir Christopher's memory, is all-powerful to prevent her accompanying him on his mission to-day.

"Yes, yes. I remember," he says, hurriedly, "Bowles, as a rule, is not courteous. My dear child," – to Portia – "*No*, you cannot, I regret to say, come with me. This man can be uncomfortable in many ways. You understand, eh? You wouldn't like him. People in shirt-sleeves, however clean, are always out of it, eh? There, good-by to both of you. Take her home, Fabian, and explain my absence to the others, especially to Roger's friend, that new young fellow, Gower, of the Fens."

So saying, he marched away to do battle with the objectionable Bowles, with his fine old shoulders well squared, and a world of defiance in his gait. There is no help for it! The two left behind feel this acutely, and Fabian pushing open the little iron gate, Portia goes down the stone steps and enters presently upon a wood all green, and soft and verdure-clad.

The trees are interlaced above their heads. Through them the calm, blue sky looks down in wonder, and sheds a scintillating radiance on their path.

"In heat the landscape quivering lies,
The cattle pant beneath the tree:"

No little kindly breath of air comes to break the monotony of the dead sultriness that lies on everything.

Portia sighs, and with a small, but expressive, gesture pushes her hat somewhat off her forehead. He is quick to notice the faintest sign of wrong in those with whom he associates, and now turning to her, says, gravely:

"Here, beneath the trees, where the sun cannot penetrate too severely, Dulce often takes off her hat. Take off yours."

"If you think it will do any good," says Portia, doubtfully; and as though fearful of seeming ungracious, she does take off her hat, and walks along beside him, bare-headed.

She is feeling sad and depressed. For the first time since her arrival she is wishing herself back again with Auntie Maud, who is anything but after her own taste. Yet to live on here in the shadow of a living lie is bitter to her; more bitter than she had ever supposed possible.

She had come down to the Court fully aware that Fabian (according to the lights of those with whom she had lived) was guilty of the crime imputed to him. He had always been discussed in her immediate circle with bated breath, as one who had eternally disgraced the good old name of Blount, and dragged it cruelly in the dust.

To be innocent and not to be able to prove one's innocence, had seemed (and even now does seem to Auntie Maud and her set) a thing not to be entertained for a moment. It would be *too* preposterous! He had rendered their name hideous, but he should not impose upon them with his absurd stories of utter ignorance. They believed he had wilfully committed the forgery, trusting he would never be discovered, because of the unfortunate similarity between his writing and that of Sir Christopher. But he had failed, in spite of his ingenuity, and had been found out; and, though none of the forged notes had been discovered in his possession (which only proved the more to his distant relatives that he possessed the cleverness of the practised schemer), still they one and all sat upon him in solemn conclave, and pronounced him outside the pale of respectability.

That Christopher should elect to leave the beautiful old Court to such a one seems little less than a crime to the "cousins and aunts." To leave it to a man shunned by the entire county (and very properly too!), a man ashamed to lift his head amongst his fellow men, and who had never tried to live down his disgrace or brave it out. In this fact – the certainty of his being pusillanimous about his accusation – lies the proof of his guilt, to them.

Portia is going over the whole sad story now again, while the sinner walks beside her. Once she lifts her eyes, and looks at him, and tells herself Roger was indeed right when he made much of his beauty. Yet Satan dwells in comely bodies! How sad that a face so inclined to nobility should be stamped with the lines of care, born of dishonor. Tears fill her eyes as she looks at him, and she turns her head quickly away, but not before he has seen and marked the signs of distress within her beautiful eyes. A spasm crosses his face; he recoils a little from her, as though fear possesses him. He frowns; and a curious light – half grief, half anger – grows upon him, and expresses itself upon his quiet lips. Something that is almost agony is in his eyes; truly though the body can know grief, the "sorrows of the soul are graver still."

"What is it that has risen between us?" he asks, suddenly; there is something intense in his tone. "Have you?" – he pauses, and then goes on with an effort – "have you in your heart so utterly condemned me?"

They have come to a stand-still; and Fabian, as he asks this question, is standing with his back against a huge oak tree, his eyes fixed upon his companion. His face is as white as death.

She makes him no answer. A very fine shade of color, so faint as to be almost imperceptible, dyes her cheek for a moment and then vanishes as suddenly as it came, leaving her quite as pallid as he is himself.

"It is the most natural thing in the world to condemn," he goes on, somewhat excitedly. "It is only human. One feels how easy it is. If one hears a damning story about an acquaintance, a story

almost unsupported, how readily one inclines to the cruel side. It is not worse in one than in another. We all have a touch of savagery about us – a thirst for blood. For the most part, if placed in a certain set number of circumstances, we all think and act alike. That we should be cast in one mould with the very commonest of our brethren is a humiliating thought, but strictly within the lines of truth. You *do* condemn me?"

He wishes to force her into saying so. She shrinks from him, and raises one hand to her throat, as though nervous and unhappy.

"I don't know," she says at last, in a low, hesitating tone. "I know nothing. Sometimes I don't even know myself."

"That is always a knowledge difficult of attainment," he says, slowly. "But about me, in your heart, you are *sure*. You believe you do know. You think me guilty." As he says the word he clenches one hand so firmly that the nails crush into the flesh.

"I would rather not talk about it," says Portia, faintly.

By a terrible effort he recovers himself; a quick breath, that is almost a sigh, escapes him.

"That, of course, shall be as you wish," he says, quietly; and, rousing himself, they walk on together beneath the branching elms, in silence, painful as it is prolonged.

Coming to a tiny stream (where he is compelled to offer and she to accept, his hand to help her over), she glances at him, but her glance is not returned, and then she sees that he has forgotten her very existence, and is, in thought, miles away from her. He has entered into some ideal realm of his own – captured during his long years of isolation from the world.

As she is silently watching him and wondering, a dark figure, moving from between the shrubs that hide off one angle of the house, comes into their path, and, seeing them, makes a skulking movement to the right as though it would gladly escape observation.

"Good evening, Slyme," says Fabian, in half kindly, half contemptuous tone. The old man murmurs something in return. His eyes refuse to meet Fabian's, his hands join each other, and rub palm to palm in an uneasy, shuffling fashion. His voice is husky and slightly uncertain. His dull old eyes roam from Fabian to Portia in an odd, questioning way, as if debating some strange matter. Yet, though looking at them, it is at their arms or chests he looks, rather than at their faces.

Portia (who had stopped when Fabian had) now turns a little to one side and plucks a flower lazily from a neighboring shrub, and sighs a little as if weary, and as if she would gladly be at home.

At this, Fabian, who is quick to notice anything concerning her, rouses himself from his prolonged stare at Gregory, and, noting the instability of the old man's gait, says, suddenly, with his dark gaze full upon him:

"Again!"

His tone this time is all contempt; no kindliness mingles with it. The old man seems to wither beneath it, and puts out his hands with a gesture suggestive of deprecation. Fabian, taking no notice of it, walks away from him, Portia gladly following.

Then the secretary's face changes. Standing in the centre of the pathway, he looks after their retreating figures with a half-drunken scrutiny, full of malice.

"Ay," he says, bitterly, beneath his breath, "as a dog I am in his sight! So he has destroyed his only hope this many a time!"

His head sinks into its old position on his chest, and with a muttered curse he continues his way.

Just as Portia ascends the stone steps that lead to the house, Fabian, by a gentle touch, detains her.

"Remember always this," he said slowly and with an attempt at calmness that is infinitely sad, "that I do not blame you."

Tears spring to her eyes. She is at least generous, and now a great longing to be able to believe in him, to be able to assure him of her unbounded faith in his honor possesses her. But, alas! faith is neither to be invoked nor purchased, and to lie to him, and tell him a soothing falsehood against her

conscience would be worse than useless. The tears having gathered, two of them roll slowly down her cheeks. She turns hastily aside. Catching her hand he holds it for a short moment in his own.

"They at least are mine," he says, meaning the tears, his voice deeply agitated, and then she draws her hand from his, and an instant later, is lost to sight.

CHAPTER IX

"Young hearts, bright eyes, and rosy lips are there,
And fairy steps, and light and laughing voices,
Ringing like welcome music through the air —
A sound at which the untroubled heart rejoices."

– Hon. Mrs. Norton.

Portia, dressed in *merveilleux* of a cream shade, with a soft, yellow rose in her hair, is looking her loveliest. She is a little languid after her walk, and a little *distraite*, but desirable beyond words. She is coquetting with her dinner, rather than eating it, and is somewhat uncomfortably conscious that Fabian's eyes are perpetually wandering in her direction.

Dicky Browne is talking gaily, and is devoting himself with an ardor worthy of a better cause to Julia Beaufort, who is chattering inanely about many things, and who is in her element, and a blood-colored gown.

They have all the conversation to themselves, these two, as the others are depressed, or rather impressed, by Sir Christopher's silence, who has one of his brooding fits upon him. Either the redoubtable Bowles disagreed with him, or he disagreed with Bowles, because clouds have crowned his brow since his return home.

Mrs. Beaufort by this time has got to Sardou's last comedy, and Dicky, who never heard of it or its author, comes to a conversational stand-still. This means uninterrupted quiet all round, as nobody else is saying anything. The footsteps of the solemn butler, and his equally solemn assistant, is all the sound one hears, and presently they all wake to the fact that something *must* be said, and *soon*.

"What wretched artichokes!" says Dulce, coming nobly to the front, with a laudable desire to fill up the yawning gap.

"Yes – melancholy," says Roger, backing her up, as in duty bound; "out of all heart, apparently."

At this weak attempt at a joke Dicky grins approvingly.

"I know few people so altogether sufficing as our Roger," he says patronizingly, addressing nobody in particular; and as nobody in particular appears to think it necessary to answer him, conversation once more languishes.

Sir Mark – who can always find resources in his dinner, whatever else may fail him – is placidly happy, so is Mrs. Beaufort, though, perhaps, she is a little sorry that her sleeves have not been made as tight as Portia's, and with the second puffing, which is certainly beyond all praise!

"What's this?" asks Sir Christopher, addressing the butler in a resigned tone, and looking at a round, soft mass that has just been laid before him.

"Suet dumpling, Sir Christopher," replies the butler, apologetically.

"Again!" says Sir Christopher, in an indescribable manner.

"Surely not *again*," repeats Dulce, with unpleasant animation. "It *can't* be that frightful thing *again*, after all I said to cook yesterday!"

"I'm afraid it is, 'em," says the butler, very sadly.

"And this is the cook Miss Gaunt so highly recommended!" says Dulce, wrathfully. "Save me from my friends, say I; can't she make anything else, Martin?"

"This is a gooseberry tart, 'em," whispers the butler, respectfully, a faint shade of encouragement in his voice, laying that delicacy before her.

"That means sugar – lots of sugar," says Dicky Browne, who is sitting close to her. "I'm glad of that, I like lots of sugar."

Portia laughs.

"You are like my lord mayor's fool," she says; "you like everything that is sweet."

"I do," says Dicky, fondly; "that's why I like you."

"I think it was very wrong of Miss Gaunt to impose such a woman upon us," says Dulce, deeply aggrieved.

"Never trust an old maid," says Roger; "I spend my life giving you good advice, which you won't take; and such an old maid, too, as Miss Gaunt! She is as good (or as bad) as two rolled into one."

"She said she was a perfect treasure," exclaims Miss Blount, casting an indignant glance at him.

"Send her back her treasure, then, and tell her, as you are not selfish, you could not think of depriving *her* of her services."

"Is that a sample of your good advice?" asks she, with considerable scorn. "Besides, I can't; I have agreed with this woman to stay here for a month."

"Fancy suet dumplings every day for a month," says Dicky Browne, unfeelingly; "that means four weeks – thirty-one days! We shall be dead, I shouldn't wonder, long before that."

"No such luck," says Sir Mark.

"Give her anything she wants, Dulce, and send her away," says Sir Christopher.

"But she will think me so unkind and capricious," protests Dulce, who is an arrant little coward, and is afraid to tell cook she no longer requires her. The cook is a big Scotchwoman, with very large bones, and a great many of them.

"Well, do whatever you like," says Uncle Christopher, wearily.

The night is fine, calm, and cool, and sweet with many perfumes. Some of them at table cast lingering glances at the lawn without, and long, silently, to be standing on it. The moon has risen, and cast across it great streaks of silver light that brighten and darken as clouds race each other o'er Astarte's sacred brow.

There is great silence on the air, broken only by a "murmuring winde, much like the sowne of swarming bees." A little rivulet in the far distance runs musically.

"Let us all go out," says Julia Beaufort, suddenly, feeling she has already spent quite too long a time over her biscuit and claret.

"Ah! thank you," says Portia, quickly, turning to her almost before she had finished speaking – her great, soft eyes even larger than usual. "I have been so longing to say that for the last five minutes."

"The 'lost chord' has been struck again," says Dicky Browne. "Mrs. Beaufort, I won't be deserted in this barefaced fashion. If you are determined to court death through night dews, *I* shall court it with you."

Julia simpers, and looks delighted. Then they all rise from the table, and move towards the balcony; all – that is – except Sir Mark, who (though he would have dearly liked to accompany them into the mystic moonlight) still lingers behind to bear company with Sir Christopher, and strive to lay the ghost that so plainly is haunting him to-night.

Joyously they all descend the steps, and then break into a little run as their feet touch the velvet grass. The sky is bright with pale blue light, the air is soft and warm as sultry noon. A little baby wind – that ought to be in bed, so sweet and tender it is – is roaming here and there amongst the flowers, playing with the scented grasses, and losing itself amongst the bracken, lower down.

One can hear the roar of the distant ocean breaking itself against the giant rocks; one can hear, too, in strange contrast, the chirp, chirp of the green grasshopper.

As they come within view of the fountain, all their mouths form themselves into many round Os, and they say, "Ah!" as with one breath.

The scene is indeed charming beyond description. The water of the fountain is bright as silver, great patches of purest moonlight lying on it as calm as though in death. The water-lilies tremble faintly, as it might be in terror of the little gods who are leaning over them. A shadow from the trees in the background falls athwart a crouching Venus. Some pretty, low chairs are standing scattered

about, and Portia sinking into one, the others all follow her example, and seating themselves on chairs on the soft sward begin to enjoy themselves.

The men produce cigars, and are presently happy in their own way. Roger or Dicky asks every one, indiscriminately, if she would like a cigarette; a question responded to in the negative by all, though in truth Dulce would have dearly liked one.

Fabian, who has come with them, is lying full length upon the grass, with his hands behind his head, gazing dreamily at the glimpse of the far-off sea, that shows through the dark-green firs. Dulce's silvery laugh is waking an echo lower down. There is a great sense of rest and happiness in the hour.

A big, lazy bumblebee, tumbling sleepily into Portia's lap, wakes her into life. It lies upon her, looking larger and blacker than its wont, as it shows against the pallor of her gown. She starts, and draws herself up with a half-suppressed cry.

Fabian, lifting the bee from her knees, flings it high into the air, and sends it off on the errand it was probably bound on before it fell in love with Portia.

"How foolish of me to be frightened of it – pretty thing," she says, with a faint blush. "How black it looked."

"*Every*thing frightens me," says Julia Beaufort pensively, "*everything!*"

"Do I?" asks Dicky Browne, in a tone full of abject misery. "Oh! *say* I don't."

"I meant insects you know, and frogs, and horrid things like that," lisps Julia. "And they always will come flying round one just on a perfect night like this, when" – sentimentally – "Nature is wrapt in its profoundest beauty!"

"I don't think I ever saw a frog fly," says Dicky Browne, innocently. "Is it nice to look at? Is it funny?"

"No! it's only silly – like you!" says Dulce throwing a rosebud at him, which he catches dexterously.

"Thank you," he says, meekly, whether for the speech or the flower, he leaves vague.

"Stephen Gower is coming over here to-night," says Roger suddenly.

"To-night? Why didn't you ask him to dinner?" asks Dulce, a note of surprise in her tone.

"I did ask him, but, for some reason I now forget, he could not come. He confessed he was lonely, however, in that big barn of a house, and said he would feel deeply grateful if you would permit him to drop in later on. I said you would; and advised him to drop in by all means, though how people do that has always been a puzzle to me."

"Who is Stephen Gower?" asks Portia, curiously, of no one in particular. She is leaning back in her chair, and is fanning herself languidly.

"He is Roger's *Fidus Achates*– his second self – his very soul!" says Dicky Browne, enthusiastically. "He is a thing apart. We must, in fact, be careful of him, lest he break. At least so I have been told."

"I thought you knew him, too," says Dulce. "I always believed you and Roger, and this wonderful Stephen Gower, were all at college together."

"You wronged Dicky, albeit unwittingly," says Mr. Dare, taking his cigar from between his lips to give more emphasis to his words. "We at Cambridge were too frivolous for such superior beings as Dicky. It was at Oxford he commenced his honorable career; it was there he indulged in those high hopes of future fame that have been so splendidly realized in his maturer years."

"Don't kick me when I'm down," says Dicky, pathetically. "I couldn't help it – and at least I have *had* my hopes. That must be always something. It's any amount soothing, do you know, to look back upon your past, and remember what a jolly ass you once were."

"I can't imagine your ever having had hopes of future fame," says Dulce, laughing.

"Well I had, do you know, any amount of 'em. In the early dawn, when I was awake – which, perhaps, wasn't so often as it sounds, except when I was returning from – er – a friend's house. I used to sit up with them, you know, whenever they had scarla" —

"Oh yes, *we* know," interrupts Roger, most unfeelingly.

"Well, in the early dawn," continues Dicky, quite unmoved, "when the little birds were singing, I used to think I could be happy as General Sir Richard Browne, at the head of a gallant corps, with a few darkies in the foreground fleeing before my trusty blade. By breakfast time, however, all that would be changed, and I would glory in the belief that one day would see me seated on the wool-sack. By dinnertime I was clothed in sanctimonious lawn; and long before the small hours, I felt myself a second Drake, starting to conquer another Armada, only one even *more* Invincible."

They all laugh at him. And then he laughs at himself, and seems, indeed, to enjoy the joke even more than they do.

"I don't care," he says, at length, valiantly; "no, not a single screw. I haven't *done* anything, you know."

"Oh yes, you have, a lot in your time," murmurs Roger, supportingly.

"But I must come in for the title and the estate when the old boy, my cousin, 'shuffles off this mortal coil,' and in the meantime the governor stands to me decently enough, and I'm pretty jolly all round."

"Tell us about Stephen Gower," says Dulce, after a pause, "He interests me, I don't know why. What is he like?"

"He is

> 'A greenery yallery
> Grosvenor gallery
> Foot-in-the-grave young man.'"

quotes Dicky, gaily.

"An æsthetic! Oh! I *do* hope not," exclaims Dulce, in a horrified tone.

"Have they pursued me even down here?" asks Portia, faintly. "I thought, I *hoped*, they were plants indigenous to London soil alone."

"He is nothing of the sort," says Roger, indignantly. "He is about the best fellow I know. He would be ashamed to go round (like those idiots you speak of) with flowers and flowing locks. He leaves all that sort of thing" – contemptuously – "to girls."

"Who is talking of Stephen Gower?" asks Sir Mark, coming towards them over the path of moonlight that lies upon the smooth lawn. "Happy man to be discussed by so fair a trio, 'beneath the sweet-smelling starlight,' as James has it."

"Bless me," says Dicky, "I had no idea dry monopole would have had such an effect on Gore. He is talking poetry, I think; I never could understand it myself. Now for example, about those stars —*do* they smell? *I* never noticed it. What's it like, Gore?"

Everyone disdains to take notice of this sally – all, that is, except Dulce, who is always only too delighted to laugh whenever the barest chance of being able to do so presents itself.

Roger, crossing over to where she sits, leans his arms on the back of her chair, and bends his face to hers.

"Look here," he says, in the conciliatory tone of one who is going to make a request and is not quite sure it will be granted. "If Gower comes down by-and-by, I wish you would promise me to be good to him. He is a very old chum of mine, and a very good fellow, and – be civil to him, will you?"

"What do you suppose I am going to do to him?" asks Miss Blount, opening her eyes. "Was I bad to him at luncheon? Are you afraid I shall bite him? I shan't. You may be happy about that."

"Of course – I know; but I want you to be *particularly* nice to him," goes on Roger, though faintly discouraged by her tone. (Now what did he mean by saying she *wouldn't* bite him. It sounds as if she would bite me!) "He is the oldest friend I have; and – er – as we are to be married some time or other, I want him to like you very much."

"Who are to be married? You and Mr. Gower? It sounded like it," says Dulce, wilfully.

"I was thinking of you and myself," he says, a little gravely.

"Well, what is it you want me to do?" asks she, moving restlessly in her seat. She is, in spite of herself, disturbed by his gravity. "Am I to make love to him, or am I to let him make love to me? Your devotion to this old friend is quite touching."

"He would be very unlikely indeed to make love to you," replies Roger, rather stiffly. "He understands perfectly how matters are between you and me."

"Oh, no doubt," says Miss Blount, disgustedly. "Everyone seems to know all about this *absurd* engagement. I can't think how I was ever brought to consent to it."

"*Absurd!*" says Mr. Dare, in an impossible tone.

"Yes, *painfully* absurd! Quite too ridiculous," with unpleasant force.

"Oh!" says Mr. Dare.

"Yes," says Dulce, still defiant, though a little ashamed of herself, "it is quite enough to make people *hate* people, all this perpetual gossip."

"You are at least honest," he says, bitterly.

Silence.

Dulce, whose tempers are always short-lived, after a little reflection grows very repentant.

Turning to him, she lays her little hand on his, as it still rests on the arm of her chair, and says, softly:

"I have been cross to you. Forgive me. I did not quite mean it. Tell me again what you want me to do about your friend."

"It was only a little matter," says Roger, in a low tone, "and it was, I think, the first favor I ever asked of you; and I thought, perhaps – "

He pauses. And raising himself from his lounging position, on her chair, moves as though he would go away from her, having abandoned all hope of having his request acceded to.

But as he turns from her, her fingers tighten upon his, and so she detains him.

"What is it now?" he asks, coldly, trying to keep up his dignity, but as his glance meets hers, he melts. And, in truth, just now she could have thawed a much harder heart, for on her *mignon* face sits one of her very loveliest smiles, conjured up for Roger's special benefit.

"Don't go away," she entreats, prettily, "and listen to me. I shall be charming to your friend. I shall devote myself exclusively to him if it will please you; and if only to prove to you that I *can* grant you a favor."

"Thank you," says Roger gratefully. Then he regards her meditatively for a moment, and then says, slowly:

"Don't be too kind to him."

"Could I?" says Dulce, naively.

He laughs a little, and, bending his head, presses his lips to the little slender hand that still rests within his own.

The caress is so unusual that Dulce glances at him curiously from under her long lashes. A faint, pink glow creeps into her cheeks. She is surprised; perhaps, too, a little pleased, because once again this evening she bestows upon him a smile, soft and radiant.

Mr. Browne is rambling on in some incoherent fashion to Julia Beaufort. Sir Mark is telling Portia some quaint little stories. Fabian is silently listening to them stretched at Portia's feet.

The last glimpse of day has gone. "Death's twin sister, Sleep," has fallen upon the earth. One by one the sweet stars come out in the dusky vault above, "spirit-like, infinite."

In amongst the firs that stand close together in a huge clump at the end of the lawn, great shadows are lying, that stretching ever and ever further, form at last a link between the land and the sea.

"Ah! here you are, Stephen," says Sir Mark, addressing the languid young man they had met in the morning, who is coming to them across the grass. "Why didn't you come sooner?"

"They wouldn't give me any dinner until about an hour ago," says the languid young man in a subdued voice. He glances from Portia to Julia Beaufort, and then to Dulce. There his glance rests. It is evident he has found what he seeks.

"Dulce, I think I told you Stephen Gower was coming to-night," says Roger, simply. And then Dulce rises and rustles up to him, and filled with the determination to keep sacred her promise to be particularly nice to Roger's friend, holds out to him a very friendly hand, and makes him warmly welcome.

Then Portia makes him a little bow, and Julia simpers at him, and presently he finds himself accepted by and admitted to the bosom of the family, which, indeed, is a rather nondescript one. After a few moments of unavoidable hesitation, he throws himself at Dulce's feet, and, leaning on his elbow, tells himself country life, after all, isn't half a bad thing.

"What a heavenly night it is," says Dulce, smiling down on him, still bent on fulfilling her word to Roger. Perhaps she is hardly aware how encouraging her smile can be. "See the ocean down there," pointing with a rounded, soft, bare arm, that gleams like snow in the moonlight, to where the sea is shining between the trees. "How near it seems, though we know it is quite far away."

"It is nearer to you than I am," says Mr. Gower, in a tone that might imply the idea that he thinks the ocean in better care than himself.

"Well, not just now," says Dulce, laughing.

"Not just now," returns he, echoing her laugh. "I suppose we should be thankful for small mercies; but I wish the Fens was a little nearer to this place than it is."

"Portia, can you see Inca's Cliff from this?" asks Dulce, looking at her cousin. "You remember the spot where we saw the little blue flowers yesterday, that you so coveted. How clearly it stands out now beneath the moonbeams."

"Like burnished silver," says Portia, dreamily, always with a lazy motion wafting her black fan to and fro. "And those flowers – how I longed for them, principally, I suppose, because they were beyond my reach."

"Where are they," asks Roger. "I never remember seeing blue flowers there."

"Oh! *you* wouldn't notice them," says his *fiancée*, a fine touch of petulance in her tone, that makes Gower lift his head to look at her; "but they were there nevertheless. They were the very color of the Alpine gentian, and so pretty. We quite fell in love with them, Portia and I, Portia especially; but we could not get at them, they were so low down."

"There was a tiny ledge we might have stood on," says Portia, "but our courage failed us, and we would not try it."

"And quite right, too," says Sir Mark. "I detest people who climb precipices and descend cliffs. It makes my blood run cold."

"Then what made you climb all those Swiss mountains, two years ago?" asks Julia Beaufort, who has a talent for saying the wrong thing, and who has quite forgotten the love affair that drove Sir Mark abroad at that time.

"I don't know," replies he, calmly; "I never shall, I suppose. I perfectly hated it all the while, especially the guides, who were more like assassins than anything else. I think they hated me, too, and would have given anything to pitch me over some of the passes."

Portia laughs.

"I can sympathize with you," she says. "Danger of any sort has no charm for me. Yet I wanted those flowers. I think" – idly – "I shall always want them, simply because I can't get them."

"You shall have them in three seconds if you will only say the word," says Dicky Browne, who is all but fast asleep, and who looks quite as like descending a rugged cliff as Portia herself.

"I am so glad I don't know the 'word,'" says Portia, with a little grimace. "It would be a pity to endanger a valuable life like yours."

Dulce turns to Mr. Gower.

"You may smoke if you like," she says, sweetly. "I know you are longing for a cigarette or something, and *we* don't mind."

"Really though?" says Gower.

"Yes, really. Even our pretty town-lady here," indicating Portia, "likes the perfume in the open air."

"Very much indeed," says Portia, graciously, leaning a little toward Gower, and smiling sweetly.

"A moment ago I told myself I could not be happier," says Stephen, glancing at Dulce. "And indeed I wanted nothing further – but if I may smoke – if I have your permission to light this," producing a cigar, "I shall feel that my end is near; I shall know that the gods love me, and that therefore I *must* die young."

As he places the cigar between his lips he leans back again at Dulce's feet with a sigh suggestive of unutterable bliss.

"We were talking about you just before you came," says Dulce, with a little friendly nod, bending over his recumbent form, and making him a present of a very adorable smile. "We had all, you know, formed such different opinions about you."

"What was your opinion," asks he, rising to a sitting posture with an alacrity not to be expected from a youth of his indolence. In this last attitude, however, it is easier to see Dulce's charming face. "I *should* like to know that."

His manner implies that he would not like to hear the opinion of the others.

"It was nothing very flattering, I am afraid," said Dulce, with a little laugh. "I was – to confess the truth – just in the very faintest degree nervous about you."

"About *me!*"

"Yes," she laughed softly again; "I thought you might be a 'blue-and-white young man,' and that idea filled me with dismay. I don't think I like a 'soul-ful eyed young man,' *too* much."

"I'm so glad I'm of the 'threepenny 'bus' lot," says Gower, with a smile. "Ye gods! what a shocking thought is the other. Look at my hair, I entreat you, Miss Blount, and tell me does it resemble the lanky locks of Oscar?"

"No, it is anything but wylde," says Dulce, glancing at his shaven crown, that any hermit might be proud of: "and do you know I am glad of your sanity; I should quite hate you if you were a disciple of that school."

"Poor school," says Gower, pityingly, "for the first time I feel deep sympathy for it. But with regard to myself, I am flattered you troubled yourself to think of me at all. Did it really matter to you what my convictions might be?"

"Yes, of course," says Dulce, opening her eyes, and showing herself half in fun, half in earnest, and wholly desirable. "Such a near neighbor as you must be. I suppose we shall see a good deal of you – at least" – sweetly – "I hope we shall; and how would it be with us if you called here every morning with lanky tresses, and a cadaverous face, and words culled from a language obsolete?"

This little speech quite dazzles Gower. Not the sauciness of it, but the undercurrent of kindliness. "*Every* morning!" Does she really mean that he may come up to this enchanting spot every morning?

It had, of course, occurred to him, during prayers, in the early part of the day, when he had sat out the dreary service with exemplary patience, and his eyes fixed on the Blount pew, that, perhaps, he might be allowed to call once a week at the Hall, without being considered by the inmates an absolute nuisance – but every day! this sounds too good to be true, and is, therefore, received by him with caution.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.