Fenn George Manville

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Содержание

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Chapter One.
Modern Skill

"Hallo, Sawbones!"

The speaker raised his head from the white pillow of the massive, old-fashioned four-post bed, and set the ornamental bobs and tags of the heavy bullion fringe upon the great cornice quivering. He was a sharp-faced, cleanly shaven man, freshly scraped, and the barber who had been operating was in the act of replacing his razor and strop as these words were spoken to the calm, thoughtful-looking person who entered the substantially furnished room.

"Good morning, Mr Masters. Had a quiet night?"

"Bah! You know I haven't. How is a man to have a good night when ten thousand imps are boring into him with red-hot iron, and jigging his nerves till he is half mad! Here, you: be off!"

"Without brushing your hair, sir?"

"Brush a birch broom! My head never wants brushing. You know that."

He gave himself a jerk, and the short, crisp, wavy grey locks

glistened in the bright morning sun, which streamed in through the window.

"Look here; you can cut it to-morrow when you come – if I'm not dead. If I am, you may have a bit to keep in remembrance."

"Oh, not so bad as that, sir, I hope. Dr Thorpe is too – "

"That'll do," said the man in the bed sharply. "I kept to you because you didn't chatter like the ordinary barber brood. I may get better, so don't spoil your character. Be off!"

The barber smiled, bowed, and left the room to doctor and patient.

"Well?" said the latter, meeting his attendant's searching eye. "I'm not gone."

"No; and I do not mean to let you go if I can help it."

"Ho! – But perhaps you can't."

"God knows, sir; but I shall do my best. I would rather, though, that you would let me bring in some one in consultation."

"And I wouldn't. If you can't set me right, Thorpe, no one in Boston can. Look here; brought your tools?"

The young doctor smiled.

"Ah, it's nothing to grin about."

"No; it is serious enough, my dear sir."

"Then answer my question. Brought your tools?"

"I have come quite prepared."

"Then I shan't have it done."

Michael Thorpe looked at his patient as if he did not believe him, and the latter continued —

"I say: it's confoundedly hard that I should suffer like this. Spent all my life slaving, and now at sixty, when I want a little peace and enjoyment, this cursed trouble comes on. Look here, Thorpe; don't fool about with me. Charge me what you like, but tell me; couldn't you give me some stuff that would cure it without this operation?"

"Do you want me to be perfectly plain with you, sir, once more?"

"Of course. Do I look the sort of man to be humbugged?"

"Then I must tell you, sir, the simple truth. You may go on for months, perhaps a year, as you are. That is the outside."

"I wouldn't go on for a week as I have been, my lad. – But if I have it done?"

"There is no reason why you should not live to be eighty, or a hundred, if you can."

"Right; I'll go in for the hundred, Thorpe. I'm tough enough. There, get it over."

"You will have it done?"

"Of course I will. Don't kill me, or I'll come back and haunt you."

"I should be too glad to see a dear old friend again, so that wouldn't alarm me," said Thorpe, examining his patient, who smiled grimly. "I shall not kill you. All I'm afraid of is that I may perform the operation so unskilfully that my labour and your suffering will have been in vain."

"And then I'll call you a miserable pretender, and shan't pay

you a cent. Bah! You can do it. I know you, Michael Thorpe, and haven't watched you for nothing."

The young surgeon held out his hands to his patient.

"Give me your full confidence, Mr Masters," he said, "work with me, and I can cure you."

"Right, my lad. But you had it before," he cried, grasping the hands extended to him. "I trust you, boy, as I always did your father – God bless him! Now, no more talking. Get to work. I won't holloa. Where are you going?"

"Only down to the drawing-room to fetch the nurse."

"Ring for her – she's downstairs."

"I mean the other – the professional nurse whom I brought with me."

"What for?"

"To help me now, and to attend you for a few days afterwards exactly as I wish."

"Two nurses? One has nearly killed me. Two will be downright murder."

"No, sir," said Michael Thorpe, smiling. "The good in one will neutralise all the ill that there may be in the other."

"Fetch her up, then; and look here, Thorpe; I'm a man, not a weak hysterical girl. None of your confounded chloroform, or anything of that kind."

"You leave yourself in my hands, please," said the surgeon, smiling, and going across to the door, which he left open, and then uttering a sharp cough, returned.

A minute later there was a faint rustling sound beyond the heavy curtains, and the patient, frowning heavily, turned his head in the direction of the door. Then the scowl upon his sharp face gave place to a look of wonder and delight as a rather slight, dark-haired girl, in a closely fitting black dress and white-bibbed apron, advanced towards him, with her large dark eyes beaming sympathy, and a smile, half pitying, half affectionate, played about her well-formed, expressive lips.

"Cornel!" he cried. "Why, my dear little girl, this is good of you to come and see me. I thought it was the nurse."

He stretched out his hands, drew the girl to him, and kissed her tenderly on both cheeks, and then on the lips, before sinking back with the tears in his eyes – two utter strangers, which, possibly finding their position novel, hurriedly quitted their temporary resting-place, fell over the sides, and trickled down his cheeks.

"I am the nurse," came now, in a sweet, silvery voice, as the new-comer began to arrange the pillow in that peculiarly refreshing way only given by loving hands.

"You? Impossible!"

"Oh no, Mr Masters. Michael told me everything, and I was going to offer, when he asked me if I would come and help him."

"Oh, but nonsense! You, my child! It would be too horrible and disgusting for a young girl like you."

"Why?" she replied gently. "Michael trusts me, and thinks I carry out his wishes better than a paid servant would."

"That's it, my dear sir. I want, both for the sake of an old

friend and for my reputation, to make my operation perfectly successful. Cornel here will carry out my instructions to the letter. She will help me too in the operation."

"But an operation is not fit – not the place for a young girl."

"Why not?" said Cornel, smiling.

"It is unsexing you, my child."

"Unsexing me, when I come to help to calm your pain, to nurse you back to health and strength! A woman never unsexes herself in proving a help to those who suffer. Besides, I have often helped my brother before."

Meanwhile the surgeon had busied himself at a table upon which he had placed a mahogany case. He had had his back to them, but now turned and advanced to the bed, with a little silver implement in his hand.

"Now, my dear sir, a little manly fortitude and patience, and you may believe me when I tell you that there is nothing to fear."

"Who is afraid?" said the old man sharply. "But what's that?"

"A little apparatus for injecting an anaesthetic."

"I said I wouldn't have anything of the kind," cried the patient angrily. "I can and will bear it."

"But I cannot and will not," said the surgeon, smiling. "You could not help wincing and showing your suffering. That would trouble, perhaps unnerve me, and I could not work so well."

"What are you going to do? – give me chloroform?"

"No; I am going to inject a fluid that will dull the sensitive nerves of the part, and place you in such a condition that you will

lose all sense of suffering."

"And if I don't come to?"

"You will not for some time. Now, old friend, show me your confidence. Are you ready?"

There was a long, deep-drawn breath, a look at the young girl's patient, trust-giving face and then Ezekiel Masters, one of the wealthiest men in Boston, said calmly —

"Yes."

A few minutes later he was lying perfectly insensible, and breathing as gently as an infant. "Can you repeat that from time to time, as I tell you?" said the surgeon.

"Yes, dear."

"Without flinching?"

"Yes. It is to save him. I shall not shrink."

"Then I depend upon you."

Busy minutes followed, with the patient lying perfectly unconscious.

"How long could he be kept like this, Michael?" whispered Cornel, whose face looked very white.

"As long as you wished – comparatively. Don't talk; you hinder me."

"As long as I liked," thought Cornel, with her eyes dilating as she gazed at the patient, with the little syringe in her hand, and the stoppered bottle, from which the fluid was taken, close by – "as long as I liked, and he as if quite dead. What an awful power to hold within one's grasp!"

Chapter Two.
The Certain Person

"Hah!"

A long-drawn sigh of content, which made Cornelia Thorpe emerge from her chair behind the bed-curtains, and bend over to lay her soft white hand upon the patient's forehead, but only for it to be taken and held to his lips.

"Well, angel?" he said quietly.

"Your head is quite cool; there is no fever. Have you had a good night's rest?"

"Good, my child? It has been heavenly. I seemed to sink at once into a delicious dreamless sleep, such as I have not known for a year, and I feel as if I had not stirred all night."

"You have not."

"Then you have watched by me?"

"Oh, yes."

"Hah!" There was a pause. Then: "You must have given me a strong dose?"

"No," said Cornel, smiling. "Your sleep was quite natural. Why should it not be? Michael says the cause of all your suffering is completely removed, and that he has been successful beyond his hopes."

The old man lay holding his nurse's hand, and gazing at her

fair, innocent face intently for some minutes before breaking the silence again.

"When was it?" he said at last.

"A week to-day, and in another month you may be up again."

"Hah! And they say there are no miracles now, and no angels upon earth," said the patient, half to himself. Then more loudly, "Cornel, my child, I think I must turn over a new leaf."

"Don't," she said, smiling. "I like the old page. You have always been my fathers dear friend – always good and kind."

"I? Bah! A regular money-scraping, harsh tyrant. A regular miser."

"Nonsense, Mr Masters."

"Then I'll prove it. I won't pay Michael his fees, nor you your wages for nursing me – not till I'm dead. Well, have I said something funny? Why do you laugh?"

"I smiled because I felt pleased."

"Because I'm better?"

"Yes; and because you are not going to insult Michael, nor your nurse, by offering us – "

"Dollars? Humph! There, let's talk about something else. Does Michael still hold to that insane notion of going to Europe?"

"Oh yes; we should have been there now, if it had not been for your illness."

"Then he gave it up for a time, because I wanted him to attend me?"

Cornel bowed her head.

"Humph! Sort of madness to want to go at all. Isn't America big enough for him?"

"Of course," said Cornel, laughing gently; and now the air of the nurse appeared to have dropped away, to give place to the bright happy look of a girl of twenty. "Surely it is not madness to want to increase his knowledge by a little study at the English and French hospitals. Besides, it was our father's wish."

"Yes; Jack was very mad about the English doctors, when there was not one who could touch him. I say, though: Michael is going to be as clever."

"I hope so," said Cornel, with animation. "He studies very hard."

"Yes, he's a clever one, girl; and Jack Thorpe would have been very proud of him if he had lived. But, I say – "

Cornel looked inquiringly in the keen eyes which searched her face.

"You really want to go with your brother?"

"Yes," she said with animation – "I should very much like to go."

"To study with him in the English and French hospitals?"

"I should like him to take me round with him," she said, with her cheeks growing slightly tinged. "I am always interested in his cases, and surely a woman is none the worse for a little surgical and medical knowledge."

"A precious deal better, my dear. But, I say – "

"Yes, dear guardian," she said, with a sweet, thrilling

modulation now in her tones, as her eyes grew dim, and she laid both her little hands in the patient's.

"I promised your father I'd always have an eye on you two, and I don't think I ought to let you think of going, Cornel dear."

She was silent.

"Isn't it a sort of madness for you – to – eh? You know."

"To love and keep my faith to Armstrong Dale?" she said gently; and the love-light shone brightly in the eyes which met the old man's now without shrinking.

"Yes; that's what I meant, little one. I don't know how you could get yourself engaged to him."

Cornel laughed gently – a pleasant, silvery little laugh, which seemed to do the patient good, for he smiled and listened to the last note of the musical sounds. But he grew serious, and there was a cynicism in his tones as he went on.

"I don't believe in him, my girl. He's good-looking and a bit clever; but when you have said that, you have said all."

A little white finger was laid upon the speaker's lips, but he went on.

"I know: he gammoned you with his love nonsense, but if he had been the fellow I took him for, he'd have stayed here in Boston and painted and glazed. Painted you. Painted me – glazed me too, if he had liked. What did he want to go and study at Rome and Paris and London for? We've cleverer people in the States than out there."

"To get breadth, and learn his own failings," said Cornel

gently.

"Hadn't any – I mean he was full of 'em, of course. Couldn't have loved you, or he'd have stopped at home."

"It was to show his love for me, and to try and make himself a master of his art, that he went away," said Cornel, with a look of faith and pride in her eyes.

"Bah! He has forgotten you by this time. Give him up, puss. He'll never come back. He'll marry some fine madam in the old country."

Cornel winced, and her eyes dilated as these words stung her; but the pang was momentary, and she laughed in the full tide of her happy trust in the man she loved.

"You mark my words, Cornel," said the old man; "that fellow will throw you over, and then that will set your monkey up, and you'll come and ask me to marry you, and I will. The folks 'll all laugh, but let 'em. We shall be all right, little one. I shall have a sweet little nurse and housekeeper to take care of me to the end, and you'll have an ugly, cantankerous old husband, who won't live very long, and will die and leave you a million dollars, so that you can laugh at the whole world, and be the prettiest little widow in Boston – bah! in the whole States – and with too much good sense to throw yourself away. – Who's that?"

"Doctor," said Michael Thorpe, entering. "How is he, Cornel?"

"Getting better fast; so well this morning that he is saying all kinds of harsh and cruel things."

“Capital sign,” said the young surgeon. – “Yes, capital. Why, you are splendid, Mr Masters, and at the end of only a week.”

“Oh, I’m better. Only said you were mad to want to go to Europe; and that she’s worse to pin her faith to a gad-about artist who’ll only break her heart.”

Michael Thorpe’s stern, thoughtful face expanded into a pleasant smile.

“Yes, Cornel dear,” he said; “there’s no doubt about it; he’s mending fast. I’ll book my cabin in one of the Allan boats for about the beginning of next month. You will not be able to go.”

Chapter Three.
A Fair Client

A noble-looking specimen of humanity, with a grand grizzly head, and strongly marked aquiline features, lit up by deeply set, piercing eyes, got out of a four-wheeler at Number 409 Portland Place, knocking off a very shabby hat in the process.

"Mind the nap, guv'nor," said the battered-looking driver with a laugh, as his fare stooped to pick up the fallen edifice; and as he spoke, the man's look took in the ill-fitting coat and patched boots of him whom he had driven only from Fitzroy Square.

"Not the first time that's been down, cabby. Hand 'em off."

A minute later, Daniel Jaggs, familiarly known in art circles as "The Emperor," and by visitors to the Royal Academy from his noble face, which had appeared over the bodies of noble Romans and heroes of great variety, stood on the pavement with an easel under one arm, a large blank canvas under the other, and a flat japanned box of oil colours and case of brushes held half hidden by beard, beneath his chin.

He walked up to the door of the great mansion, whose window-sills and portico were gay with fresh flowers, and gave a vigorous tug at the bell.

The double doors flew open almost directly, and "The Emperor" was faced by a portly butler, who was flanked by a

couple of men in livery.

"Oh! the painters traps," said the former. "Look here, my good fellow; you should have rung the other bell. Step inside."

"The Emperor" obeyed, and, leaving the visitor waiting in the handsome hall, in company with the footman and under-butler, who looked rather superciliously at the well-worn garments of the artist's model, the out-of-livery servant walked slowly up the broad staircase to the drawing-room, and as slowly returned, to stand beckoning.

"You are to bring them up yourself," he said haughtily.

Daniel Jaggs placed his hat upon one of the crest-blazoned hall chairs, loaded himself well with the artistic impedimenta, and then went forward to the foot of the stairs up which the butler was leading the way, when, hearing a sound, he turned sharply.

"Here! Hi!" he cried loudly; "what are you going to do with that 'at?"

For one of the footmen was putting it out of sight, disgusted with the appearance of the dirty lining.

"Hush! Recollect where you are," whispered the butler. "Her ladyship will hear."

"But that's my best 'at," grumbled the model, and then he subsided into silence as he was ushered into a magnificently furnished room; the door was closed behind him, and he stood staring round, thinking of backgrounds, when there was the rustling of silk, and "The Emperor" was dazzled, staring, as he told himself, at the most beautiful woman he had ever seen in

his life.

Valentina, Contessa Dellatoria, was worthy of the man's admiration as she stood there with her dark eyes half veiled by their long lashes, in all the proud matured beauty of a woman of thirty, who could command every resource of jewel and robe to heighten the charms with which nature had liberally endowed her. She was beautiful; she knew it; and at those moments, eager with anticipations which had heightened the colour in her creamy cheeks, and the lustre in her eyes, she stood ready to be amused as she thoroughly grasped the meaning of the man's astonished gaze.

"You have brought those from Mr Dale, have you not?" she said at last, in a rich, soft voice.

"Yes, my lady. I 'ave, my lady. The heasel and canvas, my lady."

"Perhaps you had better bring them into this room."

"Yes, my lady – of course, my lady," said the model eagerly, as he blundered after the Contessa, "The Emperor's" rather shambling movements, being due to a general looseness of joint, in no wise according with the majesty of his head and face.

"Yes; about there. That will do; they are sure to be moved."

"Oh yes, my lady, on account of the light. Mr Dale's very partickler."

"Indeed? Will he be here soon?"

"Direc'ly, I should say, my lady. He bordered me to bring on his traps."

"From his studio?" said the lady, sinking into a chair, and taking a purse from a little basket on a table.

"The Emperor's" eyesight was very good, and the movement suggested pleasant things. The lady, too, seemed disposed to question him, and he winked to himself mentally, as he glanced at the beautiful face before him, thought of his employer's youth and good looks, and then had sundry other thoughts, such as might occur to a man of a very ordinary world.

But his hands were not idle; they were as busy as his thoughts, and he spread the legs of the easel, and altered the position of the pegs ready for the canvas.

"Will you take this – for your trouble?" came in that soft, rich, thrilling voice.

"Oh no – thank you, my lady – that ain't necessary," said the man hastily, as his fingers closed over the coin extended with a smile by fingers glittering with jewels. – "A suv, by jingo," he added to himself.

"Are you Mr Dale's servant?"

"No, ma'am – my lady. Oh, dear, no. An old friend – that is, you know, I sit for him – and stand. I'm in a many of his pictures."

"Oh, I see. He takes your portrait?"

"Well, no, my lady; portraits is quite another line. I meant for his gennery pictures."

"*Genre*?"

"Yes, my lady. I was standing for Crackticus that day when you and his lordship come to the studio."

"Indeed? I did not see you."

"No, my lady. I had to go into the next room. You see I was a hancient Briton, and not sootable for or'nary society 'cept in a picture. – I think that'll do, my lady. He'll alter it to his taste."

"Yes, but – er – does Mr Dale paint many portraits of ladies?" said the Contessa, detaining the model as he made as if to depart.

"Oh no, my lady. I never knew him do such a thing afore. He never works away from his studio, and he went on a deal about having to come here – er – that is – of course, he did not know," added the man hastily.

The Contessa smiled.

"But he has painted the human countenance a great deal? I mean the faces of ladies. There were several of nymphs in his Academy picture this year – beautiful women."

"The Emperor" smiled and shook his head.

"On'y or'nary models, my lady. He made 'em look beautiful. That's art, my lady."

"Then he had sitters for that picture?" she asked, rather eagerly.

"Oh yes, my lady; but Lor' bless you! it isn't much you'd think of them. He's a doing a picture now – a tayblow about Juno making a discovery over something. Her good man wasn't quite what he ought to have been, my lady, and she's in a reg'lar rage."

"Indeed?"

"Yes, my lady; and he tried all the reg'lar lady models – spent no end on 'em, but they none of 'em wouldn't do."

"Not beautiful enough?"

"He didn't think so, my lady, though, as I told him, it was too much to expeck to get one as was perfeck. You see in art, to make our best studies, we has to do a deal of patching."

"Painting the picture over and over again?"

"Your ladyship does not understand. It's like this: many of our best tayblows of goddesses and nymphs is made up. One model does for the face, another for the arms and hands, another for busties and – I beg your ladyship's pardon; I was only talking art."

"I understand. I take a great deal of interest in the subject."

"Thankye, my lady. I told Mr Dale as it was expecting too much to get a perfeck woman for a model, for there wasn't such a thing in nature. But, all hignorance, my lady, all hignorance. I hadn't seen your ladyship then. I beg your ladyship's pardon for being so bold."

"The Emperor" had seen the dreamy dark eyes open wide and flash angrily, but the look changed back to the listless, half-contemptuous again, and the lady said with a smile —

"Granted. – That will do. I suppose you will fetch Mr Dale's easel when it is removed?"

"I hope so, my lady, and thank you kindly. So generous! Never forget it, and – oh! I beg your pardon, sir."

"The Emperor" had been backing toward the door, and nearly came in contact with a short, slight, carefully dressed, middle-aged man – that is to say, he was about forty-five, looked sixty-five the last thing at night, and as near thirty-five as his valet

could make him in the day.

He gazed keenly at the noble features of the man who towered over him, and "The Emperor" returned the gaze, noting, from a professional point of view, the rather classic Italian mould of the features, disfigured by a rather weak sensual mouth, and dark eyes too closely set.

"Two sizes larger, and what a Yago he would have made to my Brabantio," muttered "The Emperor," as he was let out by one of the footmen; and at the same moment Armstrong Dale, artist, strode up – a manly, handsome, carelessly dressed, typical Saxon Englishman in appearance, generations of his family, settled in America since the Puritan days, having undergone no change.

"Traps all there, Jaggs?"

"Yes, sir, everything," said the man confidentially, "and oh! sir – "

"That will do. Say what you have to say when I return: I'm late. Take my card up to the Contessa," he continued, turning sharply to the servant; and there was so much stern decision in his manner that the door was held wide, and the artist entered.

Meanwhile a few words passed in the drawing-room.

"Who's that fellow, Tina?" said the man too small, in "The Emperor's" estimation, for Iago.

The Contessa had sunk back in her lounge, and a listless, weary air had come over her face like a cloud, as she said, with a slight shrug of her shoulders —

"Mr Dale's man."

"Who the dickens is Mr Dale?"

Twenty years of life in London society had so thoroughly Anglicised Conte Cesare Dellatoria, that his conversation had become perfectly insular, and the Italian accent was only noticeable at times.

"You know – the artist whom we visited."

"Oh, him! I'd forgotten. That his litter?"

"Yes."

"Humph! I haven't much faith in English artists. Better have waited till we went to Rome in the winter. Why, Tina, you look lovely this morning. That dress suits you exactly, beloved one."

He bent down and kissed the softly rounded cheek, with the effect that the lady's dark brows rose slightly, but enough to make a couple of creases across her forehead. Then, as a dull, cracking noise, as of the giving of some form of stay or stiffening was heard, the gentleman rose upright quickly, and glanced at himself in one of the many mirrors.

"Well, make him do you justice. But no – he cannot."

"You are amiable this morning," said the lady contemptuously.

"Always most amiable in your presence, my queen," he replied.

"Oh, I see! You are going out?"

"Yes, dearest. By the way, don't wait lunch, and I shall not be back to dinner."

"Do you dine with Lady Grayson?"

The Conte laughed.

"Delightful!" he cried. "Jealousy. And of her dearest, most confidential friend."

"No," said the lady quietly. "I have only one confidential friend."

"Meaning me. Thank you, dearest."

"Meaning myself," said the lady to herself. Then haughtily: "Yes?"

This to one of the servants who brought in a card on a waiter.

"Caller?" exclaimed the Conte. "Here, stop a moment; I've an engagement;" and he hurried out through the back drawing-room, while the lady's eyes closed a little more as she took the card from the silver waiter, and sat up, listening intently, as she said in a low voice —

"Where is Mr Dale?"

"In the library, my lady."

There was a pause, during which the Contessa turned her head toward the back room, and let her eyes pass over the preparations that had been made for her sitting.

"Move that easel a little forward," she said.

The man crossed to the back room and altered the position of the tripod and canvas.

"A little more toward the middle of the room."

At that moment there was the faintly heard sound of a whistle, followed by the rattle of wheels, which stopped in front of the house. A few moments later the rattle of the wheels began again,

and there was the faint, dull, heavy sound of the closing front door.

"I think that will do," said the Contessa carelessly. "Show Mr Dale up."

The man left the room, and the change was instantaneous. His mistress sprang up eager and animated, stepped to one of the mirrors, gave a quick glance at her flushed cheeks and sparkling eyes, laid her hand for a moment upon her heaving bosom, and then hurriedly resumed her seat, with her head averted from the door. She took up a book, with which she half screened her face, the hand which held open the leaves trembling slightly from the agitation imparted by her quickened pulses.

The door opened silently, and the servant announced loudly – "Mr Dale," and withdrew.

The artist took a step or two forward, and then waited for a sign of recognition, which did not come for a few moments, during which there was a quick nervous palpitation going on in the lady's temples.

Then she rose quickly, letting fall the book, and advanced towards the visitor.

"You are late," she said, in a low, deep, emotional voice.

"I beg your ladyship's pardon," said Dale, looking wonderingly, and with all an artist's admiration for the beautiful in nature, at the glowing beauty of the woman whose eyes were turned with a soft appealing look in his, while the parted lips curved into a smile which revealed her purely white teeth.

"I forgive you," she said softly, as she held out her hand – "now that you have come."

Armstrong Dale's action was the most natural in the world. He was in London, and it was two years since he left Boston to increase his knowledge of the world of art. He took the hand held out to him, and for the moment was fascinated by the spell of the eyes which looked so strangely deep down into his own. Then he was conscious of the soft white hand clinging tightly to his with a pressure to which it had been a stranger since he left the States.

Chapter Four.
An Unexpected Scene

Armstrong Dale walked up and down his grim-looking, soot-smudged studio, as if he had determined to wear a track on one side similar to that made by a wild beast in his cage.

"I won't go again," he said; "it's a kind of madness. Heavens! how beautiful she is! And that man – that wretched, effete, miserable little piece of conceit, with his insolent criticisms of my work. I felt as if I could strangle him. If it had not been for her appealing looks, I should have had a row with him before now. I will not put up with it. But how she seems to hate him; how she – "

"Bah! Brute! Idiot! Ass! Conceited fool! Because nature has given you a decent face, can't a handsome woman look at you without your thinking she admires you – can't she speak gently, and in her graceful refined way, without your thinking that she is in love with you?"

"It's all right, Cornel, my darling! I've been a fool – a conceited fool; but I've got your sweet, innocent little face always before me, the remembrance of your dear arms about my neck, and your kisses – armour, all of them, to guard me against folly. Pish! Fancy and conceit! I will go, finish my painting, get it exhibited if I can, and pile up Philistine gold as spoil to bear home to her

who is to be my very own."

It was the third time of making this declaration, and, full of his self-confidence, Dale made his way for the fourth time to Portland Place, to find his pulses, which had been accelerating their rate, calm down at once, for his reception by the Contessa was perfect, but there was a mingling of annoyance with his satisfaction on finding that his hostess was not alone.

Lady Grayson, one of Valentina's greatest intimates, was there, a handsome, arch-looking woman, widow of a wealthy old general, who, after a long life of warfare in the East, had commenced another in the West, but this was not even of seven years' duration before he fell.

Lady Grayson smiled sweetly upon the artist as he entered; and he felt that there was as much meaning in her words as in her looks.

"I forgot this was your sitting day, Tina. Do you know, I thought ladies always had to go to an artist's studio to be painted. There, I suppose you two want to be alone?"

"Pray, don't go," said Valentina calmly. "I do not suppose Mr Dale will mind you being present."

"I? Not at all," said Armstrong. "It will not make any difference to me."

"Indeed!" said the lady archly, "I thought you might both want to talk."

Armstrong Dale turned to his palette and brushes; and, as the Contessa took up her position, he crossed to the window, half-

closed the shutters, and drew a curtain, so as to get the exact light upon his sitter, whose eyes had met those of her dearest friend, and a silent skirmish, none the less sharp for no words being spoken, went on.

Dale returned to the front of his easel, and after a few words of request to his sitter respecting her position, to which she responded by a pained look, which made him shiver, he began to paint.

"Oh, how clever!" cried Lady Grayson, who had resumed her seat.

"Then she is waiting to see Cesare," thought the Contessa, smiling at her friend.

"Did you mean that dab I just made with my brush, Lady Grayson?" said Armstrong coldly.

"Fie! to speak so slightingly of your work. Dab, indeed! why, I have had lessons in painting and ought to know. Every touch you give that canvas shows real talent."

"And with all due respect, Lady Grayson, I, as a man who has studied hard in New York, Paris, Rome, and here in London, confidently say that you are no judge."

"I declare I am, sir," cried Lady Grayson merrily. "The fact is, you are too modest. – Don't you think he is far too modest, dear?"

"I am debarred from entering into the discussion," said the Contessa, with a fixed smile.

"Then I must do all the talking. – Capital! The portrait grows

more like at every touch. By the way, Mr Dale, how is your big picture getting on – the one I saw at your studio?"

In spite of her self-command, Valentina turned pale, and a flash darted from her eyes.

She at his studio!

Then she drew a long breath, the light in her eyes grew fixed, and there was a peculiar hardening in her smile, as Armstrong went on painting, and said calmly —

"The large mythological study I showed you and the Conte?"

"Yes, that one," said Lady Grayson, who, in spite of her assurance, did not dare to look at her friend, whose smile grew a little harder now, though there was a feeling of triumph glowing at her heart, as she detected her friend's slip.

"Badly," said Armstrong quietly. "I beg your pardon, Lady Dellatoria; that smile is too hard. Are you fatigued?"

"Oh no," she replied; and the smile he was trying to transfer to the canvas came back with a look which he avoided, and he continued hastily —

"I cannot satisfy myself with my sitters. I want a good – a beautiful, intense-looking – face, full of majesty, passion, and refinement; but the models are all so hard and commonplace. I can find beautiful women to sit, but there is a vulgarity in their faces where I want something ethereal or spiritual."

"Why not get the Contessa to sit?"

"Or Lady Grayson?" said Valentina scornfully.

"Oh, I should sit for Mr Dale with pleasure."

"My dear Henriette, how can you be so absurd?"

"Oh, but I do not mean until you have quite done with him, dear."

"You would not do," said Dale bluntly. – "Quite still now, please, Lady Dellatoria."

"Alack and alas! not to be beautiful. But would your present sitter do?"

"I should not presume to ask Lady Dellatoria to sit for a study in a picture to be publicly exhibited," said the young man coldly.

"But you – so famous. – Ah, here is the Conte!"

"Yes; what is it?" said Dellatoria, entering. "Want me?"

"I knew it," thought the Contessa. "It was an appointment."

"Yes, to judge. That picture of Mr Dale's. You know – the one we saw that day at his studio."

The Conte's eyes contracted a little, and he glanced at his wife, whose face was calm and smiling.

"Oh yes, I remember," he said – then, in an aside, "You little fool. – What about it?" he added aloud.

"Mr Dale can't find a model who would do for Juno. I was suggesting that dearest Valentina should sit."

"Very good of you, Lady Grayson," said the Conte shortly; "but her ladyship does not sit for artists."

"And Mr Dale does not wish her ladyship to do so, sir," said the artist, as haughtily as the Conte.

"There, I've said something wrong," cried Lady Grayson. "Poor me! It's time I went. I had no business to stay and hinder the

painting. Good morning, Mr Dale. Good-bye, Valentina, dear. Ask the Conte to forgive me."

She bent down and kissed the beautiful face, which did not wince, but there was war between two pairs of eyes. Then, turning round, she held out her hand.

"Good-bye, dreadful man. I'm too awfully sorry I cannot give you a lift on my way back to the park."

"No, thanks. By-the-by, yes; I want to go to Albert Gate. Would it be taking you out of your way?"

"Oh no. Delighted. My horses don't have half enough to do."

"Then come along."

Armstrong could not help glancing at the couple as they crossed towards the door; and then as he turned back to the canvas his heart began to beat painfully, for he heard a peculiar hissing sound as of a long deep breath being drawn through teeth closely set, and a dangerous feeling of pity entered his breast. He could not paint, but stood fixed with the brush raised, completely mastered by the flood of thought which rushed through his brain. He saw plainly how great cause there was for the coldness and contempt with which the Contessa viewed her husband, and he realised fully the truth of the rumours he had heard of how she – a beautiful English girl – had been hurried into a fashionable marriage with this contemptible, wealthy, titled man. What else could come of it but such a life as he saw too plainly that they led!

He fought against these thoughts, but vainly; and they only opened the way to others still more dangerous. The first time he

had met Lady Dellatoria, when she visited his studio in company with her husband, she had seemed attracted to him, and he had felt flattered by the eagerness with which she listened to his words. Then came an invitation to dinner at Portland Place, for the discussion of his undertaking the portrait. That night, the Conte was called away to an engagement, and he was left in that luxurious drawing-room, talking to the clever, refined, and beautiful woman who seemed to hang upon his words.

Soon after he went back to his studio half intoxicated by her smiles; but the next morning he had grown more himself, and had a long talk with Joe Pacey, his greatest intimate, and been advised to paint the portrait by all means, but to hit hard for price.

"Do you no end of good, boy; but take care of yourself; she's the most beautiful woman in society."

Dale had laughed contemptuously, accepted the commission, and matters had gone on till it had come to this. He had been forced to be a witness of the breach between husband and wife, the cruelty of the treatment she received, and he had heard that painful drawing in of the breath, as she sat there almost within touch. She, the suffering woman, who had from the first accorded to him what had seemed to be the warmest friendship; and now the blood rose to his brain, and his resolutions, his fierce accusations, appeared to have been all in vain.

He dared not look round in the terrible silence which had ensued. He could only think that he was alone with the woman against whom his friend had warned him, and for the moment, in

the giddy sensation that attacked him, he felt that he must rush from the room.

Then he started, and the brush fell from his hand, for there was a quick movement in the chair on his left, and he turned sharply, to find Valentina's eyes filled with tears, but not dimmed so that he could not read the yearning, passionate look with which she gazed at him, as she said in a low, thrilling whisper —

"You heard – you saw – all. Have you no pity for me – no word to say?"

For a few moments not a word.

The Contessa rose and took a step toward him, with her hands raised appealingly.

"You do not – you cannot – understand," she half whispered, "or you would speak to me. Can you not see how alone I am in the world, insulted, outraged, by that man whose wife I was almost forced to become? Wife!" she cried, "no, his slave, loaded with fetters of gold, which cut into my flesh till my life becomes insufferable. Mr Dale – Armstrong, I thought you sympathised with me in my unhappy state. Have I not shown you, since fate threw us so strangely together, that my life has been renewed that everything has seemed changed?"

He looked at her wildly, and the palette he held fell upon the rich thick carpet in the struggle going on within his breast.

"Are you dumb?" she whispered softly; "have you been blind to my sufferings?"

"No, no!" he cried. "Indeed, I have not. But you must not

speak like this. It is madness. I have seen and pitied. I have felt that your husband – ”

“Husband!” she said contemptuously.

“Oh, hash!” he cried. “Lady Dellatoria, you are angry – excited. Yes, I see and know everything, but for your own sake, don’t – for Heaven’s sake, don’t speak to me like this.”

“Why,” she said bitterly, “are you not honest and true?”

“No,” he cried wildly. “It is mere folly. It has all been a terrible mistake my coming here. I cannot – I will not continue this work. It is impossible. The Conte insults me. He is dissatisfied. Lady Dellatoria, I cannot submit to all his – ”

He shrank from her, for her hand was laid upon his arm.

“Yes,” she said, as she raised her face towards his; “he insults you, as he insults me; he – poor, weak, pitiful creature – insults you who are so true and manly. I am not blind. I have seen all that you try to hide. You pity me; you have shown yourself my sympathetic friend. Yes, and I have seen more – all that you have tried so hard to hide in your veneration – your love for a despairing woman. Mr Dale – Armstrong,” she whispered – and her voice was low, tender, and caressing; her eyes seeking his with a passionate, yearning look, which thrilled him – “don’t leave me now; I could not bear it.”

“Lady Dellatoria!” he panted wildly, as honour made one more stand in his behalf.

“Valentina,” she whispered, “who casts off all a woman’s reserve for you, the first who ever taught her that, after all, there

is such a thing as love in this weary world, and with it hope and joy."

The hands which had rested upon his arm rose to his shoulders, and tightened about his neck, as she laid her burning face upon his breast.

Chapter Five.
Lady Grayson's Purse

With one quick motion, Armstrong threw Valentina back into her seat, and snatched up palette and brushes, mad with rage and shame, as he made an effort to go on painting. For the drawing-room door had been opened with a good deal of rattling of the handle, and he expected that the next minute he would have to turn and face the husband.

But it was a woman's voice, full of irony and sarcasm, and he turned sharply, to see that the Contessa sat back in her chair with a strangely angry light in her dark eyes, gazing at Lady Grayson.

"Pray forgive me, dear," said the latter mockingly. "So sorry to disturb you. I was obliged to come back, for I have lost my purse. Did I leave it here?"

"How could you have left it here?" said the Contessa coldly, as she quivered beneath her friend's gaze.

"I thought, love, that perhaps I had drawn it out with my handkerchief. It is so tiresome to lose one's purse; is it not, Mr Dale?"

"Worse, madam, not to have one to lose," said Armstrong, who was placing his brushes in their case.

"How droll you are," said Lady Grayson; "as if anybody except a beggar could be without a purse. But surely you have not done

painting the portrait?"

"Yes, Lady Grayson, I have done painting the portrait," replied Dale gravely.

"And all through my interruption. Oh, my dearest Valentina, how could I be so indiscreet as to come and interrupt your charming sitting."

"Would it be a sin to strangle this mocking wretch, who is triumphing over her shame and my disgrace?" thought Dale.

The Contessa was silent, and the situation growing maddening, when Lady Grayson suddenly exclaimed – "Why, there! I told the dear Conte that I felt sure I had dropped it here; and when I am influenced about anything happening, as I was in this case, I am pretty sure to be right."

She said this meaningly, with a smile at the other actors in the scene, and then took a few steps toward the couch she had occupied, and, picking from it the missing purse, held it up in triumph, and with her eyes sparkling with malicious glee.

"I am so glad," she cried; "I was so sure. Goodbye once more, dearest Valentina. Good morning, Mr Dale. Oh, you fortunate man," she continued, gazing at the canvas. "To paint like that. Ah, well, perhaps it may be my turn next," she added, with a mocking glance at the Contessa. "What, you going too, Mr Dale? Then I did spoil the sitting."

"No, madam," said Armstrong coldly; "your arrival was most opportune. Lady Dellatoria, my man shall come for the canvas."

Valentina darted a wildly reproachful look at him, which he

met for a moment, flushed, and turned from with a shiver.

"May I see you to your carriage, Lady Grayson?" he said.

"Oh, thank you, Mr Dale: if you would. Goodbye, dearest," she cried, with a triumphant mocking look at the fierce, beautiful face. "You must let me drop you at your studio, Mr Dale," she continued; and as the door closed behind them, Valentina started from her chair to press her hands to her temples, uttering a low, piteous moan.

"Cast off! and for her!" she cried wildly. "She has always been trying to lure him from me – him – my husband; and she could not rest in her suspicions without coming back."

She ran to the window to stand unseen, gazing down, and to her agony she saw Dale step into the carriage, take his seat beside Lady Grayson, and be carried off.

Valentina turned from the window with her face convulsed, but it grew smooth and beautiful, and there was a dreamy look in her eyes, and a smile upon her parted, humid lips.

"I am mad," she said to herself, with a mocking laugh. "He care for her! Absurd! He loves me! In his brave fight he struggled hard, but – he loves me. His arms did hold me to his breast; his lips did press mine. And she? – poor weak fool, with her transparent trick, to return and play the spy. Let her know, and have a hold upon me, and defy me about Cesare. She will threaten me some day if I revile her. Poor fool! I am the stronger – stronger than ever now. I could defy the world, for, in spite of his cold looks, his anger against himself – he loves me."

She raised her eyes and stood looking straight before her for some moments, and then started, but recovered herself and smiled as she gazed at the figure before her in one of the mirror-filled panels of the room.

For she saw reflected there a face and figure that she felt no man could resist, and the smile upon her face grew brighter, the dreamy look intensified, as she murmured —

"At last! After these long, barren, weary years, love, the desire of a woman's life;" and closing her eyes, she slowly extended her arms as, in a whisper soft as the breath of eve, she murmured, "At last! Come back to me, my love – my life – my god."

Chapter Six.
What Pacey Saw in the Clouds

Three weeks soon pass in busy London, but to Armstrong Dale the twenty-one days which ensued after the scene at Portland Place were like months of misery.

Stern in his resolve to avoid all further entanglement, and to keep faith to her whom in his heart of hearts he loved, he shut himself up in his studio, and made a desperate attack upon his great mythological picture, a broad high canvas, at which Keren-Happuch stared open-mouthed, when she went into the studio every morning "to do Mr Dale up" – a feat which consisted in brushing the fluff about from one corner to another, and resulted in a good deal of sniffing, and the lodging of more dust upon casts, ledges, furniture, and above all, upon Keren-Happuch's by no means classical features, where it adhered, consequent upon a certain labour-and-exercise-produced moisture which exuded from the maiden's skin.

"I can't help looking smudgy," she used to say; and directly after, "Comin', mum," for her name was shouted in an acid voice by Mrs Dunster, the elderly lady who let the studio and rooms in Fitzroy Square to any artist who would take them for a time.

But the poor little slavey was Keren-Happuch to that lady alone. To Armstrong she was always Miranda, on account of her

friend, the dirty-white cat of the kitchen; to his artist friends such names as seemed good to them, and suited to their bizarre thoughts.

To Armstrong one morning came Keren-Happuch, as he was painting out his previous day's work upon his great picture, and she stood staring with her mouth open.

"Oh, Mr Dale, sir, what a shame! What would Miss Montmorency say?"

"What about, Miranda?"

"You a-smudging out her beautiful figure as you took such pains to paint. Why, she was a-talking to me 'bout it, sir, when she was a-goin' yesterday, and said she was goin' to be Queen June-ho at the 'cademy."

"But she will not be, Miranda," said Armstrong sadly; "it was execrable. Ah, my little lass, what a pity it is that you could not stand for the figure."

"Me, sir! Oh, my!" cried the girl, giggling. "Why, I'm a perfect sight. And, oh! – I couldn't, you know. I mustn't stop, sir. I on'y come to tell you I was opening the front top winder, and see your funny friend, Mr Pacey, go into Smithson's. He always do before he comes here."

"Keren-Happuch!" came faintly from below.

"Comin', mum," cried the girl, and she dashed out of the studio.

"Poor, patient little drudge!" said Armstrong, half aloud. "Well washed, neatly clothed, spoken to kindly, and not worked

to death, what a good faithful little lassie she would be for a house. I wish Cornel could see her, and see her with my eyes."

He turned sharply, for there was a step – a heavy step – on the stair, and the artist's sad face brightened.

"Good little prophetess too. Here's old Joe at last. Where's the incense-box?"

He took a tobacco-jar from a cupboard and placed it upon the nearest table, just as the door opened and a big, heavy, rough, grey-haired man entered, nodded, and, placing his soft felt hat upon his heavy stick, dropped into an easy-chair.

"Welcome, little stranger!" cried Armstrong merrily. "Why tarried the wheels of your chariot so long?"

There was no answer, but the visitor fixed his deeply set piercing eyes upon his brother artist.

"Was there a smoke somewhere last night, old lad, and the whisky of an evil brew?"

"No!" said the visitor shortly.

"Why, Joe, old lad, what's the matter? Coin run out?"

"No!"

"But there is something, old fellow," said Armstrong. "Can I help you?" And, passing his brush into the hand which held his palette, he grasped the other by the shoulder.

"Don't touch me," cried the visitor angrily, and he struck Armstrong's hand aside.

There was a pause, and then the latter said gravely —

"Joe, old fellow, I don't want to pry into your affairs, but if

I can counsel or help you, don't shrink from asking. Can I do anything?"

"Yes – much."

"Hah! that's better," cried Armstrong, as if relieved. "What's the good of an Orestes, if P. does not come to him when he is in a hole! But you are upset. There's no hurry. Fill your pipe, and give me a few words about my confounded picture while you calm down. Joe, old man, it's mythological, and it's going to turn out a myth. Isn't there a woman in London who could sit for my Juno?"

"Damn all women!" cried the visitor, in a deep hoarse tone.

"Well, that's rather too large an order, old fellow. Come, fill your pipe. Now, let's have it. What's wrong – landlady?"

The eyes of the man to whom he had been attracted from his first arrival in London, the big, large-hearted, unsuccessful artist, who yet possessed more ability than any one he knew, and whose advice was eagerly sought by a large circle of rising painters, were fixed upon him so intently that the colour rose in Armstrong Dale's cheeks, and, in spite of his self-control, the younger man looked conscious.

"Then it's all true," said Pacey bitterly.

"What's all true?" cried Dale.

"Armstrong, lad, I passed a bitter night, and I thought I would come on."

The young artist was silent, but his brow knit, and there was a twitching about the corner of his eyes.

"I sat smoking hard – ounces of strong tobacco; and in the

clouds I saw a frank, good-looking young fellow, engaged to as sweet and pure a woman as ever breathed, coming up to this hell or heaven, London, whichever one makes of it, and going wrong. Ulysses among the Sirens, lad; and they sang too sweetly for him – that is, one did. The temptation was terribly strong, and he went under."

Armstrong's brow was dark as night now, and he drew his breath hard.

"Do you know what that meant, Armstrong? You are silent. I'll tell you. It meant breaking the heart of a true woman, and the wrecking of a man. He had ability – as a painter – and he could have made a name, but as soon as he woke from his mad dream, all was over. The zest had gone out of life. You know the song, lad – 'A kiss too long – and life is never the same again.'"

"I made you my friend, Joe Pacey," said Armstrong huskily, "but by what right do you dare to come preaching your parables here?"

"Parable, man? It is the truth. Eight? I have a right to tell you what wrecked my life – the story of twenty years ago."

"Joe!"

There was a gripping of hands.

"Ah! That's better. I tell you because history will repeat itself. Armstrong, lad, you have often talked to me of the one who is waiting and watching across the seas. Look at me – the wreck I am. For God's sake – for hers – your own, don't follow in my steps."

Neither spoke for a few minutes, and then with his voice changed —

"I can't humbug, Joe," said Armstrong. "Of course I understand you. You mean about – my commission."

"Yes, and I did warn you, lad. It is the talk of every set I've been into lately. There is nothing against her, but her position with that miserable hound, Dellatoria, is well-known. He insults her with his mistresses time after time. Her beauty renders her open to scandal, and they say what I feared is true."

"What? Speak out."

"That she is madly taken with our handsome young artist."

"They say that?"

"Yes, and I gave them the lie. Last night I had it, though more definitely. I was at the Van Hagues – all artistic London goes there, and a spiteful, vindictive woman contrived, by hints and innuendoes, as she knew I was your friend, to let me know the state of affairs."

"Lady Grayson?"

"The same."

"The Jezebel!"

"And worse, lad. But, Armstrong, my lad – I have come then too late?"

Pride and resentment kept Dale silent for a few moments, and then he said huskily —

"It is false."

"But it is the talk of London, my lad, and it means when it

comes to Dellatoria's ears – Bah! a miserable organ-grinder by rights – endless trouble. Perhaps a challenge. Brutes who have no right to name the word honour yell most about their own, as they call it."

"It is not true – or – there, I tell you it is not true."

"Not true?"

For answer Armstrong walked to the side of the studio, took a large canvas from where it stood face to the wall, and turned it to show the Contessa's face half painted.

"Good," said Pacey involuntarily, "but – "

"Don't ask me any more, Joe," said Dale. "Be satisfied that history is not going to repeat itself. I have declined to go on with the commission."

"Armstrong, lad," cried Pacey, springing from his seat, and clapping his hands on the young man's shoulders to look him intently in the eyes. "Bah!" he literally roared, "and I spoiled my night's rest, and – Here: got any whisky, old man? 'Bacco? Oh, here we are;" and he dragged a large black briar-root, well burned, from his breast and began to fill it. Then, taking a common box of matches from his pocket – a box he had bought an hour before from a beggar in the street, he threw himself back in the big chair, lifted one leg, and gave the match a sharp rub on his trousers, lit up, sending forth volumes of cloud, and in an entirely different tone of voice, said quite blusteringly —

"Now then, about that goddess canvas; let's have a smell at it. Hah! yes, you want a Juno – a living, breathing divinity, all

beauty, scorn, passion, hatred. No, my lad, there are plenty of flesh subjects who would do as well as one of Titian's, and you could beat an Etty into fits; but there isn't a model in London who could sit for the divine face you want. Your only chance is to evolve it from your mind as you paint another head."

"Yes; perhaps you are right," said Dale dreamily. "Sure I am. There, go in and win, my lad. You'll do it. – Hah! that's good whisky. – My dear old fellow, I might have known. I ought to have trusted you."

"Don't say any more about it."

"But I must, to ease my mind. I ought to have known that my young Samson would not yield to any Delilah, and be shorn of his manly locks. – Yes, that's capital whisky. I haven't had a drop since yesterday afternoon. A toast: 'Confound the wrong woman.' Hang them," he continued after a long draught, "they're always coming to you with rosy apples in their hands or cheeks, and saying, 'Have a bite,' You don't want to paint portraits. You can paint angels from clay to bring you cash and fame. Aha, my goddess of beauty and brightness, I salute thee, Bella Donna, in Hippocrene!"

"Oh, do adone, Mr Pacey," said the lady addressed to wit, Keren-Happuch. "I never do know what you mean, I declare," – (sniff) – "I wouldn't come into the studio when you're here if I wasn't obliged. Please, Mr Dale, sir, here's that French Mossoo gentleman. He says, his compliments, and are you too busy to see him?"

"No, Hebe the fair, he is not," cried Pacey. "Tell him there is a symposium on the way, and he is to ascend."

"A which, sir? Sym – sym – "

"Sym – whisky, Bella Donna."

The girl glanced at Dale, who nodded his head, and she hurried out. The door opened the next minute to admit a slight little man, most carefully dressed, and whose keen, refined features, essentially French, were full of animation.

"Ah, you smoke, and are at rest," he said. "Then I am welcome. Dear boys, both of you. And the picture?"

He stood, cigarette in teeth, gazing at the large canvas for a few moments.

"Excellent! So good!" he cried. "Ah, Dale, my friend, you would be great, but you do so paint backwards."

"Eh?" cried Pacey.

"I mean, my faith, he was much more in advance a month ago. There was a goddess here. Where is she now?"

"Behind the clouds," said Pacey, forming one of a goodly size; and the others helped in a more modest way, as an animated conversation ensued upon art, Pacey giving his opinions loudly, and with the decision of a judge, while the young Frenchman listened to his criticism, much of it being directed at a flower-painting he had in progress.

The debate was at its height, when the little maid again appeared with a note in her hand.

"Aha!" cried Pacey, who was in the highest spirits – "maid of

honour to the duchess – the flower of her sex again. Hah! how sweet the perfume of her presence wafted to my sense of smell."

"Oh, do adone, please, Mr Pacey, sir. You're always making game of me. I'll tell missus you call her the duchess – see if I don't. It ain't me as smells: it's this here letter, quite strong. Please, Mr Dale, sir, it was left by that lady in her carriage."

"Keren-Happuch!" came from below stairs as the girl handed Dale the note; and his countenance changed as he involuntarily turned his eyes to his friend.

"Keren-Happuch!" came again.

"Comin', mum," shouted the girl, thrusting her head for a moment through the ajar door, and turning back again.

"Said there wasn't no answer, sir."

"Keren-Happuch!"

"A call from the Duchess of Fitzroy Square," said Pacey merrily.

"No, sir, it was that Hightalian lady, her as is painted there," said the girl innocently, and pointing to the canvas leaning against the wall, as she ran out.

"Confound her!" roared Pacey, springing to his feet, and turning upon his friend, with his eyes flashing beneath his shaggy brows; "is there no such thing as truth in this cursed world?"

"What do you mean?" cried Dale hotly, as he crushed the scented note in his hand.

"Samson and Delilah," said Pacey, with savage mockery in his tones. "Here, Leronde, lad," he continued, taking up his glass, "a

toast for you – Vive la gallantry. Bah!"

He lifted the glass high above his head, but did not drink. He gave Armstrong a fierce, contemptuous look, and dashed the glass into the grate, where it was shivered to atoms.

Chapter Seven.
The Scented Note

Leronde stood for a moment watching his friends excitedly; and then, as Pacey moved towards the door, he sprang before it.

"No, no!" he cried; "you two shall not quarrel. I will not see it. You, my two artist friends who took pity on me when I fly – I, a communard – for my life from Paris. You, Pacie, who say I am brother of the crayon, and help me to sell to the dealaire; you, Dale, dear friend, who say, 'Come, ole boy, and here is papaire and tobacco for cigarette,' and at times the dinner and the bock of bière, and sometimes wine – you shake hands, both of you. I, Alexis Leronde, say you muss."

"Silence!" roared Pacey. "Whoever heard of good coming of French mediation?"

"Be quiet, Leronde," cried Armstrong firmly. "Joe, old fellow, let me – a word – explain."

"Explain?" growled Pacey, as the young Parisian shrugged his shoulders and stood aside to begin rolling up a cigarette with his thin deft fingers.

"Stop, Joe!" cried Armstrong, "you shall not go. The letter is some request about the picture – for another artist to finish it. Here, read it, and satisfy yourself."

He tore open the scented missive, glanced at it, and was about

to hand it over to his friend; but a few words caught his eye, and he crushed the paper in his hand, to stand flushed and frowning before his friend.

"All right: I see," said the latter, with a bitter, contemptuous laugh. "We're a paltry, weak lot, we men. Poor little daughter of the stars and stripes across the herring-pond! I'm sorry, for I did think I could believe your word."

"Dear boys – ole men!" cried Leronde, advancing once more to play mediator.

"Shut up!" roared Pacey, so fiercely that the young Frenchman frowned, folded his arms across his chest, and puffed out a cloud of smoke in defiance.

"Joe, I swear – "

"Thank you," said Pacey ironically. "I can do enough of that as I go home;" and, swinging open the door, he strode out and went downstairs, whistling loudly the last popular music-hall air.

"Aha! he flies," cried Leronde, biting through his cigarette, the lighted end falling to the floor, while he ground up the other between his teeth. "I go down. He insult me – he insult you, my dear friend. I pull his nose on ze door mat, and say damn."

"Be quiet, lad!" cried Armstrong fiercely. "It is nothing to do with you. It is my affair."

"Yes, I understand, dear ole man," said Leronde, placing his fingers to his lips, and nodding his head a great deal, while Armstrong stood dreamy and thoughtful, frowning, as if undecided what to do. "I know I am French – man of the whole

world, my friend. I love the big Pacie. So good, so noble, but he is not young and handsome. The lady, she prefaire my other good friend. What marvel? And the good Pacie is jealous."

"No, no; you do not understand."

"But, yes. Cherchez la femme! It is so always. They make all the mischief in the great world, but we love them always the same."

"I tell you that you do not understand," cried Armstrong angrily.

"Well, no; but enough, my friend. Ah, there is so much in a lettaire that is perfumed. I do not like it; you two are such good friends – my best friends; you, the American, he, the big honest Jean Bull. I do not like you to fight, but there, what is it? – a meeting for the honour in Hyde Park, a few minutes wiz the small sword, a scratch, and then you embrace, and we go to the déjeûner better friends than before. You are silent. I will make another cigarette."

"I was thinking," said Dale slowly.

"What – you fear to ask me to be your second? Be of good courage, my friend. I will bear your cartel of defiance, and ask him who is his friend."

"Bah!" ejaculated Dale, so roughly that Leronde frowned. "There, don't take any notice of me, old fellow," he cried. "Sit down and smoke. You will excuse me."

Leronde bowed, and Armstrong hurried into his inner room, where he smoothed out the note, and read half aloud and in a

disconnected way: —

"*How can you stay away – those long weary weeks – my unhappy state – force me to write humbly – appealingly – my wretched thoughts – Lady Grayson – her double looks of triumph over me – will not believe it of you – could not be so base for such a heartless woman as that – heartbroken – my first and only love – won from me my shameless avowal – not shameless – a love as true as ever given – for you so good and noble. In despair – no rest but in the grave – forgive your coldness. Come back to me or I shall die – die now when hope, love, and joy are before me. You must – you shall – I pray by all that is true and manly in your nature – or in my mad recklessness and despair I shall cast consequences to the winds and come to you*."

Dale crushed up the letter once again, and as he stood frowning and thoughtful, he struck a match, lit the paper, and held it in his hand till it had completely burned out, scorching his hand the while. Then, going to the window, he blew the tinder out and saw it fall.

"The ashes of a dead love," he muttered; and then quickly, "No, it was not love. The mad fancy of the moment. There, it is all over. Poor woman! if all she says is honest truth, she must fight it down, and forgive me if I have been to blame. Yes; some day I can tell her. She will not forgive me, for there is nothing to forgive. Poor little woman! Ah, if the one who loves us could see and know all – the life, the thoughts of the wisest and best man who ever breathed! Nature, you are a hard mistress. Well,

that is over; but poor old Joe! He will find out the truth, though, and ask my pardon. Everything comes to the man who waits."

He crossed to a desk lying on a table by his bed, opened it, took out a photograph, and gazed at it for a few moments before replacing it with a sigh.

"You can be at rest, little one. Surely I am strong enough to keep my word."

Then he started and bit his lip, for a hot flush came to his temples as the last words in the letter he had burned rose before him: "*cast consequences to the winds and come to you*."

He shivered at the idea, as for the moment he saw the beautiful, passionate woman standing before him with her pleading eyes and outstretched hands.

"No!" he cried aloud, "she would not go to the man who treats her with silence and – "

"Did you call me, mon ami?" said a voice at the door.

"No, old fellow; I'm coming," cried Dale; and then to himself, as one who has mastered self. "That is all past and gone – in ashes to the winds. Now for work."

Chapter Eight.
In the Scales

"Nothing like hard work. I've conquered," said Dale to himself one morning, as he sat toiling away at his big picture, whose minor portions were standing out definitely round the principal figure, which had been painted in again and again, but always to be cleaned off in disgust, and was now merely sketched in charcoal.

He was waiting patiently for the model who was to attend to stand for that figure – the figure only – for Pacey's idea had taken hold, and, though he could not dwell upon it without a nervous feeling of dread, and asking himself whether it was not dangerous ground to take, he had determined, as he thought, to prove his strength, to endeavour to idealise the Contessa's features for his Juno. It was the very countenance he wished to produce, and if he could have caught her expression and fixed it upon canvas that day when the Conte entered, so evidently by preconcerted arrangement with Lady Grayson, the picture would have been perfect.

"It need not be like her," he argued; "it is the expression I want."

He knew that in very few hours he could produce that face with its scornful eyes, but he always put it off.

After a time, when the trouble there was not so fresh, it would be more easy – "and the power to paint it as I saw it then have grown faint," he added in despair, with the consequence that between the desire to paint a masterpiece, and the temptation to which he had been exposed, the face of Lady Dellatoria was always before him, sleeping and waking; though had he made a strong effort to cast out the recollection of those passionate, yearning eyes, the letters he received from time to time would have kept the memory fresh.

"At last!" he cried that morning, as steps were heard upon the stairs. "But she has not a light foot. I remember, though: they told me that she was a fine, majestic-looking woman."

There was a tap at the door.

"Come in."

Jupiter himself, in the person of Daniel Jaggs, thrust in his noble head.

"All right, Emperor, come in," said Dale, going on painting, giving touches to the background of his Olympian scene, with its group of glowing beauties, who were to be surpassed by the majesty of the principal figure still to come. "What is it? Don't want you to-day."

"No, sir. I knowed it was a lady day, but I've come with a message from one."

"Not from Lady – "

He ceased speaking, and his heart beat heavily. Jaggs had been to and from Portland Place with the canvas. Had she made him

her messenger?

"Yes, sir; from Lady Somers Town."

"What?" cried Dale, with a sigh of relief, though, to his agony, he felt that he longed to hear from the Contessa again.

"Lady Somers Town, sir; that's what Mr Pacey used to call her. Miss Vere Montesquieu of the Kaiserinn."

"Miss Vere Montesquieu!" said Dale contemptuously.

"Well, that's what she calls herself, sir. Did you say what was her real name, sir?"

"No, I didn't, but I thought it. Oh, by the way, Jaggs, I must have another sitting or two from you. We haven't quite caught the expression of Jupiter's lips."

"No, sir, we haven't, sir," said the model, looking at the canvas wistfully. "I know azactly what you want, but it's so hard to put it on."

"It is, Jaggs."

"You want him to be looking as he would if he was afraid of his missus, and she'd just found him out at one of his games."

"That's it."

"Well, sir, I'll try again. Perhaps I can manage it next time. I was a bit on the other night, and I did get it pretty warm when I went home. I'll try and feel like I did then, next time I'm a settin'."

"Yes, do," said Dale, who kept on with his work. "Ah, that's better. Well, you were going to say something. Is anything wrong?"

"Well, sir, I'm only a poor model, and it ain't for me to

presoom."

"Lookers-on see most of the game, Jaggs. What is it?"

"Well, sir, I was looking at Jupiter's corpus."

"Eh? See something out of drawing?"

"No, sir; your nattomy's all right, of course. Never see it wrong. You're splendid on 'ticulation, muskle, and flesh. But that's Sam Spraggs as sat for the body, wasn't it?"

"Yes; I've fitted it to your head."

"Well, sir, not to presoom, do you feel sure as it wouldn't be more god-like, more Jupitery as you may say, if you let me set, painted that out, and give the head the proper body. Be more nat'ral like, wouldn't it?"

"No. What's the matter with that? – the composition of a more muscular man with your head is, I think, excellent."

"But it ain't nat'ral like, sir. You see, Sam's too fat."

"Oh no, Jaggs. He only looks as if Hebe and Ganymede had poured him out good potions of a prime vintage, and as if the honey of Hybla often melted in his mouth."

"Well, sir, you knows best. Maria Budd says – "

"Who?"

"Miss Montesquieu, sir. She's old Budd's – the Somers Town greengrocer's – gal."

"Humph! Idiot! Well, what message has she sent? Not coming again?"

"No, sir. She's very sorry, sir; but she's got an engagement to early dinner at Brighton to-day, and won't only be back in time

to take her place in the chorus to-night."

"Confound the woman! I shall never get the figure done. Do you know of any one else, Jaggs?"

"No, sir; and I'm afraid that you won't after all be satisfied with her."

"All, well, you needn't wait. Seen Mr Pacey lately?"

"Yes, sir. Looks very ill, he do. Good morning, sir."

"Good morning."

"Beg pardon, sir; but my missus – "

"There, there, I don't want to hear a long string of your inventions, Jaggs. How much do you want?"

"Oh, thankye, sir. If you could manage to let me have five shillings on account. – Thankye, sir. You are a gentleman."

"The Emperor" departed, winking to himself as if he had something on his mind; and Dale threw down brushes and palette, sat back with his hands clasped behind his head, gazing at the blank place in his great canvas, till by slow degrees it was filled, and in all her majestic angry beauty Juno stood there, with her attendants shrinking and looking on, while she seemed to be flashing at her lord lightnings more terrible than those he held in his hand.

The face, the wondrous figure, in all its glow of mature womanhood, were there; and then the eyes seemed to turn upon Dale a look of love and appeal to him to think upon her piteous state, vowed to love and honour such a man as that.

Armstrong shuddered and wrenched his eyes away, wondering

at the power of his vivid imagination, which had conjured up before him the Contessa in all the pride of her womanly beauty; and strive how he might to think of her only in connection with his picture, as he felt that he could produce her exactly there, and make the group a triumph of his work, he knew that his thoughts were of another cast, and that, in spite of all, this woman had inspired him with a passion that enthralled his very soul.

He started up, for the maid entered with a letter, and he fancied that she seemed to read his thoughts, as he took it and threw it carelessly on the table.

He did not look at the address. There was the Conte's florid crest, face upward, and it lay there ready to be burned as soon as he left his seat, for the matches were over the fireless grate.

Keren-Happuch had reached the door.

"'Tain't scented up like some on 'em," she said to herself; and then she turned to look wistfully at the artist, whose eyes were fixed upon vacancy, for he was reading the letter in imagination. He knew every word of sorrowful reproach it would contain, for the letters were little varied. She would tell him of her solitary state, beg him to reconsider his decision, and ask him whether, in spite of the world and its laws, it was not a man's duty to take compassion upon the woman who loved him with all her heart. Yes: he could read it all.

"Must get away," he said to himself. "Why not go back home, and seek for safety behind the armour of her innocency? My poor darling, I want to be true to you, but I am sorely tempted now. It

cannot be love; only a vile, degrading passion from which I must flee, for I am – Heaven knows, how weak."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.