

CHARLOTTE M. BRAME

A FAIR MYSTERY: THE
STORY OF A COQUETTE

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CHAPTER I

A VOICE AND A FACE IN THE NIGHT

"Hush! For the love of mercy, hush, I cannot bear it!"

But that which called forth this protest was only the lisping prayer of a little child at its mother's knee.

Patty Brace lifted the white-robed figure to her lap, and rested the brown head on her bosom.

"Mark!" she said, in mild remonstrance, looking at her husband.

"I say I cannot bear it. You have her pray, 'God bless my home.' It is too much."

"But why not? On this wild, stormy night, when other little ones may be out in the dashing rain and moaning wind, is it not right to pray, 'God bless our home?'"

"But how long will we have a home, Patty? Think of to-morrow! oh, Heaven help me to-morrow! Ruined, disgraced, going out from the home where I was born, and forced into exile. I cannot bear it. We shall never have a home again, and our child will grow up homeless!"

"Dear Mark, you cannot go out disgraced when you have done no wrong; and homeless you will not be, for home is where the heart is, and in any land we three will be together, and Heaven over all."

"I cannot feel as you do, Patty. I am not gentle and good as you. I blame myself that by going security for that smooth-tongued rascal, whom may a curse – "

"Hush!" said Patty, with sudden authority. "Mark, you shall not curse friend, neighbor, nor enemy. It is not your nature; it is wrong. If you curse any one how can you look to have prayer answered?"

"Prayer!" said Mark, bitterly. "I begin not to believe in prayer, or goodness, or any such thing. You have prayed, and that innocent little victim on your bosom has prayed, in her baby way, and has Heaven heard? No! We lose our home, and I was born here!"

Heavier grew the round brown head of the two-year-old child on Patty's breast, the little tanned hands fell apart with a sleepy grace, and the plump, sunburnt face took the moist flush of childhood's deep rest.

Patty looked at her husband. He leaned against the wooden mantel-shelf, the ruddy light of the fire leaped across his sorrowful face, and the wife saw his bronzed cheek wet, with not unmanly tears.

Beyond him, in the range of her vision, was the window looking toward the garden, and between the bushes of lilac and guelder-roses, Patty had a swift vision of a tall woman, robed in black, a thin white face, looking eagerly into the cheerful farm-kitchen.

She leaped to her feet. But the vision had faded; only the wind swept the wet lilac boughs against the pane, only the guelder-roses looked like tall, dark, draped forms in the stormy night.

"What is it?" said Mark, as she started.

"Nothing," said the wife; "little Mattie sleeps; I must carry her up to bed." She chided herself for her fancies.

"Nothing!" said Mark. "I have become nervous and womanish with my misery. Do you know, Patty, even now I keep looking for some one or something to come and save me."

"It is never too late," said Patty. "Heaven could save you now – save you even by so frail a thing as this baby child."

She passed to the upper room, and left Mark still in his misery hastily retracing his past, in gloomy thought. Patty returned and stood wistfully, her hand on his arm.

"Don't despond, Mark. We are young, strong, loving. We will give honest work for honest bread."

"It is not right for the innocent to perish with the guilty," cried Mark, vehemently; "for you and baby Mattie to perish with me."

"You are not perishing, and how have you been guilty."

"I seem to have been guilty, somehow, all along. My father left me this farm in fairly good order, the lease for my life and one after me. I could not rest content. I must improve the land, and improve the outbuildings, and improve the breed of my cattle and sheep, like a fool."

"No, like neither a knave nor a fool; like an enterprising farmer, wanting to improve his prospects and grow with the age. Did not the Duke of Downsbury say you were one of his best tenants, and that you were a pattern of good farming and industry?"

"And then," said Mark, intent on saying bitter things of himself, "I had a thousand pounds, my father's savings, and instead of leaving it where he placed it, at safe, low interest, I must let the men of the great new Bank of Downsbury persuade me to give all to them for big interest; and that bubble burst, the bank collapsed, swindled every one, and left me nothing."

"No blame to you, and you were left your good name. Are you not known, in all the country, as Honest Mark Brace?"

"I must be a scoundrel some way, Patty, to have such luck."

"Go on and tell your sins," said Patty. "You married a girl without money, Patty Leslie by name; you took care of her widowed mother till she died; and you were so foolish as to have a little girl-child, who can only eat and not earn."

"Heaven bless her and you!" said Mark. "Marrying the best wife in the world was about the only good deed I ever did – What do you start that way for again, Patty?"

"Hark! I heard such a strange noise – a pitiful wail."

"Not further off than my heart," said Mark. "I heard nothing. Once married, Patty, think how harvest after harvest has been poor, and seasons bad, so I could not lay up a penny."

"Not your fault – Mark, I *know* I hear a cry."

"No, no; my ears are keen; I hear nothing. It is the storm. Even the wind and rain are crying after the out-going of the Brace blood from the farm of Brackenside. Oh, Patty, why could I not let well enough alone, and not go and sign security for that villain, Amwell?"

"You did it out of pure heart-kindness. You thought him honest and in trouble; you helped him."

"And he left me with a hundred pounds to pay. He meant to do it all along. He robbed me; I robbed you; and to-morrow my goods must be seized. The crops will be bid off as they stand in the ground, and the farm tools and the house goods with them, for this terrible security. I have tried everywhere to get help. I spent all to-day seeking for some one to lend to me. But since Farmer Dobbs holds a mortgage on my live stock for the debt the burning of the big barn brought me into, I cannot get any help. The lease must be sold to finish paying up Dobbs. I will not run off in debt like that scoundrel Amwell, and, with what is left, we can emigrate. Patty, oh, how can I go! I love every stick, and every tree, and every sod. My mother and father lie here in yon churchyard, and I had hoped to lie by them."

Honest Mark Brace covered his face with his hands, and his strong, tall figure shook with the storm of his sorrow. He loved every foot of this land, where, boy and man, he had sung at his work and lived popular and respected. A fine, stalwart young Englishman, intensely a home-lover, it seemed to him impossible that other skies could be so blue, other breezes so jocund, other fields so green, as these that blessed his birthplace.

Patty, in mute sympathy, clasped her arms about his neck, friend in woe as in joy. She, too, loved and suffered. But hers was a cheerful, hopeful, pious soul: she could not despair as Mark did. Mark had been loudly accusing himself where he was guiltless; now, with the inconsistency of misery, he turned to declare his own uprightness and, by implication, the injustice of Heaven.

"Why has this come to me? Other worse men have happier fortune. Have I swindled men like the bankers, who carried off my all? Have I lied like Ned Amwell? Did I ever cheat in my men's wages? Have I sent the poor empty from my door? Have I failed to pay my tithes, or missed church on Sundays? Do I drink? Do I swear? Do I ever go to sleep in church? Why, then, have I such trouble?"

The wild minglings of crimes, errors, and peccadilloes might have made a disinterested listener laugh. It did not make Patty laugh, nor did it call forth an answer. She turned an intent ear to the outer world and said, uneasily:

"Mark, listen! Other souls are in pain. It is not the wind that I hear – not the dashing rain. I have heard sobs, and moans, and crying in the night – a child crying – like a little baby soul that has lost its way and can find neither earth nor heaven."

"Your fancies make me mad," cried Mark, angrily.

"My troubles are real, and so will yours be to-morrow – "

Shrill and clear the cry quivered on the air. He, too, heard it.

"It is little Mattie," he cried. "Run to her."

And he followed Patty, fleet-footed, up the stairs.

But little rosy Mattie slept tranquilly, and the two came slowly down. Patty opened the kitchen window, and the swirling rain drenched her dark hair as she leaned into the darkness.

"Come in; there will be nights enough to face storms," said Mark, hardly. "We are only both fanciful; or, as my old grannie used to tell me, since we are flitting from the hearth where we have kept warm so long, the souls of my ancestors are mourning for my sorrow. Poor old grannie! little she knew how I should leave the old roof-tree."

Patty sprang to her feet.

"Mark, come with me! It is no fancy – no spirit. It is real; some human being out in this tempest. Let us search everywhere, and give the homeless a shelter this last night that we have a home."

She ran from the room, and Mark followed her into the stone-flagged entry. Her vehemence carried him away. He reached over her shoulder, and aided her trembling hands to undo the door-bolt.

Starless the night; no balm on the summer air; the raw chill of autumn brooding under the beating rain; a murky heaven over land and sea; and once again that wild, only half-human wail, coming up now from their very feet!

Patty sprang into the dark, vine-draped porch; the red light from the kitchen crept fitfully to the threshold, and close beside the door-sill, lay a bundle in the poor shelter of the latticed porch.

From that bundle came, shrill and piteous, that miserable cry.

CHAPTER II

A FAIRY CHANGELING

"Mark! Mark! it is a child, a poor forsaken baby," said Patty, stooping down and gathering into her womanly arms the weeping waif-fragment of the seething sea of humanity so strangely drifted to her door. "A child! Dear Heaven! such a very little child!"

She hurried into the kitchen and laid the bundle on the table in the circle of lamplight, and with careful, eager fingers, began to loosen the wrappings.

"A child!" said Mark, amazed and dull – "a child!"

Then with sudden anger he cried out:

"A child, to the homeless! A child to us, who will not be able to care for our own – a child for forced exiles! Why did they not carry it to the poor-house? There, at least, it might have stayed!"

"Hush, dear!" said Patty. "God only asks of us duty for to-day. To-night we have a home, and can take the stranger in. God will take care of it to-morrow."

"Not that I grudge the poor little wretch," said Mark, looking over his wife's shoulder.

Patty unpinned the tartan shawl, and snugly wrapped within lay a little babe; a delicate veil covered the small face within the lace and satin cap, and Patty lifted in motherly hands one of the most singularly lovely infants that sun had ever looked upon. Dimpled, snow-white, with exquisitely molded features, and neck and hands; soft rings of golden, silken hair, a faint perfume of costly odors breathing from its garments.

Patty's tender heart melted at the divine innocence, loveliness, helplessness of the little one, and raising the rosebud face to her own, she kissed it softly again and again.

This motion caused the white cashmere cloak to fall back, and Mark gave a cry at some dark thing broadly pinned against the quilted satin lining.

As his wife kissed the babe, murmuring: "Little, lovely angel! Who sent you? Who could abandon you?" Mark unpinned this object and held it near the light. Then he gave such a cry that his wife, clasping the babe closer, turned to him in alarm. In his shaking hand he held a packet of bank-notes. He cried out:

"Patty! Patty! Did God send this? See! Just the amount of my debt! Patty! Patty! am I safe? Is this ours?"

"How much is there?" she demanded, breathlessly.

"Twenty fives! A hundred pounds!"

"Mark, just what we owe?"

"Just that. Oh, Patty, we are saved!"

He staggered to a seat, white and weak, and then, first, Patty realized what his anguish of soul had been. The strong young farmer shook like a reed; drops of perspiration rolled over his face.

"But is it ours?" demanded Patty, sitting down also, and beginning to unfasten the baby's cap and cloak.

"See if there is anything more – any message – any word – quick – oh, Patty, Patty. I am weak!"

Patty rose up, stroked his cheek, kissed him, said: "Courage, Mark! Heaven has helped us!" and then she set to searching the child.

On the lace bosom of the little dress was sewed a letter. She unfastened it and held it to her husband.

"You read it, Mark. I am so frightened, my eyes are dim. See, it is to us; it says on the outside – 'To Mark and Patty Brace.'"

Mark restrained himself, and as Patty softly rocked the child to and fro on her breast, he read aloud:

"To you a most sorrowful mother sends this little child. You have never seen that mother, probably you never will; but she has heard of you – of honest Mark Brace and Patty Brace, his kind, good wife. Oh, be tender to this little child, deprived of father and of mother. Be patient with it; think how its mother's heart ached at parting: think of your own little child. Let this baby be yours, and your child's sister. It is lovely and white as an angel. Will you try to keep its soul white and pure, and bring it up simply, like your own, just to be good? There is a little mark on the right shoulder – a little red leaf. But I may never be able to claim my own again. Then let it be yours, and rear it, as you will answer for it to God. With the child the mother sends you a hundred pounds, and every year will send you the same. This is a child of noble blood and honest birth. Its mother prays you, for the sake of mercy and pity, to make no effort to find her. Never show this letter, never try to learn the child's surname; her Christian name is Doris. Will you say you have taken charge of the child for a lady who has gone abroad? Say only that, and night and day a heart's best prayers will go up for you, who are good to little Doris."

Mark and Patty looked at each other in silence.

"Oh, Mark! you doubted – doubted God and prayer!"

"Did I? May God pardon me – I was wild with misery!"

"Whose child can this be?" said Patty.

"Patty," said Mark, "if we use this money, as we must and shall, it is part of a bargain, you know – a bargain to keep the child tenderly and faithfully, and make no effort to discover who sends it. We must keep faith."

"It will be very easy to be loving and tender to such a lovely baby," said Patty. "Look, did you ever see anything so wonderful, so beautiful, in all your life?"

"Fair as an angel," said Mark, gently kissing the wee white hand. "God bless the baby, the little angel baby that saved us."

"A hundred a year! This is very much money, just for keeping one little child," said Patty.

"We must pay ourselves what is fair, and keep the rest to educate the child, or make her dower."

"And we must keep her soul white and fair. The letter says, we are to train her like our own, Mark."

"Only, Patty, it is a child of noble blood, and if, some day, the mother claims her, she must not be ashamed of the child, Patty."

"Oh, Mark!" cried Patty, in terror, "suppose the mother is in all this storm? Go, Mark – take a light and look for her. Do go!"

"She cannot possibly be lingering here, Patty."

"Oh, Mark, she is no doubt waiting to see what we will do. I am sure I saw her looking in the window before I took Mattie to bed."

Mark took a lantern from its hook by the chimney-side, and went out into the storm. There was no trace of any one. The gate was fastened, no foot-print marked the gravel walk; nothing but sighing wind and plashing rain filled the darkness. He returned to the house.

"There is no one. Whoever was here has done the errand and gone. I cannot believe it yet, Patty. My debt is paid! my home is saved! I shall live where my fathers lived, and die where they died; and all by means of *this little child*. I feel as if I could never love it enough!"

Patty looked at the babe on her arm. She cried:

"How could a mother give up such a lovely creature! I would rather die! Oh, poor mother! Mark, a heart has broken to-night in this storm."

"I wonder if the poor soul was married?" said Mark.

"She must have been! Look at the letter, Mark. It is the letter of a good woman. She wants the child's soul kept white and pure. A wicked woman would think of the body, but not of the soul!"

The child opened its eyes – eyes like spring violets, softly blue. It stirred uneasily. Patty went for milk to feed it.

"There are no clothes with it, Mark. Whoever knew us to write to us, knew about little Mattie, and expected us to let this baby wear her clothes, and be reared just like our own."

She went for a night-dress that had been worn by Mattie a year before, and taking off the infant's rich clothes, put on instead the simple little gown. About the child's neck was a gold chain, with a locket; in the locket was a tress of curly golden hair, and one of dark shining brown.

"Mark," said Patty, "let us put the letter and the locket and these rich clothes away. Some day they may be needed to show whose child this is."

Mark folded the articles together and locked them in a strong box, which for years had held the especial valuables of the owners of Brackenside Farm. Never before had such singular treasures been placed among those simple rustic relics.

"Now," said Patty. "I shall take this baby up and put her in Mattie's trundle bed; they are sisters now."

She carried the wee stranger up-stairs and laid it by her own little daughter. Mark held the light.

"There is a great difference between them," said Patty, as she looked at the two little ones in the same bed. "It is not only that one is two years and one is two months, but one looks like a child of the nobles, the other like a child of the people."

"The people are the bone and sinew of the land, and the heart, too," said Mark, sturdily. "I don't believe a mother of the people would give such a baby away in this fashion. You note my words, wife; it is *pride*, rank pride, that has cast this child out among strangers."

Patty sighed, still looking at the children. Little Doris, a jewel child, pearly skin, golden hair and brows, and a little red mouth like a thread of rubies; Mattie, brown, plump, sturdy, child of soil, wind, and sun.

"I like my own best," said Mark, bravely, "if she is not half so fair. Our Mattie has what will last all her life – a warm, true, honest little heart in her strong little body."

"Of course you will like our own best," said Patty half offended. "It would be a fine story if the coming of this little beauty could crowd our girl out of the first place in our hearts."

"I wonder if they will love each other," said Mark.

"Of course they will, as they are to be sisters," said Patty, with edifying faith in humanity.

"And I wonder if she will love us?"

"Surely, since we are to be her parents, and will be always kind and faithful to her."

"I hope so," said Mark, shaking his head; "but there are some things, Patty, that do not mix well – as, say, oil and water – and belike blood will tell, and this little lady will not take to our homely ways. Besides, we shall always be considering how much is due her for that hundred pounds a year; and I, for one, will always be remembering how she came like a little angel to save a home that is like my heart's blood to me."

Then they went down-stairs, leaving the dark child and the fair child sleeping together.

CHAPTER III

A DAUGHTER OF PATRICIANS

Mark and Patty Brace sat down again by their hearth-stone. They were too much excited to think of sleep. Mark made up the fire and trimmed the lamp, and ruddy glow and golden gleam seemed the joyful reflection of their strangely-brightened fortunes.

Honest Mark, who seldom thought of even locking his door when he went to bed, suddenly felt that thieves might break in to steal that blessed hundred pounds that saved him from ruin. He buttoned the notes up in his waistcoat, and longed for the day-dawn when he might pay his debt and be free.

Upon Patty's simple heart rested the shadow of a new care. It was to her upright spirit a terrible responsibility to rear a stranger's child. What disposition would this little one inherit?

Could she obey that unknown mother's behest and keep this soul white and pure? Suppose the child should be willful, full of faults, proud, hard to govern, in all points the opposite to her own simple, gentle, good little girl – would she be able by love and kindness to govern and mold her into goodness? And suppose the child grew day by day into her heart, until it seemed like her very own, and then that unknown mother came and took her away? Suppose, too, that after all her humble cares, when the mother came, she should be dissatisfied and complain of the rudeness of the child's rearing?

But Patty need not have feared that; she had herself the best of good breeding, that which comes from a generous, thoughtful, unselfish spirit.

Then she began to wonder who was the mother of this babe. She told over to herself all the ladies of the adjacent village of Brakebury; not one had a hundred pounds a year to spare. She thought of all the ladies she had met in the narrow limits of life, in which she had never been fifty miles from her home. There was not one whom it would not be the utmost absurdity to charge with the maternity of this charge.

"I give it up," said Patty aloud, with a sigh.

"Give what up?" asked Mark, starting from a reverie.

"Guessing who is the mother of this little Doris."

"So you should give it up," said honest Mark, stoutly. "A bargain is a bargain, Patty, and you know all that money is not to pay for one baby's milk, tendance, and bits of clothes; nor is it to buy our faith, for faith cannot be bought; but it is given us as pledge of a secret kept with that child's mother, and to use to defend that secret; and so we must. Questions, Patty, we must not ask nor answer; if curiosity is troublesome, we'll even bear it till it dies out naturally; we are paid for the trouble of bearing our neighbor's curiosity."

"That is true," said Patty; "we will make silence our rule."

So they sat by the fire, while the storm ceased, the winds fell, the rain-heavy grass and leaves lifted themselves, the east brightened with a new day, the birds broke forth into matin-song, and then a broad bar of sunshine fell over the kitchen floor, through the very window where the black-veiled figure had stood the night before.

"Mark," said Patty, "here is a new day."

"And a very happy day," said Mark. "I shall go pay my debt the first thing; and then, Heaven helping me, when this harvest is gathered in, I can settle with neighbor Dobbs and stand up a free man. After that, Patty, I'll starve before I beg, borrow, steal, or go security. In my eye, it's all one; it's robbing your own or your neighbors in any case."

How happy felt Mark Brace that morning, as, with springing step, and whistling like a mavis, loud and clear, he strode off to Brakebury to pay his debt. His sinewy hand trembled convulsively as he took his receipt.

"I'm as thankful as you are, Mark," said his creditor; "it would have gone to my heart to ruin you. I lay awake all night thinking of it; but I must have this money or be sold out myself, and my wife is ill in bed, and my old mother blind, and cleaving to this home she was born in as ivy cleaves to the wall."

"I know how it goes," said Mark; "I've felt it. And after this, I'll hold the Scripture rule, to owe no man anything but to love one another."

Mark felt his heart large enough to love all the world that morning, especially that golden-haired mystery who had brought him safety. He hurried home, longing to be at work again. He felt energy for everything. Never had there been such a fair day, never such a lovely home, never such beautiful fields, standing thick to the sickle. Heaven be praised, he was his own man again!

He met his laborers coming to the work. In answer to his questions, one said that, crossing a field after dark, he had met a tall woman, in black, veiled, carrying a bundle which, at the time, he fancied might be a child. Another, returning late from the Blue Boar, had passed a tall woman, in black, veiled, hurrying on, with empty arms swinging at her side, but heard her sob and moan as she went by.

This was all Mark Brace heard about that eventful night.

The neighbors, finding a golden-haired, dainty babe in Patty Brace's cradle, said, wisely:

"No doubt she was well paid." "Mark Brace had seemed flush of money of late." "It was well to have friends. The child very surely belonged to some great lady."

But whether its mother lived or was dead, or where she was, Patty never opened her lips to tell; and, after two months, gossip died away, and the baby at Brackenside Farm was an accepted fact.

One person asked questions with more show of authority, and to him Mark and Patty told part of the truth. This one person was the Rector of Brakebury. They told him that the child had been left at their door, with a letter and a sum of money. The letter said the child was legitimate and christened, and that the hundred pounds would come each year. The rector was so astonished at this story that he told it to his bishop when he dined with him.

"And what kind of a child is it?" asked the Bishop of Lansdown.

"The most marvelously beautiful creature; fairly angelic."

A few weeks later, in November, the bishop was dining with the Duke of Downsbury, and bethought himself to tell the tale, beginning:

"Does not the village of Brakebury belong entirely to your grace? and is not Mark Brace one of your tenant farmers?"

The bishop told the story, as he told every story, admirably.

"And they have no clew to the child's family," asked the duchess.

"Not the least. It was the most cleverly-managed thing I ever heard of in my life."

When the ladies returned to the drawing-room, Lady Estelle Hereford, the duke's only child, asked her mother:

"What was that story the bishop was telling?"

Lady Estelle was not nineteen. Her mother felt that this tale of a foundling was not a proper thing to pour into the ear of innocence.

"Really, my dear, I was shocked at the bishop's speaking of such a thing before you," said her Grace of Downsbury.

"Why, mamma, there may be nothing really wrong about it after all," said Lady Estelle, quietly, and the duchess privately thanked Heaven for her daughter's simplicity.

"There is always some wrong where there is concealment," said the duchess, with decision. "Honor does not shun the day. I prefer you do not talk of it, Estelle."

"But, dear mamma, I want to know. So little happens here in the country, I hoped it was something to interest me."

"No, my dear. Only a little child, left at Mark Brace's door – with some money – and I think that is all, my dear."

"And Mark Brace is going to keep the child, mamma?"

"So I understand. Very admirable, honest people, the Braces."

"It is just like a novel, mamma – nicer than a written one. I am sick of novels, as I am sick of everything. I would like to see that child, if it is so pretty, mamma."

"My dearest love! But Brackenside is fifteen miles off, and you could not go so far in this chill autumn weather. You know the doctor says you must get to Italy at once."

Lady Estelle leaned back as one completely bored and weary of life, and toyed with her fan and flowers. A beauty, an heiress, a duke's daughter, Lady Estelle had been for a year and a half the idol of the most fashionable circle in London. Proud, stately, cold, calm, with sudden gleams of tenderness and fire in her great violet eyes, she had been courted by some of the noblest men of England, and dismissed each with the same indifference. But the excitement of gay life, or a nervous shock received in traveling with her friend, Lady Agnes Delapain, in Switzerland, had stolen the wild-rose tint from her cheek and the elasticity from her graceful step, and baffled physicians ordered her to be taken to a warmer climate.

"I am sorry to lose you again, Lady Hereford," said the bishop, when the gentlemen joined the ladies in the drawing-room.

"Thank you. But I am rather glad to go. I may find in Italy something to amuse me, or wake my cold, calm soul to romance. Here, it seems to me, it is very dull. Only the little incident that you told to-day rises over the prosaic."

Lady Estelle, with a swift glance, assured herself that the duchess was at the most remote corner of the room.

"Ah, yes, that has a flavor of romance," said the bishop.

"And you say the child is healthy and pretty?"

"Both, I am told, to an unusual degree. It has the fatal gift of beauty."

"Why fatal?" asked Lady Estelle, with listless politeness.

"Not fatal to those born to rank, parents, and every care, but fatal to the poor, the unprotected, the unknown. I cannot imagine a more terrible gift to a friendless girl."

"I never thought of that," said Lady Estelle, and then her brief interest in the little child seemed to pass into the gentle indifference with which she regarded all the events of life.

For hours afterward Lady Estelle Hereford thought of the fair foundling that had been left at Brackenside Farm, and an uneasy feeling came over her as she reflected upon the bishop's words:

"The child possesses the fatal gift of beauty. I cannot imagine a more terrible gift to a friendless girl."

CHAPTER IV

THE MARBLE PSYCHE

Mark Brace was the tenant of the Duke of Downsbury, as his fathers before him had for many generations been the tenants of the duke's ancestors; yet no two lines of life seemed to run farther apart than those of the duke and the farmer. The duke respected and appreciated his tenant, and the tenant sturdily held loyal faith in his duke, as the noblest duke in England.

Yet, when Downsbury Castle was shut up, and all the family were abroad, seeking, year by year, health for the patrician daughter, that absence of the noble patron made no change in the current of life at the farm. Patty and Mark, when the duke came to their minds, hoped he would find for his only child the health he sought.

"How we should feel if our Mattie was delicate!" said Patty.

"What a pity it is," said Mark, "that the duke has no son. He has hoped and hoped, but now he knows he will be the last Duke of Downsbury."

"But Lady Estelle will get strong, perhaps, and marry, and he will have great comfort in his grandchildren," said Patty.

Meanwhile, at Brackenside Farm, little Doris grew every day in beauty and brightness. Never was such a winsome wee thing. Patty felt sure the saucy blue eyes would count many victims when Doris bloomed into girlhood's beauty. Patty was tender of her charge, as of some strange tropic bird that had fluttered into her homely nest. Mattie, with her frank simplicity, adored, waited on, yielded to, her "little sister." Honest Mark fell a complete slave to the fascinations of her beauty: he could not give a severe look, nor a reproving word: the twining of those dimpled arms around his neck brought instant submission to any whim of Miss Doris.

"Mark, Mark, you are like all the men – you think the world and all of a pretty face," said Patty, laughing.

"She's just a wonder, and I *can't* cross her," said Mark. "Not but I like Mattie best. You can rely on Mattie, somehow: she's worth twenty of this pretty Doris; but I *can* say 'no' to her, and I can try to train her up to be a good woman; but this little golden and pearly thing is just like a butterfly or a humming-bird to me, that's a fact. And then, Patty, we have had luck ever since she came; her hands brought us blessings."

Was it any wonder that it came about that when one child was to yield to the other, Mattie yielded to Doris? Mattie was older and stronger, and, truth to say, yielded more readily. If Patty called on a child to help her, to pick up toys, or a spool, or run to call Mark, was it not natural that Mattie, true, industrious child of the house, was the one called on, rather than the child who paid a hundred pounds a year? Was it strange that, thinking of that lady-mother, who might any day come to claim her own, Patty protected the snowy beauty of her nurse-child with nankeen mitts, and sleeves, and wide-brimmed hat? Did it seem less than honest, when one considered that yearly hundred pounds, and the gentle birth, to give the child finer shoes and daintier garments than little Mattie had?

Thus it came about that pride, and vanity, and indolence, and imperious self-will, were nursed insensibly in this child, whose soul Patty greatly desired to keep white and pure.

Mark Brace, too, felt the duties that the yearly payment pressed upon him. When Doris was three years and a half old, he said to his wife:

"We must make her mannerly, lest her mother should not be satisfied. When she gets big she must learn music and languages; now she must learn to sew and to read. We will let our Mattie learn what she does. She is our only child; we can afford it."

"And you mean me to teach them?" asked Patty.

"Oh, no, wife. You are too busy. We will send them every day to Brakebury, to the Misses Hopwell."

The Misses Hopwell were very genteel ladies; a surgeon's daughters, fallen into narrow circumstances, and keeping a little school, very genteel indeed, where they taught the making of samplers, the tables, reading, writing, the globes, etc., in prim, old-fashioned style.

To this "ladies' school" went Mattie and Doris every day, in a little wicker cart, drawn by a donkey, beside which ran a bare-foot farm-boy as their charioteer. And so time went on, and Doris had been four years at the farm, and news now spread abroad that Lady Estelle Hereford was better at last, and the duke was coming home.

Back to England finally, and the castle was filled with guests.

"I believe," said the duchess to the duke, "that the best thing for our daughter would be a happy marriage. She is over twenty-two. If we could rouse her up to take any interest in any one – all she lacks is animation. She is a Psyche before the coming of Cupid. I heard a gentleman in Italy calling her 'the marble Psyche,' speaking to a friend."

"I cannot understand it," said the duke. "During her first year in society she seemed animated and interested. I believe I even once spoke sharply to her for dancing twice with Captain Rodney Alnwick."

"You were quite right," said the duchess. "I spoke to her myself about him. He was entirely ineligible in every particular. But that all passed by. I thought she liked him a little, and I was glad when he exchanged his regiment and went off to India. A ne'er-do-well family, if an old one."

"We must bring together the best *partis*," said the duke, "and she may fancy some one. I long to see her settled, and to have grandchildren about me."

The guests came; and among them, calm, gracious, lovely, went Lady Estelle, untouched by adoration, a goddess moving in a nimbus of her own impregnable repose.

There was a dinner-party given for the Bishop of Lansdown, and, as usual, the bishop was full of stories, and told them well.

"I remember," said Lady Estelle, "before we went abroad, you told me some story that interested me – something about a child –"

"No doubt – about the child left at Mark Brace's door."

"Perhaps that might be it. I suppose it has been claimed."

"Not at all. Mark has it yet, and shows himself a most honest man in his care of it."

"Ah! In what way?"

"He not only adores the child, but he rears it delicately, and he means to educate her."

"Yes? And can one be educated at Brakebury?" said the soft, caressing, languid, scarcely interested voice.

"The child is very young yet. She goes in a little donkey-carriage to a really nice little school, kept by two ladies in reduced circumstances. When she gets too old for that school, Mark means to find a better one for her."

"Quite thoughtful of him; and the child is pretty?"

"More pretty than I can tell you. I am sure she is nobly born. I saw her after service the day I held confirmation."

"And her parents have never been found?" asked the duchess.

"No; and surely never will be. Great care has been taken to secure secrecy, and Mark feels bound to maintain it."

"I do not know but it may be quite as well," said her grace; and then dinner was announced.

CHAPTER V

"I WANT TO BE JUST LIKE YOU."

"My dear Estelle," said the Duchess of Downsbury, "I had hoped that with returning health you would have more earnestness and animation – be more like your early self."

"Possibly my early self was a great simpleton, mamma, and as for animation, most girls are overdoing that. Calmness, what you call indifference, may be my style. Don't you think people like it, mamma?"

"Your style is simply perfection," said her grace, "and there are two or three eligible men here just now who plainly think so; if you could only give them a little encouragement."

"I'm quite sick of eligible men, mamma. Is it ten or a dozen that I have 'declined with thanks?' I do not give them encouragement because they offer themselves soon enough without it. They don't interest me."

"And what will interest you?" asked the perplexed duchess.

Lady Estelle waved to and fro, in a meditative manner, her feather fan, as if considering what she *could* desire.

"I believe, now I think of it, it would interest me to go and see that child the Bishop of Lansdown told us of."

"My dear, that is not a nice story at all. It is suspicious."

"But the Braces are very proper people, and the child may be a very nice child. Brakebury village belongs to us, and I think I never was there. In fact, I have never been over half our estate, nor do I know any of our people."

"It is hardly necessary that you should, Estelle."

"Because I am not a son and heir, mamma, that is not my fault. I think I should rather have been a boy than a girl. As a boy I might have found something to interest me."

She was relapsing into indifference.

"We will go and see the child by all means," said the duchess, hastily. "To-morrow at eleven the carriage shall be ready, and your father will accompany us; he wishes to look over the estate a little."

At noon next day the ducal party were whirling over the broad, level Downsbury roads toward the home of honest Mark Brace, who, all unconscious of coming honor drove his team afield, while Patty guided her household affairs in their usual shining order.

It was Saturday and there was no school for the little ones. Mattie, in brown linen dress, was trotting about after her mother, helping here and there, active and useful. Little Beauty was making bouquets for herself; dressed in white, because white she *would* wear continually, and decorated with a sash and shoulder knots; and deprived of these ornaments she shrieked vigorously.

"And this," said Lady Estelle, as they drove up, "is Brackenside. I did not know it was so pretty. A fit place for a romance."

Honest Mark, abashed but happy, was anything but a hero of romance as he came up to greet his duke.

"Good-morning, Mr. Brace," said the duchess, frankly. "We have heard so much of your little foster-child, your fairy changeling, that we drove over to hear her story and to see her. We would like, also, to see your wife and your own little girl."

Mark Brace told the story in his matter-of-fact way, as he ushered the guests in the seldom-used parlor, the pride of Patty's soul.

"It is not half so romantic a story as I thought," yawned Lady Estelle; "but let us see the child since we are here."

Mark withdrew to summon his family.

"Goodness, mamma!" drawled Estelle, "what a stiff, hideous place; framed samplers and horsehair chairs. I should die of it. It is well we are not all born alike."

She lost herself in contemplation of a tall, eight-day clock.

Enter Mark, leading Mattie, and Mrs. Brace carrying the golden-haired mystery.

The child was beautiful as our dreams of angels. One small hand rested on Patty's shoulder, the other hung in a graceful curve; her large, clear, smiling eyes met her august guests, sweet and unabashed. The duchess raised her hands.

"She is perfectly angelic!"

"A true fairy," said the duke, taking the child from Patty, and standing her, as a thing to be admired, on the table.

"What is your name, my dear?"

"Doris," said the child, with a gracious little inclination of the head, extending her hand with ease, as if she had now found suitable acquaintances.

Fair, pearly fair, her cheeks and lips mantled with the dainty bloom of the wild rose; her hair like spun gold, flowing over her molded shoulders; her eyes large, shining as stars under dark brows and lashes, fearless, free, not a trace of rustic embarrassment; taper fingers, ears like small pink shells, true child of the nobles, set now among her peers.

"Estelle! do look at her!" cried her grace.

Estelle roused herself from contemplating the clock; she drew off her gloves, and the jewels gleamed on her hands, as she took the child's soft palm, and gently stroked her golden hair.

"You are like sunshine! Speak to me, little one."

"Will you tell me what to say?" asked Doris, promptly.

"What would you like best of anything – tell me?"

"I would like to be *just like you!* I want to be tall, to have rings, and your pretty dress, and ride in a carriage. I don't like brown clothes, and donkey wagons."

Her little lips curled with scorn, as she looked toward Patty.

"Oh," said Lady Estelle, shocked and remonstrant, "would you not like best of all to be good, *very good?*"

Doris broke into a frank, silvery laugh, showing dimples and pearly teeth.

"No," she said, with charming candor. "I like pretty things more than being good. Mattie can be good for us both. I am pretty. To be good is *so dull,*" she sighed with grace.

The duke laughed heartily, crying:

"Woman, true woman!"

"Not true woman at all," said the duchess, indignantly, "a very vain little girl."

"*All* little girls should be good," said Lady Estelle, sagely.

Doris laughed again incredulously, with all her heart.

Patty Brace stepped forward, looking distressed.

"Please do not believe her – she is very good, most of the time, unless she is crossed. She has that odd way of talking, but Mark and I try our best to teach her goodness, and so do the ladies at the school. She will be good, I am sure."

"Poor child," said the duchess, "I hope so."

"Promise me that you will be good," said Lady Estelle.

"Oh, I'll promise; but then, I don't keep promises. I don't think I shall be good. I shall laugh in school, and eat all the red apples, and run away to ride, when I am told not."

"Very small sins, overcome in time," laughed the duke.

"Perhaps you would like me to sing for you," said Doris, and with a voice sweet, strong, and clear, she broke into an old ballad, caught from Patty's lips, but vastly improved in her rendering. Her visitors were enchanted.

"You are a very clever little lady," said the duke.

"Oh, yes, I *am* a lady," said Doris, positively, "and when I am big I shall be *just like you*," she added to Estelle.

"We must go," said Lady Estelle Hereford, hastily. "Mamma, I feel quite warm and faint. I want outdoor air."

CHAPTER VI

FAITHLESS AND DEBONAIR

The duke placed a shining gold sovereign in the hand of Doris, and another in the hand of the quiet Mattie. The duchess looked at the honest, healthy, pleasant face of little Mattie, her frank brown eyes, and simple, rustic manners, and said, suddenly:

"I like this child best. She promises better; she fits her place; she will make the world better for her being in it."

"Thank your grace," said the gratified Patty. "I hope so. But little Doris is very good, too, only we cannot help spoiling her; she has such curious ways."

"Perhaps you wish to see me dance," said Doris, who had been placed on the floor. "Mattie can't dance; she won't learn the steps. I learn, and I make some steps; see me."

Full of grace as a true fairy, she caught one side of her little white gown, and with a glance of veiled coquetry at the duke, began to dance.

The duke clapped his hands in hearty admiration.

The duchess, looking at her daughter, saw that she was deadly pale.

"My dear; you are ill; you are over-fatigued!"

"No, no, I am quite well," said Lady Estelle, calm and proud; "I only want fresh air; the room is close."

They made hasty adieus, and Mark followed them to the carriage; Mattie stood, a good little figure, framed in the doorway. Doris danced like a butterfly over the turf near the gate.

Mark, overcome by his great honors, returned to the parlor, and refreshed himself with a draught of cowslip wine.

"Here's an uncommon bit of civility, Patty," he said. "A duke is a duke, say what one may! And what a duke ours is! And what a rare gracious lady is the duchess! But the Lady Estelle – oh, she is rather a proud piece, I fear. But God bless her, she's young, and doesn't know what life is yet. I hope she'll live to be a comfort and honor to them. Patty! Why don't you speak, my girl? You are pale as the dead. This visit has overdone you."

"Oh, no; I'm only —*thinking*— very hard, Mark."

Mark knew of old that when Patty set herself to hard thinking she might as well be let alone, so he went off to his work among the barley. But Patty worked that day with a burden on her heart.

"Well, well," said the duke, as they drove back, "I did not expect to see such a wonderfully beautiful child. Even lovelier than you were, Estelle, when you were little."

"Was I pretty?" asked the languid Estelle. "Yes, this child is pretty, and seems to be rather bright."

"The prettiest, brightest child I ever saw," said the duke.

"But such shocking ideas! I never saw so young a child with such bad tendencies!" cried the duchess. "It is easy enough to see how she will end."

"How will she end, mamma?" said Lady Estelle's slow, sweet voice.

"Very badly, my dear. She loves luxury; she is willful; she is scornful. She will hate the plain ways of those good people, and they will be able to do nothing with her. Gifts and beauty – dangerous dower for this young bird of paradise, in a wood-dove's nest."

"They are bringing up their own child well, I fancy."

"Yes, my dear; she *is* their own; they understand her; they are under no restraint concerning her."

"Honest Mark worships that little beauty," said the duke; "his eyes followed her every movement. She will govern him, and so much the worse for her. Your *protegee* will have tragedy as well as comedy in her life, Estelle."

"Why call her *my protegee*?" said Lady Estelle, indolently. "Surely I have sins and follies enough to answer for, papa, without assigning to my protection a child of whom my mother prophesies such evil."

"I wish we could do something for her," said the duke.

"What could we do? She is admirably well kept; she goes to school. If that good Patty Brace could not succeed with her, could we, where life and fashion would fill her head with nonsense? Perhaps I only speak so because I am constitutionally indolent."

"You are quite right. She has too much flattery and indulgence now," said the duchess.

"Sometimes I think that simple, unworldly life is best for everybody," said Lady Estelle. "I get tired of society and display, and fancy I should like to wear a print gown and lie all day under an apple-tree in bloom."

"But apple-trees don't bloom all the year, and the ground is often outrageously damp," laughed the duke.

"And these simple people cannot lie under trees all day, or much of the day; consider they must be making butter and cheese, and curing bacon," added her grace.

"So?" drawled Lady Estelle. "Then no doubt I had better stay as I am."

"My dear girl," said her father, seriously, "it is time to reconsider that determination to stay as you are. Not long ago you refused the Marquis of Bourne. You said he was too old and too plain. Now I have a proposal from the Earl of Seaton for your hand. He is neither old nor plain; he is in every way eligible."

"Now you are boring me again, papa," drawled Lady Estelle.

"But, my dear, I approve of the earl. I really wish to see you married. What shall I say to him?"

"Tell him to go away and not trouble me, papa."

"My daughter, he deserves a better answer. You are my only child; I shall not live forever; I must consider your future. Marriage will contribute to your happiness."

"I am happy enough, papa."

"Then think of our happiness – your mother's and mine. Oh, Estelle! when I saw that lovely little child, how I wished I had a grandchild like that!"

A ruddy blush dyed Lady Estelle's face, and she was silent.

"Daughter," said the duchess, "do not wait and refuse all offers from some romantic fancy about falling in love. That does not belong to your rank. Perhaps your nature is not to love any man very passionately: but you will care for your husband when you are married, and you will love your children."

Lady Estelle drooped her eyelids until the long lashes rested on her swiftly paling cheek.

"Mamma, I *hate* the word marriage!" she said, with far more than her usual vehemence.

"We will drop the question at present," said her mother, anxiously. "You are looking very pale and ill. This long ride has been too much. I wish I had not permitted it."

Yes, Lady Estelle was the worse for her visit. She looked paler each day, and often when alone she whispered:

"Faithless and debonair – faithless and fair; faithless and debonair!"

The duke soon concluded that he must begin his wanderings again in search of health and strength for his idolized only child. The suitors were sent sway, the castle was closed, and the family of Downsbury went far from Brackenside and little Doris.

CHAPTER VII

ALL, ALL IS VANITY

Meanwhile, at the farm little Doris grew under the protection of Mark and Patty, and yearly, as the day came round which was the anniversary of her arrival, Mark received a hundred pounds, in golden sovereigns, or in fresh, new Bank of England notes. And Mark, in his sturdy honesty, and far-seeing common sense, developed rare qualities as a guardian. Plain man as he was, he guessed at what a girl of good family or high social position should know, and preparing Doris for that position to which some day her unknown mother might call her, he resolved that she should receive accomplishments.

Fortune favored him. In Brakebury lived a Frenchman, a political exile, a gentleman of high accomplishments. Monsieur D'Anvers was held in great awe in the village; his courtly grace, the foreign tongues he spoke, the pictures that he drew, the water-color landscapes which he painted and sold in London, his playing on various instruments – all lifted him far above his neighbors.

To Monsieur D'Anvers went honest Mark, when Doris was eight years old, and offered him fifty pounds a year to tutor the two little girls, the brown and the fair.

"You will teach Mattie what she wants to learn, and what she can learn," said Mark; "but Doris can learn anything, and I want you to teach her all you know."

So Doris was taken daily to her tutor, as she had been to the school of the Misses Hopwell, and the old French courtier bowed down and worshiped her, as in all her life did all the men who were brought into contact with her. To teach her was a labor of love. Her aptitude was marvelous. She learned to speak French and German fluently; she drew and painted with taste and skill; her little fingers, with some inherited grace, flew over the ivory keys, or touched the shining cords of harp and guitar. Manners – the manners of courts – the banished Frenchman taught her, and she learned them intuitively.

"*Mon Dieu!*" cried the old gentleman; "but this child is lovely! She surpasses Ninon D'Enclos and Diana de Poitiers! She has spirit, wit, originality – everything that is admirable! A queen might be proud to be her mother!"

Doris swayed and enchanted her old preceptor. Mattie, quietly studying French, drawing, and English literature, was left far behind by her foster-sister, who was speedily learning all that the tutor could teach.

"You should have been born a princess, *ma belle!*" the old man would say, delighted with some flash of wit, some piquant performance. "What will you do with all your beauty here on a farm?"

"Am I very beautiful?" demanded Doris.

"More beautiful than Helen, for whom thousands died; than Cleopatra, who had the world's conquerors at her feet! What will you do with so much beauty?"

"Make the most of it!" and the words jarred on the aristocrat.

All men said the same. Even the rector unwisely cried:

"Little maid, you have beauty enough to turn your head. Do not let it make you proud."

"Who made me beautiful?" asked Doris.

"God, my child."

"Is it not right to be proud of God's work and gifts?"

"You have beauty enough to be a snare," said the doctor.

"God gave me my beauty, and God is good, and does not set snares," said Doris, quickly, making Mark and the doctor laugh at her ready wit.

"A beautiful body is nothing without a beautiful soul," said Mark, mindful of the letter saying, "Keep her soul white and pure."

"I would rather have a beautiful body than a beautiful soul," said Doris, promptly.

"Why, my dear?" demanded the good man, in amaze.

"Because my body is where people can see it. Who can see my soul?" said Doris, scornful of her best possession.

Mark was shocked.

"That comes from every one praising you so foolishly; you will be ruined!" he exclaimed.

"Mattie can have the beautiful soul, and I will have the beautiful body," retorted Doris. "Monsieur D'Anvers says wisdom is the best gift, the gift for kings. I say beauty is the best gift, the gift for queens; and queens have always ruled kings."

Mark shook his head. It is hard labor to rear an eagle in a sparrow's nest.

"Mother," said Doris, one day, when she was twelve, "this shall not go on longer – I'm sick of it."

"What, my child? Of what are you sick?"

"Of the village, of the farm, of our way of living. I hate it. If I am kept here longer I know I shall run away."

"My dear, are we not good to you?"

"Oh, yes, you are good, of course; but it is not goodness I want; it is change; I want something new – some more *style*."

"But how and where, Doris?"

"Send me to boarding-school. I want to know more of the way ladies do and live. We see no one here. If Mattie does not want to go, I ought not to be kept home. I have learned all Monsieur D'Anvers knows. I talk French and German as fast as he does – we go over the same old things."

"That is true, mother," said Mattie. "Doris is a great scholar. I cannot go away from home; I don't want to; I love to stay and help you; but let Doris go."

"I will ask your father," said Patty, hesitatingly.

"And he'll say to let the child have her own way," said Doris, with a laugh.

"Well, I must consult your father."

"Consult my father!" said Doris, with wonderful scorn.

She had a singular contempt for all about her, though no hint that she was other than the child of the Braces had been given her.

She had her way; she went to a fashionable boarding-school. For her clothing and tuition honest Mark paid the entire hundred pounds each year. She elected to visit schoolmates at vacation, and for four years Brackenside Farm knew no more of the golden-haired mystery.

At sixteen she came home again, beautiful as a fairy, ripe for mischief, mad for display – a tireless reader of French novels.

She looked about that home of rustic goodness, and covert scorn dwelt in the violet eyes and sat lightly on the chiseled lips; her parents were "so plain," her sister Mattie "a country simpleton."

They on their part rose up to do her homage; they bowed down and worshiped at beauty's shrine. And was she not most beautiful?

"Beauty was hers in dower, such as earth
Doth rarely reckon 'mid her fading things:
A glory lit her tears, and in her mirth
Shook the sweet laughter of translucent springs."

Already an adept in coquetry, she sighed at once for a victim for her charms. Alas! she found him near.

"Are there any new people?" she asked of Mattie.

"Only Earle Moray."

"Eh? A decent sounding name. Who is he?"

"A poet and a gentleman," cried Mattie, enthusiastically.

"A poet? Poets live, I understand, in garrets."

"But Earle has some money," said Mattie, simply.

"Earle? So? You seem to know him rather well."

Poor Mattie blushed crimson.

CHAPTER VIII

THE YOUNG COQUETTE

"For some had perished in her stern neglect —
Fell on the sword of their own hope and died;
While she in triumph, scornfully erect,
Swept o'er their ashes with the skirts of pride."

Before returning to Brackenside, Doris had demanded a room for herself, and for this room certain furnishings. She did not know that Mark and Patty would say to each other:

"It is only fair, since we have for her a hundred pounds a year;" but she did know that her will would be law to them.

She brought with her, when she came back to the farm, many little adornments, purchases of her own, or gifts from her school friends; and these Mattie dutifully arranged for her, just as she had polished the windows and nailed down the carpet, and ironed the curtains before Doris came. Doris never thought of helping her. She perched herself, Turk fashion, on the foot of the bed, and issued her orders as a good-natured little mistress to her maid. There were knickknacks for the toilet-table, pictures for the wall, a little book-case of hanging shelves.

"Your room will be fit for a princess, Doris," said Mattie.

"For a princess!" said Doris, with scorn. "If I were half a princess, or only rich, I would clear out the rubbishy things at once. You might have them, Mattie, since you like them. I would have gold-mounted furnishings for my dressing-table, silk hangings, velvet carpets, upholstery in plush and satin, gold, white, pale-blue. I would have exquisite marbles, and pictures that cost a fortune each."

"But you never saw such things," said Mattie.

"No; only I have read of them, and find in myself a fitness for them. I would give *anything* for such luxury."

"Do not pine, dear, for what you can never have."

"I may have it some day," said Doris, defiantly.

"But how would you get it?"

"By my beauty. The world belongs to beauty."

Mattie was shocked. She was putting the books on the shelves, and her honest face clouded. She said to Doris:

"I fear your books are worse than none. How did you come to get such books? I have heard Monsieur D'Anvers say some of these were vile trash; and I notice sentences in the others that are not fit reading for a young maid."

"They are French," said Doris.

"That does not make them better. There are good books to be had in French; and you have Byron for your only poet. I have heard our rector say Byron is unfit reading for girls."

"You ridiculous, strait-laced creature!"

"And I don't quite like your pictures, dear. The *subjects* are not pleasant to me. These French beauties were famous for vice. La Pompadour, and Diana, and the rest. This Cleopatra is too scantily attired to suit my taste, and this Trojan Helen is not a nice picture. I would have chosen Joan of Arc, and tender Margaret More, and sad Hecuba, and martyr Margaret. Pictures should elevate our souls."

"My goodness, Mattie! have you been taking lessons of that gentleman poet you mentioned? Where does he live!"

"At Lindenholtm – his mother owns it, and came there two years ago, when she was left a widow. Her husband was a curate."

"Then I don't believe your Earle Moray is very rich. He is just a farmer, if he has only Lindenholtm. I remember the place, half villa, half farm-house, with great linden trees around it. Does he write books?"

"He has written one small one – 'Songs of the Country-side.' I have it here. You can read it; it is like music."

"Ta, ta! I hate poetry. What does the man look like?"

"Why, he looks as he is, a gentleman, a good man."

"I foresee I shall have a surfeit of goodness here. If the man is neither rich nor handsome, he will hardly pay to flirt with, unless one is desperate."

"To flirt with!" cried Mattie, aghast. "You would not *flirt*, Doris?"

"And why wouldn't I?"

"Why, it is wicked. It is cruel, it is deceitful."

"Hear the girl talk!" cried Doris, flinging herself back on the bed with peals of musical laughter. "Why, goosey, I flirted with every male creature I set eyes on at school."

"But I thought they did not allow such things."

"Allow? You will undoubtedly be the death of me, with your simplicity," said Doris, sitting up, her golden hair distractingly ruffled, her eyes shining with glee, her dimples dancing like tricky sprites among the deepened roses on her cheeks. "*Don't* you understand that it was our chief aim to do what we were not allowed? Men, I admit, were scarce. The writing-master was engaged to one of the teachers; but I flirted with him until *she* nearly cried her eyes out; and after he withstood me three months he surrendered at discretion, and I laughed at him. The French master vowed he would kill himself on my behalf; the music-master fell so conspicuously into my power that the preceptress dismissed him, and got a gorgon of a woman in green spectacles in his place. As for the dancing-master, he played the fool and erred exceedingly whenever I was in sight; so the girls said it was better than any theater."

"Doris, I am ashamed of you."

"What odds does that make, so long as I am not ashamed of myself?"

"But you will not act in that way with Earle?"

"Why won't I? Are you afraid of losing him?"

"He doesn't belong to me," said Mattie, blushing.

"How soon am I likely to see him?" demanded Doris.

"To-morrow. Every day. His mother wants him to be a farmer. She manages Lindenholtm now, and sends him to take farming lessons of father. Father thinks everything of Earle, and so does mother."

"A farmer! The game is not worth the candle. I wouldn't be a farmer's wife for anything. I loathe being a farmer's daughter."

"I don't," said Mattie, with spirit. "I'm proud of my home, my honest race, my good, sweet mother, my dear father."

"How queer!" said Doris, meditatively. "Now, I couldn't see anything to be proud of in all *that*. I should be proud of a coach and grays, and men in livery – of suits of jewels, of a French maid, of velvet, satin, lace, brocade dresses."

"Doris," said Mattie, anxiously, "*have* you any soul?"

"Soul? If we cannot live without one, and soul makes the heart go, I suppose I have; otherwise, I don't feel aware of the property you mention."

"I believe you are only jesting, to tease me. You were always brighter than I am, and a real rogue. You have higher ideas and better intentions and wishes than you say."

"No, really I haven't – not one bit."

"Why, then," said poor Mattie, deeply distressed, "it must be your moral nature that is lacking."

"*Moral nature?* That's just it," said Doris, with infinite satisfaction. "Moral nature – I haven't any. I think all the nature I have must be immoral; I always side with the sinners in all stories."

Mattie had finished arranging the pretty little room. Doris jumped from her place on the bed.

"Really you have made it look very well, considering what you have to do it with. A sort of household fairy, you, Mattie; your name should be Brownie. Now we will play you are my maid. I am going to bed, and I like to have my hair brushed a long time. It is good for my nerves, and good for my hair. Will you be my maid?"

"With great pleasure," said Mattie, letting down the golden flood of Doris' silken hair. "How beautiful it is!"

"I think I am beautiful every way," said Doris, calmly.

"You are, indeed," said Mattie, without the least envy.

"Your hair will not brush straight! It is all in wavy clusters."

"You will brush it every night, and then I shall like you."

"Surely I will brush it, when you wish. But I like you in all cases," said Mattie. "And I want you to be good, dear."

"And not flirt with Earle Moray? Or other men? I'll not promise that. Flirting is my nature. I will flirt with this Earle until he puts his heart in my hands, and I will crush it up *so*— as I do this rosebud – and drop it —*so*! You watch and see how it is done, Mattie."

Tears rushed to Mattie's eyes. She hurriedly left the room.

"In love with him! Jealous! Oh, delightful! Here is something to amuse me. I thought I must surely die of dullness here, but I can flirt with the 'gentleman and poet,' and drive this preaching little puritan mad with envy, and that may fill up a year for me. Then, if the prince has not come along to woo, I shall go out somewhere to seek my fortune. Anything but stagnation. I will go where no one of the name of Brace shall follow me."

Meanwhile, Mattie, in her own neat, snug room, sat in the moonlight, mourning over the perverseness of this beautiful beloved sister, and trembling for Earle Moray, whom she called her friend, and held far dearer, without knowing it. How could any man help loving such a dazzling creature as this Doris? And his manly, noble heart must then be crushed and flung away like that ruined rose? She looked up to the moon-lit sky. There was her helper and her friend. She prayed:

"God keep poor Earle."

Then, comforted, she sought her bed and slept the sleep of faith. Doris slept the sleep of youth and abounding health, until Mrs. Brace awoke her.

"It is almost seven, dear. I let you sleep late this morning."

"This late? Now, mother, you might as well know I made my own hours for rising, and I will never rise at seven!"

Patty sighed, and left her; she knew Doris would always have her own way.

CHAPTER IX

POET AND GENTLEMAN

"I sat with Doris, beloved maiden,
Her lap was laden with wreathed flowers:
I sat and wooed her, through sunlight wheeling,
And shadows stealing, for hours and hours."

Rose the sun over an idyllic day; the white clouds floated softly over the summer blue; the poppies blazed in scarlet splendor through the grass; the bearded barley stood in sheaves, and through the meadows of Brackenside, that prosperous farmer, Mark Brace, led his men to their work.

Earle Moray, whose mother looked on poesy as the macadamizing of the road to ruin, and desired nothing better for her son than the safe estate and healthful, honest life of a farmer, had come to take a lesson in stacking corn.

It is true that farm work was not especially attractive to Earle the poet, but pleasing his mother was attractive to Earle the son; the friendship of honest Mark was attractive to Earle the man; and Earle had common sense to know that every man is better off for knowing how to win his bread from the field. Therefore, came Earle to his lesson.

"My sister has come!" said Mattie, meeting him with a boding heart. "She has grown more lovely than ever in these four years. You will write poems about her when you see her. Her face is a poem, her voice and laugh are poems!"

"And where is the phoenix of girls?" demanded Earle.

"Down there under the great elm, watching the reapers. I will introduce you to her," said Mattie, who thought this fatal introduction should be well over with, the sooner the better.

Perhaps Doris was in a less impish mood to-day. Frank Mattie did not dream how Doris had meditated all the morning on the new situation, and had dressed for conquest. In rustic surroundings she would play the rural queen. Her dress was a simple print, a white ground with little green sprays of maiden-hair traced on it. At her neck a knot of pale green, through which was carelessly drawn a flower; in her gleaming hair a cluster of hop blossoms; her wide straw hat at her feet was trimmed with a wreath of hop-vine; over her shoulders fell her wonderful hair. She held a book in her lap; one white hand rested on the page, the other brushed back a truant curl; and she lifted her lovely eyes in innocent, pleased expectation, as Mattie and Earle drew near.

The heart of Earle Moray stood still with surprise, then it leaped as if it would break its bounds, and a flood of passionate admiration fired his whole being. Oh, how divine a thing she was, this naiad in the meadow-land; all poetry should wait as handmaid at her feet. Why was one born to sing, unless to sing. Those shining eyes, those dimpling smiles, that flush of dawn upon her cheeks, well becoming the young morning of her maiden life. Oh, daughter of the gods of Hellas! Oh, "being fit to startle and surprise," looking at her, this boy-poet, whose soul had until now only stirred in its sleep, and murmured in its dreams, awoke to full and perfect life.

Mattie looked into his flushing face, his kindling eyes, and saw that words, if she had dared to utter them, would now be fruitless to warn him of Doris. She could only in her secret soul hope that Doris was less cruel than she had said, and so send up in silence to the ear of Heaven, that prayer:

"God save Earle Moray!"

Earle looked at her.

"Mattie! What is on your mind? Do you want to say something to me?"

"No – yes – only – that you must remember that my sister is only a child, and takes nothing seriously. You will not mind any nonsense that she says."

"Surely she will speak as she looks, like an angel."

They drew near the elm. With what consummate art were the violet eyes drawn down from contemplation of their native skies to comprehension of earth's lower things! With what a sudden start at the *abandon* of her own position on the grass did Doris greet Mattie and the "gentleman-poet!" She saw the flush on his cheek, the ardent flame lighting his dark eyes. She said to herself:

"I shall have no trouble here; he is at my feet already. Thank fortune the man is handsome; and what an air he has! I shall not waste time on him, as it would be wasted on a clod-hopper. He will be good practice for better times."

"Ah," she said, as Earle asked permission to sit on the grass at her feet, "I don't know that you belong there. Are you a worker or an idler? Mattie is a worker; if you are industrious and good, you must go with her or my father. I am an idler; if you are naughty and idle, you belong with me."

"I am of still a third class – I am a dreamer. Here let me sit and dream of heaven."

Mattie turned away, fearful and sick of heart; the mischief was done.

"Dreaming is even better than idling," said Doris. "And here is a real land of dreams. See how the poppies bend, sleepy with sunshine; the sunshine is a flood of refined gold; the bees fly slowly, drunk with perfume; the butterflies drift up and down like beautiful, happy, aimless thoughts. Let us dream, and live to be happy."

"One could not do better," cried Earle. "Here shall be our lotus-land, and you are a fit genius for the place, Miss Brace."

"Now, at the very beginning, I must make a treaty with you. Are you coming here often?"

"I hope so."

"Then, unless I am to hate you on the spot, you must not call me Miss Brace. I detest the name! If there is one name above another that I hate, it is that name Brace! It is so common, so mean – a wretched monosyllable!"

"But you would grace any name!" cried Earle.

"I don't mean to grace that very long!" exclaimed Doris.

Earle opened his eyes in uncontrollable amazement.

"You don't know what it is to suffer from a wretched, short, commonplace name. Look at me, and consider that I am called, above all things, Doris Brace! Horrors! Now, your name is fairly good. Earle Moray. There is a savor of gentility, of blood, of breeding, about that. You can venture to rise with such a name. I can only rise by dropping mine, and that I mean to do."

Earle laughed. This was, after all, the pretty, captious nonsense of a little child.

"But Doris is a sweet name. It fits this sweet, home-like landscape. Doris, the lovely shepherdess, has been sung and painted for centuries."

"But I have no genius for woods or fields, and I am afraid of sheep. However, Miss Doris is better than – Miss Brace."

She reached for a poppy growing in the grass, and the book fell from her knee. Earle picked it up, and saw what it was.

"*This!*" he exclaimed, in genuine consternation.

Now, Doris absolutely lacked the moral sense that would make her ashamed of the book, or revolt at anything she found therein. But she had native wit, and she saw that she was on the point of instantly losing caste with Earle Moray on account of this literature.

"Eh? What kind is it?" she said, with enchanting simplicity. "I bought it on the train late yesterday, and since I came out here I have been too happy to read it. Isn't it a nice book?"

"I should say not," said Earle.

"How do you know, unless you have read it?"

"I know the author's reputation; and then, the title!"

"Dear me! And so I must not read it? – and my one-and-six-pence gone! Whenever I try to do particularly right, I do wrong. Unlucky, isn't it? Now the last word my French teacher said to me was, 'By all means keep up your French; you have such a beautiful accent.'"

Earle looked relieved. Here was an explanation of exquisite simplicity. There was no spot on this sweet, stainless lily.

Mattie came back.

"Doris, mother thinks you had better unpack your trunk. Your dresses will be rumpled lying in it so long."

"You unpack it, like a dear! I shall ruin my things taking them out; and then, I can't go in, it is so lovely out-of-doors."

"Did you not put the things in, to begin with?" asked Mattie.

"No, dear; one of the girls did. The *girls* loved to wait on me, Mattie!" This with sweet reproach.

"But mother thinks you are keeping Earle from work."

"Go away, Earle!" said Doris, giving him a dainty little push. "If you stay idle here, I am to be called in and set to work. After that stuffy old school this four years, I cannot stay indoors. Go, Mattie, and tell mother if she insists on my coming in, I shall appeal at once to my fairy godmother to turn me into a butterfly."

Mattie walked slowly away.

"That's all right," said Doris, with satisfaction. "They all end by letting me have my own way."

"And how does that work?"

"Well. Don't you suppose it is always a very nice way?"

"It must be, indeed," said Earle, heartily.

He thought to himself that so charming a form must shrine only the tenderest of hearts, the sweetest of souls, and her way must always be a good way.

The girl was infinitely more lovely than one could look for in the child of Mark and Patty Brace, the sister of gentle Mattie; but being the child of Mark and Patty, and sister of Mattie, she must be a sharer in their goodness, that sterling honesty, that generous unselfishness, that made these three everywhere beloved and respected, patterns of domestic and neighborly virtues.

Thus thinking, Earle sunned himself in the radiance of her smiles.

CHAPTER X

A WASTED WARNING

While Earle Moray watched Doris, and lost himself in delicious fancies of a soul fair as the body that shined it, Doris, on her part, gazed on him with awakening interest. She had expected to see a young countryman, a rhymster who believed himself a poet, one with whom she could "flirt to pass away the time," and "to keep in practice" – not this gentleman in air and dress, with the cultivated musical voice, the noble face, the truthful, earnest eye.

Said Doris in her heart, "I did not know that little dairy-maid Mattie had such good taste;" and in proportion as the value of Mattie's love increased before her, so increased her joy in winning it away. Not that Doris had any malice toward Mattie personally; but she had a freakish love of triumphing in the discomfiture of others. Slowly she yielded to the fascination of Earle's presence. She told herself that "the detestable country" could be endurable with him to play lover at her feet. To her, mentally arraiging "the detestable country," spoke Earle:

"I love this scene; fairer is hardly found in any book of nature. What is more lovely, more suggestive, than a wheat field with golden sheaves?"

"I am a true child of the cities," said Doris, "despite my country birth and rural name. I was just thinking how superior are the attractions of paved streets, filled with men and women, and lined with glittering windows. But if you will tell me some of the suggestions of the wheat field, no doubt I shall learn from you to think differently."

How charming was this docile frankness!

"It suggests earth's millions filled daily with bread. It suggests that gracious Providence, by long and lovely processes, forestalling man's needs. It brings to mind the old-time stories of Joseph's dream of bowing sheaves, of Ruth gleaning in the field of Boaz."

The stories of Ruth, Rebecca and Esther were the three Bible stories that Doris knew; the face of Doris lighted as she answered:

"Oh, I like that! I have imagined Boaz – tall, grave, stately, dark; and Ruth – young, and fair, and tender. I cannot quite fancy how Naomi looked – like other old women with a sad history, I suppose – but the words are lovely."

"Whither thou goest I will go; thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God."

His voice took a deep, passionate tone, and his eyes filled with the light of love.

"Mattie says you are a poet!" cried Doris. "Are you?"

"I wish I could say 'I am.' Time will prove me. I have the poet's longing. Shall I ever reach the poet's utterance?"

"Why, I think you have it now," said Doris, sweetly.

"It is because you inspire me, perhaps. As I came toward you, I wondered whether you were Tennyson's 'Dora' or 'The Gardener's Daughter.'"

"Oh, neither! I am very different! They were content with trees and flowers, and humble ways. Was it not Dora who 'dwelt unmarried till her death?' I shall not do that. I shall marry and fly from the country-side. I can *live* among people in the city."

"What! cannot you live the truest life where wind, and rain, and water-fall, and birds make music? the flowers mark the sweet procession of seasons – all is calm, and security, and innocence."

"Tell me," said Doris, bending forward, glee in her sapphire eyes, her small hand thrilling him as she touched his arm; "tell me, poet, are *you* content? Do *you* not long for fame? To sway your fellows, to be rich, to make money?"

"Oh, money is the lowest of all objects. What is money to love?" demanded Earle.

"Money, just as metal, may be a low object, but money as money, as getting what we want most, is a high object. Think of what it can buy. Think of gorgeous pictures lighting your walls with beauty, of flashing jewels and gleaming marbles, of many-fountained gardens, of homes fit to live in, not stuffy little farm-houses, with windows under the eaves. Tell me, are you content? Will you live and die a farmer? Is not this money a thing worth winning to lay at the feet of love? Will you not spread the wings of your soul for a wider life? Have you not ambition?"

"Yes!" cried Earle; "I have ambition."

The dimpling smile showed the shining pearly line of little teeth; the soft fingers of the little hand touched his hand as she withdrew them; and, leaning back against her oak tree, she laughed joyously:

"I have found a fellow-sinner."

"Ambition can be noble, rather than evil, and to aspire is not to sin. Who could help being ambitious, with you as the apostle of ambition? You enforce with your beauty each word that you utter!"

"You think me *beautiful*?" said Circe, in sweetest wonderment, as if she had not studied dress, look, pose, gesture, minutely to enhance her wonderful and rich endowments of nature.

"Words cannot tell how fair. A verse keeps singing through my brain; it is this:

"And she, my Doris, whose lap incloses
Wild summer roses of sweet perfume,
The while I sued her, smiled and hearkened,
Till daylight darkened from glow to gloom."

Ah, this was something like, thought Doris, to be wooed and flattered in poetry. She dropped her dainty lids, the rose pink deepened in her cheeks, and she gave a slow, sweet sigh.

"Did you make that poetry?"

"No: but would I could make immortal verses, for your sake," said Earle. "The world should hear of you."

The world! Oh, rare delight! Had she not dreamed of driving men mad for love, of making poets sing, and artists paint her charms? And these conquests were begun.

She looked up archly. She knew when to check the tides of enthusiasm and adoration, that they might grow stronger for the repression.

"Away with poetry, my singer, here comes prose."

Over the field toward them strode honest Mark Brace, looking for his neophyte in rural toils. Mark's round face was crimson with heat and exertion, but a broad smile responded to the pretty picture these two young lovers made under the tree. He cried, heartily:

"A deal you are learning this morning, Master Earle. Will you put off your lessons in wheat-stacking till next year? Lindenholm farm, at this rate, will be a model farm to the county when the madam turns it over to you."

"I was not in working humor," said Earle.

"Work won't wait for humors," quoth Mark. "And for you, my pretty miss, I don't doubt your sister is making butter and your mother cooking dinner, while you are playing shepherdess under a tree."

"Do I look as if I could work?" laughed Doris, springing to her feet and extending a wee rose-leaf hand. "I am only for ornament, not use. But I will leave Mr. Moray, for 'evil communications corrupt good manners,' and I have made him lazy. Good-bye, poet. 'Blessings brighten as they take their flight;' so I expect to look more and more charming as I depart homeward."

The minx knew that she had done enough that day to turn Earle Moray's head, and it would be well to let the effect deepen in absence. She danced off homeward, and Earle whispered under his breath:

"Against her ankles as she trod,
The lucky buttercups did nod;
I leaned upon the gate to see —
The sweet thing looked, but did not speak —
A dimple came in either cheek,
And all my heart was gone from me!"

Mark Brace looked after his Fairy Changeling in dire perplexity. To him work, honest labor – winning bread from the soil, was noble and happy; in all the words of Doris rang some delicate undertone of irony and scorn, of what he most esteemed. Fair, fair, indeed, but was it not selfish of her to let those whom she deemed her blood, work, and she stay idle? Yes, there was the hundred pounds, and she was not really their blood, but of some idle never-toiling strain.

More and more his hands were bound concerning the beauty, as she grew up in his care. He wished he could explain her to Moray, but he could not. Honor held him to silence. He could warn. He spoke suddenly, laying a hand on the lad's arm.

"Earle, I like you vastly. You are honest, good, a gentleman. I should be sorry indeed to see you giving your time, and mind, and setting your heart on that pretty, idle lass of mine."

"Sorry, Mark? Why sorry? She is sweet and lovely!"

"If it were Mattie, now," said honest Mark, speaking, not as a father or match-maker, but as a man. "Well and good. I'd not say a word. A man's heart may rest in Mattie – Heaven bless her! But Doris is of quite a different strain. In her there is no rest. One could never find rest in her. Never – never."

Earle tried to smile, but the words struck home, and were fixed in his heart beside the thought of Doris.

Meanwhile Doris danced off home, and framed her lovely countenance in the vines about the kitchen window.

"And what have *you* been doing?" asked Patty, reprovingly.

"Turning Earle Moray's head," responded Doris, promptly.

Mattie started and paled a little.

"He thinks I'm lovely!" cried Doris, with a laugh.

"So you may be, but no thanks to you," said Patty, "and if you set yourself to head-turning, mark my words, child, there will some terrible evil overtake you both."

CHAPTER XI

THE FOSTER-SISTERS

Summer day glided silently after summer day, and at Brackenside Farm Earle Moray was re-telling for himself the story of Eden – the love of one man for one woman, to him the only woman in the world. Alas, that his had not been a more guileless Eve! The love-making was patent to every one, and the family at the farm wondered where it would end. Mark Brace was truly sorry that Earle had set his heart on the lovely, fantastic Doris; and yet, honest man, he did not wonder that any young fellow should be beguiled by so fair a face, and he could not but be heartily amused at the queenly airs with which the farm foundling, believing herself a tenant-farmer's child, received the homage of Earle Moray, poet and gentleman, owner of the little estate of Lindenhalm.

Good Patty Brace was, on her part, greatly perplexed. With woman's keen intuition in love, she perceived the intense sincerity of Earle's passion for Doris, and saw as well that Doris was entirely without heart for him. The girl admired him, loved his flattery, desired to be some one's chief object, but would have tossed him aside as easily as an old glove if a more dashing adorer had made his appearance. Besides, if Doris gave consent to Earle's wooing, would Mrs. Moray be well pleased with her son's choice? Mrs. Moray of Lindenhalm was a thoroughly practical woman, and would see at a glance that the idle young beauty would be a very unreliable wife for any man, especially for one of moderate means.

"What fools men are in love matters," quoth Patty to herself – "at least most men!" with a thought backward to Mark's sensible choosing. "This dreamer and verse-writer would have done well to choose our Mattie, who would help him on and make him happy his life-long. But Doris is only fit to marry a lord, as no doubt she sprung from a lord; but where a lord is to come from as a suitor goodness knows, not I."

And, of all who saw the summer wooing, Mattie was the most deeply touched, but gave no sign. When she felt the sharpness of the pain when Doris asserted empire over Earle, then Mattie first guessed that she had set her love upon him; and she gave herself the task of rooting out lover's love, and planting sisterly affection in its stead. Her gentle face grew graver, her soft brown eyes had a more wistful light, but not a thought of jealousy, or anger, or envy. God was good to Mattie in that no ill weeds throve in her maiden soul. Doris did not find the sweetness she had expected in tormenting her, for Mattie gave no signs of torment – rather for Earle than for herself she was sad, and that with reason.

It is sad to see a young man love absorbingly, madly, giving up all for love. Doris became his one idea. Even his mother, while she knew he was attracted by a pretty daughter of Mark Brace, did not guess his infatuation. Scarcely an hour in the day were the young pair parted.

Earle had told Doris of the poet's old recipe for a lovely complexion, washing in morning dew; and Doris, to preserve the most exquisite complexion in the world, went out, when the sun rose, to bathe her cheeks and brow with the other lilies and roses in the dews of the dawning. Earle met her and rambled with her through flowery lanes. When his supposed studies in farming began, he was rather lounging at the feet of Doris than learning of Mark Brace; yet so eagerly did he hurry off to the farm, that his mother blessed his unwonted attention to his duty.

He dined at home, not to leave his mother lonely, then off again, and his farm studies consisted in reading poetry or tales to Doris, under trees, or wandering far into the gloaming with her in Brackenside garden. His heart poured itself out in Herrick's grand old song "To Anthea:"

"Thou art my life, my soul, my heart,
The very eyes of me —

Thou hast command of every part,
To live and die for thee."

His rich young voice rolled forth these words with deep feeling.

Doris laughed at the song at first, but his earnestness in singing it touched her a very little.

"I shall always think of you when I hear that song," she said.

"Think of me! Yes, but if it means that we are to be parted, and you think – just to remember – Doris, I should die!"

He was fervid, handsome, romantic, brilliant in love's first golden glow, hard to resist.

She smiled at him.

"Let us fancy we will not be parted," she said sweetly.

Earle came hurrying up one day after dinner.

"Now for a long evening in the garden!" he cried. "I have brought a new drama; the poetry is exquisite. We will sit in the arbor under the honeysuckle, and while the summer wind is full of the breath of flowers, I will read you the sweeter breathing of a poet's soul. Come, Doris – come, Mattie – let us off to the garden."

Mattie's face flushed with joy; it was so sweet to find some pleasure she could share with him.

Earle read; his voice was full of fire and music. Mattie listened entranced. Doris half forgot her favorite dreams of herself in gorgeous crowds, the center of admiration. The gloaming fell as he read the last lines.

"It is beautiful, in its poetry," said Mattie, "but not in its idea. I cannot love the heroine, though her face is fair. Beauty should be united to goodness, and goodness has not this cruel pride. To think of a woman who would let a brave man die, or risk death, to win a smile! I always hated the lady who threw the glove, and I think the knight served her well, to leave her when he returned the glove, for she had no idea of true love."

"Beauty has a right to all triumphs," cried Doris, "and men have always been ready to die for beauty's smile."

"A good man's life is worth more than any woman's smile," said Mattie. "The man's life, the woman's life, are Heaven's gifts, to be spent in doing good. We have no right to throw them idly away, or demand their sacrifice. I never liked these stories of wasted affection. They are too pitiful. To give all and get nothing is a cruel fate."

"Oh, you little silly country girl," laughed Doris, "you do not think that beautiful women are queens, and hearts are their rightful kingdom, and they can get as many as they like, and do what they please with them."

"You talk to amuse yourself," said Earle, "that sweet smile and voice fit your cruel words as little as they would suit an executioner's sword."

"What is slaying by treachery in love better than murder?" asked Mattie, eagerly.

"It is a very exciting, piquant, interesting form of murder," retorted her wicked little sister.

"How can any one enjoy giving pain," cried Mattie. "I have read of such women, but to me they seem true demons, however fair. Think of destroying hope, life, genius, morals – for what? For amusement, and yet these sons all had mothers."

"You are in earnest, Mattie," said Earle, admiringly.

"I feel in earnest," said Mattie, passionately.

"Pshaw, there is much spider and fly in men and women," laughed Doris. "Women weave silvery nets in the sun, and the silly men walk straight in. Who's to blame?"

"You talk like a worn-out French cynic," cried Mattie.

"Well, who *is* to blame?" persisted Doris; "pretty women for just amusing themselves according to their natures? or silly men for walking into danger, being warned?"

"It should not be a woman's nature to set traps for hearts or souls. You know better, Doris," urged Mattie.

"If I could be rich and great, and go to London, and live in society, you'd see if I would *do* better," retorted Doris.

"You two remind me of verses of a poem on two sisters," said Earle. "Their lives lay far apart.

"One sought the gilded world, and there became
A being fit to startle and surprise,
Till men moved to the echoes of her name,
And bowed beneath the magic of her eyes."

"Yes, that means me," said Doris, tranquilly.

"But she, the other, with a happier choice,
Dwelt 'mong the breezes of her native fields,
Laughed with the brooks, and saw the flowers rejoice;
Brimmed with all sweetness that the summer yields."

"That, then, is Mattie."

Mattie looked up in gratified surprise.

"If you are complimenting Mattie, I won't stay and hear it; I reign alone!" cried Doris, half laughing, half petulant, and darting away she sought her own room, and refused to return that night.

It was often so. When she had sunned Earle with her smiles she withdrew her presence, or changed smiles to frowns; so he was never cloyed with too much sweetness. When Doris withdrew, in vain he sang under the window, or sent her love-full notes. The summer sun of his love had its settings, its shadows, its thunder-clouds, yet Earle loved and was happy.

CHAPTER XII

BEAUTY BECOMES IMMORTAL

It was the good custom of Mark Brace to close the day with prayer; and sometimes a word or two of the psalms for the day penetrated the sedulously deaf ears of Doris.

Such happened to be the case one August night, and set the beauty thinking. She was perched on the sill of the dairy window, next morning, watching Mattie make butter, but her brow wore a perplexed frown, and a look of curiosity not provoked by butter-making was in her blue eyes.

"What is the matter? What are you thinking of, Doris?"

"I am thinking that I am an example of Scripture truth."

"In what particular?" asked Mattie.

"In the particular of tumbling into the pit, or catching in the net, duly set forth by me for other people."

"I don't quite understand you."

"Then you are even duller than usual, and, as I may no more speak in parables, I will expound myself clearly. I deliberately endeavored to entrap and entangle Earle Moray into loving me, for my summer pastime. I did not duly consider that I might fall in love with him myself."

"Why not, if you desired him to love you?"

"That was merely part of beauty's dues, child. Why not? He is not rich enough, or great enough; he cannot take me to London, and make me a society queen."

"Certainly not. You did not expect that."

"True. And I did not expect to fall in love with him."

"But you have? Surely you have, he loves you so much."

"Eh? Do you want me to love him? I thought you wanted him."

"I only want him to be happy," said Mattie, turning away, with a blush.

"Perhaps I love him a little. I am not capable of loving much," said Doris, with exceeding frankness. "My chief affections are set upon the pomps and vanities of this life, which I presume were renounced for me in my baptism."

"Don't be so wicked," cried the scandalized Mattie.

"And yet I don't know that I could say 'yes,' if Earle asked me to marry him. I might, and then repent, and take it back. I suppose, if he asked father and mother, they would say 'yes,' and be fearfully awkward about it."

"You shall not talk so about them!" said Mattie, indignantly.

"I don't feel to them as you do – why is it? I don't feel a part of the Brace family. I like you, Mattie; father amuses me with his outspoken, homely ways; I don't consider mother much. She is good, but commonplace, like brown bread. In fact, you are all too rustic, and homely, and pious, and common-sensical for wicked me. Are you done with that butter? Why don't it grow made? I am sick of life. Earle is off to Brakebury for his mother. It is only half-past eight, and I feel as if I had been up a century. Come with me to get blackberries."

"I cannot. I have much dairy work to do yet," said Mattie.

"I wish you *would* go for blackberries for supper," said Patty Brace, coming in. "You don't seem disposed to do anything useful, Doris – suppose you try that."

"I take care of my room, and my clothes," pouted Doris, "and that nearly kills me. I wish I had a maid!"

Patty laughed.

"Well, child, the woods are cool and beautiful, and you are tired of doing nothing. Take this basket, and try and fill it with blackberries."

Fearful of being asked to do some more practical duty if she rejected this, Doris picked up the basket, put on a pair of gloves, tied her sun-hat down under her distracting little chin, and set forth toward the knoll, a place famous for blackberries. The grass was long and thick, the aftermath of clover loaded the air with fragrance, scarlet creepers ran along the hedges, and at the knoll, with purple stems and green and orange leaves, grew the blackberries in globules of polished jet. An inspiration of industry seized Doris, and she filled her basket; the soft little tips of her fingers were dyed crimson with the fruit. She lingered over her task. Earle might return, and it would be pleasant under the trees, birds singing and grass rustling about them, while Earle talked poetry to her.

But Earle did not come, and something in the silence of nature set this thoughtless creature to thinking.

It was one of those solemn hours of life when our fate hangs in the balance. What of her future? What should she do with herself? Should she give up her frantic ambition, her intense desire after excitement, riches, and splendor, and, accepting an honest man, settle in a simple, comfortable home, and grace it as a good wife and mother all her days? Could she do that?

Should she refuse Earle Moray, on whose lips an offer of himself and his all was trembling? Should she send him away? She scarcely felt ready for that. She had grown to love him a little – just a little – but more than any one – except herself. Should she fly this homely, quiet life, these good, uncongenial people, fly to the great city, and set out under a feigned name to make her own way in the world, as singer, actress – any wild, adventurous path that might find her at least a lord for a husband? Should she?

"Can I give him up? Can I leave him to Mattie? Will he ever be famous and rich enough to make it worth while to nourish my little bit of love for him into real love, if I can ever love? Oh, for some good fairy to rise up and tell me what to do!"

She started in sudden fear, for surely a step was coming close to her, some one from the other side of the coppice, who had watched her unseen. Not a fairy. A gentleman. A very presentable gentleman, who said:

"I beg pardon. Do not let me alarm you."

Then the two looked at each other.

Doris saw a handsome, middle-aged man, palette on his thumb, box of paints under his arm, portable easel in his hand; wide-awake hat, velveteen suit. She promptly summed him up – "artist."

He saw – Doris; Doris, mold of beauty; naiad in grace; innocence in her startled eyes; face of an angel; mien of a wood nymph. He began to believe in the gods of old. He said to himself, "Maid or spirit? Mortal or vision?"

"Forgive me for startling you," he said; "but I have been watching you as you stood under this tree –"

"I hate to be watched," interrupted Doris.

"As a man I was guilty; as an artist, guiltless, for an artist, above all things, loves and serves his art, and considers all he sees as subservient to it. I came to Downsbury in quest of studies in still life. For years I have had an ideal of a face that I wished to paint in my best mood: a face after which all should wonder. I have searched cities and country; I have wandered in my quest for that face through other lands; and when I saw you under the tree, I was all the artist – all lost in art – for yours is the face I have been seeking for my canvas."

"Why, do you mean I would make a picture – a real picture?" demanded Doris, with studied simplicity.

"Yes; ten thousand times yes! Under this greenwood tree, your basket at your feet, your hat swinging in your hand, your eyes lifted – yes, a picture to be known and praised forever. Child, I will make your beauty immortal."

This was what she had dreamed.

A poet was singing her praises, and would do so, whether she played him false or not; and here was an artist to paint her for a world to admire.

Could she who so inspired men tie herself to the narrow bounds of one humble, rustic hearth? Never!

"May I paint you?" demanded the artist. "May I set you in canvas, in immortal youth and loveliness, to live years, perhaps centuries hence, in deathless beauty?"

"The picture – the face – will live! Where, in those far off ages, shall *I* be?" asked Doris, earnestly.

Gregory Leslie thought the word and mood strange.

"The best part of you is immortal," he said, gently.

"And what would you call my picture?"

"Innocence.' Yes, 'Innocence' should be its name!"

"But what in me seems to you the image of '*Innocence*'?"

Stranger question still. But he answered as an artist:

"You have an ideal brow, rounded at the temples as the old masters painted their angels. Your eyes are large, bright, clear, as seeing more of heaven than earth. Your lips have the most exquisite curve. The form of your face, its coloring, your hair, are all simply perfect!"

"You shall paint my picture!" cried Doris, joyously, changing her mood. "You need ask no consent but mine!"

CHAPTER XIII

"FAITHLESS AND DEBONAIR."

"Doris, you must not do it. I cannot bear it!"

"I don't see what difference it makes to you, Earle, and you have no right to interfere, and do it I surely shall."

Thus Doris and Earle on the theme of portrait painting.

Gregory Leslie was too astute a man, too experienced, to take his wandering naiad at her word, and paint her picture, asking no consent but her own. Never had a girl so puzzled him. Her rare beauty, found in so remote and rural a district; her delicate hands, soft, cultured tones, exquisite, high-bred grace, in contrast with her very common, simple, if tasteful, dress: and then her words, so odd – either purest innocence and simplicity, or curious art in wickedness. Who and what was the young enchantress? Then, too, her smile, the turn of her neck, her *way* evoked constantly some shadowy reminiscence, some picture set far back and grown dim in the gallery of his memory, but surely there. Again and again he strove to catch the fleeing likeness, but at once, with the effort, it was gone.

"If you want to paint me, begin!" said Doris, child-like.

"Pardon. It would inconvenience you to stand here; the sketch even would take time. It must be a work of care. I shall do better if I have your permission to accompany you home. Also I must ask your parents' consent."

"*They* don't mind!" cried Doris, petulantly, after some little hesitation. "I am only a farmer's daughter." She flushed with bitter vexation at the thought, but seeing the artist immovable in his purpose, added: "I live at Brackenside, it is not far; you can easily come there."

"If you will permit," said Gregory, with courtesy.

"You can come. I have no objection," said Doris, with the air of a princess.

She picked up her basket, and moved away with the grace, the proud bearing of "the daughter of a hundred earls."

Gregory Leslie marveled more and more. As an artist, he was enraptured; as a man, he was puzzled by this new Daphne.

Doris, seemingly forgetting her new cavalier, yet taking a rapid side look at him, considered that he was very handsome, if getting a little gray; also, that his air was that of a man of the world, a dash of the picturesque added to the culture of cities.

She wished Earle would meet them, and go into a spasm of jealousy. But Earle was spared that experience, and only Mark, Patty, and Mattie Brace were at the farm-house, to be dazzled with the beauty's conquest.

Arrived at the gate, Doris turned with proud humility to her escort.

"This is my home. I do not like it. Most people think the place pretty."

"It is a paradise!" said Leslie, enthusiastically.

"Then it must have a serpent in it," quoth Doris.

"I hope not," said Leslie.

"It has. I have felt it bite!"

Mark Brace, with natural courtesy, came from the door to meet them.

"This is an artist that I met at the knoll," said Doris, calmly. "He is looking for subjects for pictures. I think he mentioned his name was Mr. Leslie, and he wishes to paint me."

"Wants a picture of you, my darling!" said honest Mark, his face lighting with a smile. "Then he shows his good taste. Walk in, sir; walk in. Let us ask my wife."

He led the way into the cool, neat, quaint kitchen-room, hated of Doris' soul, but to the artist a study most excellent.

Then did the artist look at the Brace family in deepest wonder. Mark had called the wood-nymph "my darling," and asserted a father's right; and yet not one line or trace of Mark was in this dainty maid.

Leslie turned to study Patty, who had made her courtesy and taken the basket of berries – dark, strong, plump, tidy, intelligent, kindly, plain. Not a particle of Patty in this aristocratic young beauty, who called her "mother" in a slighting tone.

Then, in despair, he fixed his eyes on Mattie Brace – brown, earnest, honest, dark, sad eyes, good, calm – just as little like the pearl-and-gold beauty as the others.

Meanwhile Mark and Patty eyed each other.

"I want to speak to you a minute, Mark," said Patty; and the pair retired to the dairy.

Doris flushed angrily, and drummed on the window-sill.

"Behold a mystery!" said Gregory Leslie to himself.

"Mark," said Patty, in the safe retirement of the milk-pans, "this needs considering. Doris is not our own. To have her picture painted and exhibited in London to all the great folk, may be the last thing her mother would desire: and her mother is yet living, as the money comes always the same way."

"I declare, Patty, I never thought of that."

"And yet, if Doris has set her heart on it, she'll have it done – you see," added Patty.

"True," said Mark. "And people will hardly think of seeking resemblances to middle-aged people in a sort of fancy picture. Better let it be done under our eye, Patty."

"I suppose so, since we cannot hinder its doing."

They returned to the kitchen.

"We have no objection, if you wish to make the picture, sir," said Mark.

"I should think not. I had settled *that*," said Doris.

"In return for your kindness," said the artist to Patty, "I will make a small portrait of her for your parlor."

So one sitting was given then and there, and others were arranged for.

When Earle came that evening he heard all the story, and then, being with Doris in the garden, they fell out over it, beginning as set forth in the opening of this chapter.

"I cannot and will not have another man gazing at you, studying your every look, carrying your face in his soul."

"If you are to begin by being jealous," said Doris, delighted, "I might as well know. I enjoy jealousy as a proof of love, and as amusing me, but I like admiration, and I mean to have it all my life. If ever I go to London, I expect to have London at my feet. Besides, if you mean to sing me, for all the world, why cannot Mr. Leslie paint me. You say Poetry and Art should wait at the feet of Beauty. Now they shall!"

It ended by truce, and Doris agreed that Earle should be present at every sitting. This calmed Earle, and rejoiced her. She thought it would be charming to pit poet and artist one against the other.

But the sittings did not thus fall out. Earle grew much interested, and he and Gregory took a hearty liking for each other. Gregory admired Doris as a beauty, but his experienced eye detected the lacking loveliness of her soul. Besides, he had no love but art, and his heart shrined one sacred pervading memory. Daily, as he painted, that haunting reminiscence of some long-ago-seen face, or painted portrait, grew upon him. He looked at Doris and searched the past. One day he cried out, as he painted:

"I have it!"

"What have you?" demanded Doris, curiously.

"A face, a name, that you constantly brought to mind in a shadowy way – that you resembled."

"Man or woman?" demanded Doris, eagerly.

"A man."

She was disappointed. She had hoped to hear of some reigning belle of society.

"Was he handsome?" she asked, less interested.

"Remarkably so. How else, if your face was like his?"

"But how can it be like a stranger I never heard of?"

"A coincidence – a freak of nature," said Leslie, slowly.

"And what was he like?" demanded Doris.

"*Faithless and debonair!* False, false and fair, like all his line. It was a fatal race; he no worse than the rest."

CHAPTER XV

"I WILL BE TRUE – FOREVER."

Despite all the love eagerly made by Earle, and readily accepted by Doris, there was no formal engagement. A hundred times the decisive words trembled on the lips of the poet-lover, and he chided himself that they were not uttered. But then, if she said "no," what lot would be his? As for Doris not being prepared to say "yes," she deferred decision, and checked Earle on the verge of a finality, for she was not ready to dismiss her suitor. If he fled from Brackenside, what pleasure would be left in life?

She had soon ceased her efforts to flirt with Gregory Leslie; he regarded her with the eye of an artist – what of his feeling that was not artistic, was paternal.

At first, she had hoped that an opening might be made for her to city life. She had wild dreams that he could get an engagement for her as an actress or concert-singer, where wonderful beauty would make up for lack of training; she built wild castles in the air, about titled ladies who would take her for an adopted daughter, or as a companion. But Gregory Leslie was the last man to tempt a lovely, heedless young girl to the vortex of city life.

She told him one day of some of her longings and distastes. She hated the farm, the country. She wanted the glory of the city – dress, theaters, operas, promenades.

"Can't you tell me how to get what I want?"

"Child," said Gregory, "you would weary of it, and long for peace. You have a devoted young lover, who offers you a comfortable home at Lindenholm."

"To live with my mother-in-law!" sneered Doris.

"An admirable woman. I have met her."

"It would be just this dullness repeated all my life," said Doris, tearful and pouting.

"It would be love, comfort, safety, goodness. Besides, this young Moray is one of our coming men. He has native power. I am much mistaken if he does not make a name, fame, place, fortune."

"Do you suppose he will one day go to London and be great?"

"Yes, I do."

"I would like that. A poet's lovely home, where learned people, and musical wonders, and famous actors, and artists *like you*, Mr. Leslie, come; and we had flowers, and pictures, and song, and gayety."

"It is pleasant, well come by. You might have it all, as Mr. Moray's wife, if at first you waited patiently."

Earle took new value in this ambitious girl's eyes.

Meanwhile, warned by the experience with Leslie, which might have turned out so differently, had Leslie played lover, and offered London-life to Doris, Earle resolved to press his suit, and urge early marriage. He must have some way of holding fast the fair coquette. To him the marriage tie was invulnerable. Once his wife, he fancied she would be ever true. Yes, once betrothed, he believed that she would be true as steel. So one fine September morning, when Leslie's picture was nearly finished, Earle came up to the farm, resolved to be silent no longer. He met Mattie first. He took her hand.

"Mattie, dear sister-friend, to-day I mean to ask Doris to be my wife. Wish me success."

Mattie's heart died within her, but the true eyes did not quail, as she said:

"I hope she will consent, for I know you love her. Heaven send you all good gifts."

"If she does not take me, my life will be spoiled!" cried Earle, passionately.

"Hush," said Mattie. "No man has a right to say such a word. No one should ever throw away all good that Heaven has given him, because of one good withheld."

"Does she love me? Tell me!"

"I do not know. There is no way but to ask her."

They heard a gay voice singing through the garden. In came Doris, her arms laden with lavender flowers cut for drying. She came, and filled the room with light.

"You here, Earle!" cried Doris. "Come up to the coppice nutting with me; the hazel bushes are full."

She held out her hand, frank and natural as a child, and away they went together.

Doris was fantastic as a butterfly that day. She danced on before Earle. She lingered till he overtook her, and before he could say two words, was off again. Then she sang gay snatches of song. She noted his anxious, grave face, and setting her saucy little head on one side, trilled forth:

"Prithee, why so pale, fond lover,
Prithee, why so pale?
For if looking well won't move her,
Looking ill must fail."

Finally, at a mossy seat under an oak tree, he made a dash, caught her, drew her to his side, and cried:

"Doris, be quiet and hear me; you *shall* hear me; I have something to tell you – something important."

"Bless us!" cried Doris, in pretended terror. "Is it going to rain? Are you going to tell me something dreadful about the weather, and I have a set of new ribbons on!"

"Dear Doris, it is not about the weather; it is an old, old story."

"Don't tell it, by any means. I hate old things."

"But this is very beautiful to me – so beautiful I must tell it."

"If you are so distracted about it, after the fashion of the Ancient Mariner and his tale, I know you have told it to at least half a dozen other girls."

"Never!" cried Earle; "never once! It is the story of my love, and I never loved any one but you."

"You have the advantage of me," said Doris, with a charming air. "It seems you have loved once; I never loved."

"Doris! Doris! Don't say that!" cried Earle, in agony.

"Not? Why, how many experiences should I have had at my age?" demanded Doris, with infantine archness.

"Yes, you are a child – a sweet, innocent child. But love me, Doris. Love me and be my wife. You know I adore you. Do not drive me to despair. I cannot live without you! Will you be my wife?"

Doris looked thoughtfully at Earle. From her eyes, her face, one would have said that she was realizing for the first time the great problem of love; that love was dawning in her young soul as she listened to Earle's pleading.

But in her heart she was telling herself that this play of love would give a new zest to her life at the farm, would add a little excitement to daily dullness; that, even if she promised, she need not be bound if anything better came in her way. Earle Moray might be the best husband she could find. What was it Mr. Leslie had said about him?

Earle, unconscious of this dark abyss in his idol's soul, sat watching the wide, violet eyes, the gently parted lips, the pink flush growing like the morning on her rounded cheek.

He put his arm gently about her.

"Doris, answer me."

"Can't I wait – an hour, a day, a week, a month, a year?"

"No! – a thousand times no! Suspense would kill me!"

"Why, I wouldn't die so easy as that."

"Doris, answer me. Say yes."

"Yes," said Doris, placidly.

Earl caught her in his arms, and kissed her fervently.

"Is that the way you mean to act?" laughed Doris, sweet and low. "Why did you tell me to say 'yes,' and get my hair ruffled, and my dress all crushed up that way?"

"You are mine, my own Doris! Tell me, no one else shall ever make love to you, or kiss you – you will never be another's?"

"Of course not," said Doris, with delicious assurance.

"You will be true to me forever."

"Yes; I will be true forever," said Doris.

If she played at love-making, she would play her part perfectly, let come what would afterward.

"And you will marry me? When will you marry me?" urged this impetuous young lover.

"How can I tell? This is all very pleasant, being lovers; and then you must ask – the people at the farm." She spoke with reluctance. It always irritated her to call the honest Brace family "parents, sister." "I can't be married till they say so. And – there's your mother."

"They will all agree to what will make us happy."

"And will you agree to what will make me happy?"

"Yes, my darling, with all my heart and soul!"

"Then you must build up fame, and get money, and go to London to live, for I do not love this country life. Only think, to live in London among the *literati* and the noted people! We will surely do that Earle?"

CHAPTER XVI

A BETROTHAL DAY

Gregory Leslie, seated before his easel, saw the young couple returning to the house. No need to tell him what had happened. The triumphant lover was in every line of Earle's face. Gregory Leslie sighed. Earle had won the most beautiful girl in England for his wife; but the artist was a deep student of human nature, and he read in Doris a disposition intensely worldly and selfish, an ambition that nothing could satisfy, a moral weakness that would break a promise as easily as Samson broke the seven green withes.

Doris ran away from Earle into the garden, and left him to enter the house alone. Gregory was the first one he saw.

"Wish me joy!" he cried, exultantly.

"With all my heart. What you have won, may you keep."

"I have no fear," said Earle, the gentleman. "She loves me."

"You have the original; I the picture. This picture will wake the curiosity of the world," said Gregory, looking at his work.

"But you will not tell who or where is the original? I do not wish my Doris to be pursued by a crowd of idle, curious people."

"On honor, no," said Gregory, holding out his hand.

Then Earle went on to find Mark and Patty.

Patty heard the news with a bewildered shake of her head.

"There's no counting on Doris," she said. "I thought she was playing with you. We shall see how it will turn out. I hope you will be happy."

"I am sure they will," spoke up Mattie, and left the room.

"There's your mother to be consulted," said Mark.

"She will be ready for anything that makes me happy."

"And Doris is too young. She cannot be married for a year yet," said Mark, decidedly. "She must have time to know her mind and to settle herself. If it were Mattie now, I'd feel different. Mattie is two years older, and she has a steadier nature."

"But it's not Mattie, thank fortune, for Mattie is my right hand," spoke up Patty, sharply; for she had read a little of her own child's cherished secret.

Earle was so overjoyed to get the promise of Doris, that he counted the year of probation a day, and saw nothing of Gregory Leslie's incredulity, of Patty's hesitation, of the anxiety of Mark, or of Mattie's shy withdrawing. These young lovers are selfish, even the best of them.

Patty roused herself to do justice to the occasion. She set forth a table with her best damask and the few old pieces of family silver; she spread out the choicest of her culinary stores, and invited Gregory Leslie to dine, and Mattie crowned the board with flowers, and put on her best dress, while Doris played the young *fiancee* to sweet perfection. Yet the keen eyes of the artist read not only Mattie's hidden pain, but Patty's sorrow and anxiety, and saw that Mark was not a rural father, joyful in a good match for his child, but a man in dire perplexity, uncertain what was right and wise for him to do.

"This girl and all her surroundings are a mystery," said the artist to himself.

Earle Moray saw no mystery; all was broad day in the light of his love. It seemed high noon even, when he went home at night, and the heavens were lit with starry hosts. Doris had kept him late, not unmindful of the mother watching alone to hear her boy's tale of wooing, mindful of her, rather, and finding it a pleasure to tantalize the unknown mother by a long delay.

But once free of the beguiling voice of his little siren, Earle remembered heartily his mother, and hurried to her as if his feet were winged with the sandals of Apollo. He flung open the gate with a crash; his joyous tread rang on the gravel walk; he dashed into the house, and into the sitting-room, and dropping on his knees by his mother, clasped his arms about her waist and cried:

"Mother! she is mine!"

"Heaven bless you, my son!" said his mother; but she sighed.

"You will go and see her, mother, to-morrow? You will see how wonderfully lovely she is; witty and accomplished, too; you are sure to be charmed, mother!"

If he had chosen a beggar maid, like King Cophetua, the mother would have made the best of it. Yet in her secret heart Mrs. Moray thought Earle too young to marry, and, besides, this girl was very young, and who knew if she would be a good wife. Earle's poetizing and dreaming were bad enough, but his love-making was even worse! Still his mother hid her fears, and sympathized and helped him plan his future, while in her soul she blessed Mark Brace for that year's delay.

Accustomed from childhood to open his heart to his mother, Earle poured forth to her the full story of his love, his adoration, his intoxicating passion for Doris. The mother heard and trembled. His was not the love of a Christian man for a wife, but of a pagan for the idol in his shrine. She felt that this love could not be blessed or bring blessing; it was earthly, infatuated, unreasoning, terrible. She trembled; yet trembling did not foresee the stormy and dreadful way that this love should lead her boy, nor in what horror and blackness its grave should be!

While Mrs. Moray and her son forgot the flight of time, one in anxiety, the other in overflowing joy, Mark Brace and Patty, at Brackenside Farm, also kept vigils. They were perplexed to know what was right.

"It was terrible to send us a child in that way," cried Patty. "We cannot tell what we should do with her."

"I think we can," said Mark. "We were told to do as by our own. We would give Mattie to Earle, if they both wished it. We can give Doris. No doubt her mother will be glad to know that she is safe in the care of a husband."

"But if they come to reclaim her, as I have expected?"

"They gave her to us, unasked, and must abide by our decision. Besides, here is a year's delay, and the engagement no secret. If the unknown mother watches her child, let her make known her rights and interfere."

"And the letter said she was of noble blood."

"Earle Moray is a good man, a gentleman, a scholar."

"But what would he think of this secret? They believe Doris to be ours, the same as Mattie."

"There's the rub," said Mark; "but here, to be honest, we must break silence. Not to Doris, but to Earle. We must tell Earle and his mother all the truth that we know. Married life goes ill, Patty, begun in mystery."

"Possibly Mrs. Moray will not consent."

"I think it will make no difference. If it does, we have done our duty, and that is all our trouble. I believe her mother is some poor timid soul, secretly married, and perhaps now dead, and the father also."

Patty sighed, and a look of trouble and conviction was in her face. She had thoughts about Doris that she did not tell even to Mark.

"Love and trouble always come together," sighed Patty.

"Doris has been a great help to us, as well as a great care," said Mark. "Her money saved us from ruin, and put us on our feet. I have done honestly by her, and have not forgotten that she has helped us. But I admit she fills me with anxiety, and is a strange element in our home. Once she is well married and gone, I think we shall be very happy together. I'll save this year's hundred pounds to give her a good outfit, and give her next year's hundred for a wedding present."

"She has had *all* the money since she was twelve," said Patty.

"True, but for the first twelve years I did not spend the half of it on her."

Next day Earle brought his mother, and proudly presented Doris to her.

Mrs. Moray, making allowances for the enthusiasm of a lover, had expected to find a rosy, pretty country girl. She saw a dainty, high-bred beauty, of the most exquisite and aristocratic type. She looked in wonder at Doris, then helplessly at Mark and Patty.

"How little your daughter resembles you!" she cried.

Patty blushed, honest Mark studied the carpet pattern, the pretty lips of Doris curled scornfully.

Mrs. Moray suspected a mystery. Mark Brace spoke up:

"I'd like a word with you and your son in the garden, ma'am."

Doris watched the three angrily from the window.

"What is father saying that I may not hear? See how oddly Mrs. Moray looks, and Earle too! What is he saying?"

"Perhaps that he has no fortune to give you," hinted Patty.

"My face is my fortune," cried Doris, pettishly.

"Dear child, do not be so vain! Suppose you lost that fortune."

"Then I'd kill myself. I would not live unbeautiful!"

Poor Patty held up her hands in horror.

CHAPTER XVII

A SHINING MEMORY

Yes, Mark, in plain phrases, had told his story. Mrs. Moray had opened the way, saying, frankly:

"Have you anything to tell us?"

"Yes. Doris is not my daughter. She was left, being two months old or thereabouts, on my doorstep, with a letter and a hundred pounds. Here is the letter for you to read. I have done my best for the girl, and I love her. I have tried to meet the wishes of her unknown mother. And of that mother and her history I know no more than you. If this makes a difference, now is the time to speak."

"It makes no difference," cried Earle; "only, if possible, I shall love her more than ever, she having no kith or kin."

"I saw she did not look in the least like any of you," said Mrs. Moray, thoughtfully.

Mark smiled.

"Yes, she is fine china, we are delf. I have never hinted this thing to Doris, and whatever you decide, I wish the secret rigidly kept, as I have kept it."

"What is there to decide!" cried Earle. "We are betrothed."

"Your mother may think differently," said Mark.

"Of course I am very sorry that the girl has no name or position," said Mrs. Moray.

Earle flushed.

"Her name will be our name, and her position I will make for her; and it will be honorable, I promise you."

"You are a stanch fellow," said Mark. "But I pledge you to keep this secret always. The idea of being a foundling might make Doris miserable, drive her half wild. Or it might set her up to some queer caper. She has a fine spirit of her own."

"Is she hard to manage?" asked Mrs. Moray, anxiously.

"I never found her hard to manage," said Earle, the dauntless.

"I hope you'll tell the same tale twenty years from now," said Mark, with a laugh.

He felt glad this matter was settled.

"We shall never mention it," said Mrs. Moray, yielding to the inevitable.

"And on the wedding-day I'll give her a hundred pounds, and she shall have a hundred pounds in her outfit."

"You are very generous, Mr. Brace," said Mrs. Moray.

"Doris is quick and keen. She'll ask you, Earle, what we were saying out here. You may mention the hundred pounds."

Just as he had foreseen, Doris questioned Earle, and he told her of the promised outfit and the wedding gift.

All this reconciled her more to the idea of marrying.

"My mother sha'n't interfere with what I get for my outfit," said she to herself. "I'll dress like a lady for once. One hundred pounds in clothes will make a very fair show."

Alas, Patty, in her thrifty mind, had already destined part of this hundred pounds to sheeting and table-clothes, blankets and pillow-cases! A hundred pounds for clothes! Fie on the extravagance! A white mull for the wedding gown, a black silk, a cashmere. This was Patty's notion of a suitable bridal *trousseau*!

"A hundred pounds on my wedding-day to use as I like."

"You may be sure I sha'n't touch it," laughed Earle.

"A hundred pounds! That is kind of him; but it is not much. I could spend it in one hour in London."

"Spend it in an hour. I'm glad you are not fond of money."

"I *am* fond of it. Money is the salt and essence of life."

"And you marry a man who has almost none?"

"But a man who can, who must, make a great deal."

"Suppose I should not?"

She looked at him in alarm.

"Suppose you should not? I tell you I would rather die than be mean, and plain, and poor, all my life."

"Dear child, you do not understand. You have exaggerated ideas. You shall never be left to suffer. Cheer up. I will make money, and you, my little idol, shall spend it!"

"That is fair," cried Doris, joyously. "I'll buy no end of things."

Gregory Leslie finished his picture of "Innocence," and took it away, knowing it should grace the walls of the Academy the next May. At Brackenside he had found an artistic ideal, and reached the acme of his art life. Doris wondered a little, the while she had inspired the artist, she had not conquered the man. Earle and Gregory made a compact of friendship and parted – to meet in pain.

Earle entered into a very happy winter. As Doris had inspired the artist so she inspired the poet; and Earle sang as he had never sung before. A little volume of his verses found a publisher, and public approval, and though the recompense did not at all meet the idea of Doris, yet she told herself that fame led the way to fortune.

Indulged by Mark and Patty, and waited on by Mattie, while Earle was in daily raptures over her charms, as bride-elect Doris managed to pass the winter at the farm with some content. Mark had hired for her a good piano, she had a store of French novels, and she sedulously refused to have any steps taken in the matter of wedding paraphernalia.

And yet, as the weeks crept by, Doris began to be weary of lover and friends and country home, and her longing for the gay world and all its glories filled her fantastic heart.

"Oh, why does not some lord with a coach and six come along and carry me off and marry me?" she cried one day as she sat in the window, lazily watching the falling snow.

"Surely you would not give up Earle for any lord!" cried Mattie.

"Wouldn't I! I only hope for his sake I'd not be tempted. If the lord had money enough, and jewels enough, and memorial castles enough I'm afraid, Mattie, you'd be left to console Earle."

"Child, don't talk in that reckless way," said Mrs. Brace.

"I'm only telling the truth. I find in myself a natural affinity for lords," said Doris, and Mrs. Brace sighed and flushed.

Well, the winter passed, and the love-making of Earle was becoming an old story, and farm life a weariness to the flesh, but still Doris hid her vexations and unrest in her heart. The hawthorn bloomed, when Mark came in one day, crying cheerily:

"Here's something like old days. The duke is coming home for good, and Lady Estelle is finally quite well and strong, but unmarried still – more's the pity."

"They've been away long," said Patty, uneasily.

"Ay. How long is it since I've seen his grace? Not since they all came here."

Patty looked warningly at him.

He stooped to tie his shoe.

"The duke been here!" said Doris. "The duke and his family to a common farm-house!"

"A farm-house is not so poor a place, missey," said Mark.

Doris sprung up.

"I remember – now I remember! I've had gleams of it, and wondered what I was trying to think of. They came in a gorgeous coach, with men in livery that I thought quite splendid; the duke, a tall, grand man, and with him two ladies?"

"Yes," said Patty, shortly.

"I can see my memories best in the dark," said Doris, shutting her lovely blue eyes. "It is a vague dream of a fair, proud face, a shining, lovely lady all in lace, and silk, and jewels!"

"That was Lady Estelle Hereford," said Mark, carried away.

"Lady Estelle Hereford! There's a name worth wearing! Why did not I have such a name – not that hateful Doris Brace!"

"Your name is good enough," said Mark, tartly.

"Why did they come?" demanded Doris.

These people were not good at fine evasions, but Mark made shift to answer:

"The duke is my landlord; it is only proper for him to see his best farm now and then."

"Did they see me?" urged Doris.

"Listen to Vanity! As if she was the show of the house!" said Mark.

"So I am. What here is worth seeing in comparison?"

"If that doesn't beat all!" said the scandalized Patty.

"Yes, he saw you," said Mark; "and now your next question will be, 'Did he admire me?' I won't answer you."

"There's no need; it goes without saying. Of course he admired me if he had eyes. I must have been lovely. Why did you not have my picture taken? I must have looked just like one of Correggio's little angels."

"Whose?" asked Mark.

"You didn't act much like an angel, if I remember right," said Mattie, quietly.

"Who cares for the *acting*, so long as one has the looks?" inquired Doris, with simplicity. "Share and share alike between sisters, you know, Mattie. I'll *look* like an angel, and you'll *act* like one!"

CHAPTER XVIII

A WOMAN AVERSE TO MARRIAGE

The Duke and Duchess of Downsbury had been so long absent from their home, that on their return they felt the greatest pleasure and keenest interest in every one whose name they remembered. Lady Estelle had outgrown her weakness of constitution. For many years it had been quite uncertain how her illness would terminate. It was not so much a malady as a wasting of strength, an utter absence of all hope or energy, a strange languor that attacked both body and mind.

Doctors recommended travel; travel fatigued her; they recommended change; change wearied her – nothing on earth seemed to have the least interest for her. Beautiful, high-born, blessed with every advantage that wealth and rank can give, she was afflicted with that most terrible of all diseases, hopeless *ennui*. Then, after a time, her physical health failed her, and it became a question as to whether she would recover or not. It was the one great trial that her devoted parents had to bear. They would have given all they had, all they cared for most, to have seen her happy, bright, light of heart as were others. That was never to be.

On this morning, early in the month of May, the duchess and her daughter were alone in the drawing-room of Downsbury Castle; a May morning that should have rejoiced the heart of a poet – crowned with golden rays of the sun, musical with the sweet song of birds. Lady Estelle stood at the window, looking over the trees, a wistful expression in her fine eyes. She never moved quickly when any thought or idea occurred to her; she never turned with the rapid movement peculiar to some people. An idea had evidently occurred to her now, for her face flushed, the white skin was for some minutes dyed scarlet; she waited until it died away, then she turned slowly and glanced at the duchess.

"Mamma," she said, "have you heard how the interview between papa and his agent passed off?"

"Quite satisfactorily, I believe," replied the duchess; "everything is prosperous. The tenants are all well, and there has been no misfortune among them."

Lady Estelle crossed the room; there was a beautiful stand of white hyacinths, and she bent over, caressing the beautiful buds.

"Do you remember the farmer we went to see?" she continued, "What was his name? – the man with the honest face?"

"Mark Brace?" replied the duchess.

"Yes," said Lady Estelle; "Mark Brace. Do you remember him, and that simple, gentle wife of his, and the two children, one as brown as a berry, and the other as fair as a lily, with hair of shining gold?"

"I remember them very well," replied her grace. "Indeed I could never forget that child; she was the most beautiful little creature I ever beheld; but she gave promise of being one of the worst."

"Oh, mamma, do not say such a thing!" cried Lady Estelle, with more animation than was usual with her.

"Why not, my dear?" said the duchess, calmly. "Great beauty and great wickedness so often go together."

"But it seems such a cruel thing to say of a child – a little child."

"Well, perhaps it does seem rather hard; but then, 'the child gives promise of the man,' and if ever child was precocious in vanity and ambition, that child was. You forget her."

"Yes," said Lady Estelle. "It is so long since, I forget her; but you are generally merciful in your judgments, mamma. It seems strange to hear you speak harshly of a child."

The duchess made no reply. The subject seemed to have no particular interest for her, whereas the beautiful point-lace she was making had great claims on her attention. After a few minutes Lady Estelle continued:

"I suppose nothing more has been heard of the child; no one has claimed her, or the story would have reached us. I must confess that I feel some little curiosity as to what she is like. I should be pleased to see her."

"If the girl bears out the promise of her youth, she would be worth seeing," said the duchess.

The entrance of her husband interrupted her, and she said no more.

The Duke of Downsbury looked pleased.

"My dear," he said to his wife, "I am delighted. I have the finest agent in the country. The accounts and everything else are in the finest possible order. I am so pleased that I thought of giving a dinner to the tenants; it could be no annoyance to you, and it would be a nice little act of attention, after being absent so long."

The duchess quite agreed with the project. It would be a compliment to them, and a pleasure to herself, she said.

The duke smiled to think what an amiable wife he had.

"To all your tenants, papa?" said Lady Estelle, in her graceful, languid way.

"Yes, all of them – rich and poor; but then there are no poor."

She smiled.

"I shall see Mark Brace," she said. "I was just telling mamma that I felt some interest in that child we saw. I should like to know how she has turned out."

The duke's face lighted up.

"That pretty little girl," he said; "the one over whom there was a mystery. I had forgotten her, and the story too. I should like to see her. What wonderful hair she had. I must tell Mark Brace to bring her over."

"Mark Brace is a sensible man," the duchess hastened to observe; "I am sure he will understand. She was a vain child then – she will be even vainer now. No one knows what nonsensical ideas will fill her mind if she thinks she has been invited here; you might do her a great harm by such indiscretion. Tell him to bring her over if he likes; but tell him at the same time, it will be as well for him not to mention it – he is sensible enough to understand."

"I see – you are quite right, my dear – it shall be just as you say."

And Lady Estelle hastened to add:

"You are wise, mamma. I feel some curiosity over her. I have a vague recollection of a brilliant, beautiful child, who seemed very much out of place in that quiet farm-house. But it is so long ago."

Looking at his daughter, the duke hardly realized how long it was – she did not look one year older; perhaps the delicate state of her health had preserved her face from all marks of time. The calm, high-bred features were unruffled as ever; there was not one line on the fair brow, nor round the calm, serene lips; the fair hair was abundant and shining as ever; the light of the proud, brilliant eyes was undimmed. Time, indeed, seemed to have stood still for Lady Estelle Hereford. It might be that she had escaped the wear and tear of emotion, so had had nothing to mar the calm serenity of her life or her features. She went back to her post at the window, and stood once more looking out over the trees. She remained silent, dreamy, abstracted, while the duke and duchess discussed their affairs, their tenants, friends, and neighbors.

"Estelle," said the duke, at length, "are you going to drive to-day?"

"No, papa, I think not; I do not care to go."

The duke and duchess exchanged glances.

"My dear Estelle," said the duke, gravely, "I wish that you did feel interested in going out or in anything else. We were in great hopes, your mother and I, that when you returned you would show a

little more animation, a little more interest in the world around you – more capacity for enjoyment. Could you not throw off that languor, and be bright, animated, and happy?"

She smiled, and if that smile concealed any pain, no one knew it.

"I am happy, papa," she said; "but my languor is, I suppose, part of myself – I should not know how to throw it off. I suppose the right thing to do when you propose a walk or a drive, on this lovely May morning, would be to blush – to glow and dimple. I am really sorry that I am so fashioned by nature as to find anything of the kind impossible."

The duke rose from his seat and went to his daughter. He placed his arm round the stately figure.

"Do you think that I am scolding you, Estelle?" he said. "I shall never do that. Nor could I be more proud of you than I am. It is only for your own sake that I speak to you, and because I long to see you happy. I should like to see you married, Estelle, and to hold my grandchildren in my arms before I die."

She started, the calm face grew a shade paler, then she clasped her arms round his neck.

"I am so happy with you and mamma," she replied, "I do not want any other love."

The next minute she had quitted the room.

The duchess looked at her husband with a smile.

"It is useless," she said. "Estelle is like no other woman in the world. I do not think she is capable of love; I do not think the man is born who could win from her a kindly smile, a warm word, or a loving look. She loves us; no one else. I have watched her year after year, and feel sure of it."

"It is strange, too," said the duke, "for the Herefords are not a cold-hearted race. And do you really think that she will never marry?"

"I feel sure of it. I do not think she will ever like any one well enough. There is variety in all creation. We must not be surprised to find it in ladies."

The day fixed for the tenants' dinner came round, and among the others Mark Brace arrived at the Castle in a state of great glory. There had been great excitement at Brackenside when the invitation reached there, and Mark, with considerable difficulty, had mastered it.

"You are to dine at the Castle," said Doris, with that quickness which seemed to take everything in at one glance. "Then, for once in your life, you must have a suit of clothes that pretend to fit you. Yours always look as though you had found them by accident, and had met with considerable difficulty in the way of putting them on."

Mark laughed, but Patty took up the cudgels for her husband.

"I am sure your father always looks nice, Doris."

"Why, mother, how can you judge?"

"It is not the coat that makes the man," said Patty.

Doris laughed.

"You are all brimful of good sentiments, but you are quite wrong; broadcloth makes its way where fustian is trampled under foot. I know all about the genuine stamp, a man's being a man for all that; but it is great nonsense. You believe me, father, there is much in having good clothes – the habit makes the monk."

They looked at her in wonder, as they generally did when she talked above them.

"Have some good clothes," Doris continued. "You have no idea how much the other tenants will respect you if you are well dressed and show a good gold chain."

Mark laughed. The cynicism of Doris always amused him.

Here he saw some glimmer of sense in what she said; so Mark went to Quainton, an adjacent town, and ordered a suit of the finest broadcloth. Great was the excitement when it came home, and the honest farmer stood arrayed in all his glory. He looked very delighted, but stiff and uncomfortable; his arms seemed longer than ever, his hands redder and more awkward; still he tried to do honor to his new estate by carrying it off boldly. To his wife he confided that he should not always like being a gentleman, to be dressed so tightly; and Mark's wife flung her loving arms round his neck.

"You are a gentleman," she said; "one of nature's very own."

The whole family stood by the gate to see Mark drive off. Doris had placed a white rose in his buttonhole; his wife and daughter watched him with pride and exultation in their hearts, while Doris thought to herself that, after all, even a broadcloth suit could not make what she called a gentleman.

"I am sure that no one in the room will look so nice as your father," said Mrs. Brace, proudly; the glories of the new broadcloth had dazzled her. Mattie quite agreed with her, while Doris, with a mocking smile, went away.

CHAPTER XIX

A PROSPECTIVE PLEASURE FOR DORIS

The tenants' dinner was a great success. It was well attended, for all were anxious to show that they appreciated and returned the duke's kindly feeling. To Mark it was a dream of glory; he had seen nothing like the interior of this magnificent castle. The state rooms, the superb hall, with its blazonry of shields and armor; the banquet-room, with its groined roof and grand pictures, puzzled him. It was something to be a tenant of such a duke as this. As for the dinner itself, it simply amazed him; he did not know the name of half the dishes or half the wines; as for the fruit, the silver, the servants in attendance, he thought of it all with bated breath.

Doris had desired him, in a whisper, to tell her all he saw, and to be sure and not forget anything. Honest Mark tried to take an inventory, but his mind failed him: it gave way under the strain; he could not grasp the half what he saw and heard.

Mark's wonder was not diminished when a footman, bending very respectfully, asked him to be kind enough to follow him. He arose instantly, and followed through such dazzling and magnificent rooms that he began to think of the wonders of the "Arabian Nights" he had read when a boy. They came to a door that was covered with rich velvet hangings; the footman pushed them aside, opened it, and Mark Brace found himself, to his great consternation and distress, in the presence of the duchess and her daughter, both in evening dress; and the shimmer of silk, the sheen of jewels, were enough to bewilder the honest farmer. Still he had a native dignity of his own of which nothing could deprive him. Although his hands felt more stiff and red than ever, and he was most sorely puzzled what to do with them, still he recollected himself, and bowed to the ladies in a fashion quite his own.

The duchess received him kindly. Lady Estelle spoke no word, but her indolent, handsome eyes, rested on his face.

"Mr. Brace," said her grace, "I am pleased to see you. We have been long absent."

Mark muttered something to the effect: "Heaven bless them, they were very welcome home."

The duchess smiled, and Lady Estelle thought to herself:

"What a simple, honest man he is."

Mark had disposed of his hands to his own satisfaction: one was placed behind him, where it lay rigid and straight, the other hung down by his side as though slightly ashamed of itself. Then he found himself in difficulties over his feet. He had some dim idea that he had heard his wife say it was genteel to stand with the heels together; he tried it, and it proved a dead failure.

The duchess relieved him of all further embarrassment by pointing to a chair. He sat down with a deep sigh that was almost a gasp – thankful to be relieved at last.

"I wanted to see you, Mr. Brace," continued the stately lady, "to ask how the child is whom we saw at the farm."

Mark was himself again with something to say of Doris. His face brightened.

"She is not a child now, your grace; she has grown to be a beautiful girl."

"Is she still beautiful?" asked her grace.

"I do not think the sun, when it rises in the morning, is brighter," replied Mark, with unconscious poetry.

"I am almost sorry to hear it," said her grace. "There are more qualities than beauty for a girl in her position, Mr. Brace."

"Yes; but we can't help it."

"And," interrupted the duchess, "have you heard any more? Do you know to whom she belongs? Have you any trace of her parentage?"

Lady Estelle shut her jeweled fan, and laid it on the table. Her eyes were fixed on Mark's face.

"No, your grace," he replied. "We know no more than we did on the day she first came to us. The money comes every year. It always comes from London, generally in Bank of England notes, quite new and crisp; sometimes gold packed in a little box. It never fails."

"It is so strange. There is never a word about the child in the parcels? No questions? No remarks?"

"No; not one," he replied.

"And what have you done with her all these years?" asked the duchess. "She had high spirits of her own."

"She has been to school, your grace; it was her own wish she should go. She was away for four years without coming home."

"Then she is clever and accomplished?" said the duchess.

"Yes," replied Mark; "she is as clever as any lady in the land."

Then his face grew crimson, and he said to himself that he had made a great blunder. Lady Estelle smiled in her usual languid fashion.

"I mean, your grace," exclaimed Mark, "that she is really very clever. She sings like a mermaid," he added, delighted at his own figure of speech; "she can dance, and speaks two foreign languages."

The duchess laughed. It was impossible to help it; Mark's face was such a study as he enumerated this list of accomplishments.

"I should like to see your *protegee*, Mr. Brace," said her grace; "but as she is inclined to be vain, it would be wise perhaps not to tell her that I have expressed such a wish."

Mark looked very wise; he quite agreed with it.

"You might say," continued her grace, "that you are coming over to the Castle next week on business, and bring her with you."

"I will, your grace," said Mark, proudly. "I am coming on business next Tuesday; my lease is to be renewed. I will bring her with me. She is engaged to be married," he added, bluntly.

"Engaged!" repeated the duchess. "Why, she cannot be more than nineteen."

"She is nineteen," said Mark; "and, of course, I shall not allow her to be married for a year."

"You are quite right," interrupted the duchess.

Lady Estelle had opened her fan, and she stirred it gently, as she asked:

"To whom is she engaged?"

Mark declared, in reporting the conversation, that it was the grammar that destroyed him. It made him feel unequal to giving any answer. He turned uneasily in his chair.

"To whom is she engaged?" repeated the clear, musical voice.

"Why, my lady, he is a poet and a gentleman."

"A poet and a gentleman!" repeated the duchess. "That is high praise."

"He deserves it, your grace. He has written a book – I cannot say whether it has been read among the great people; but, with such as us, the verses are on the lips of every man, woman and child."

"What is the poet's name?" asked Lady Estelle.

"Earle Moray, my lady. He lives near us, and his father was a clergyman. His mother is a very quiet, grave lady. She always thought that Doris was my daughter, and when she heard the truth she was quite unwilling for her son to make such a marriage. But he talked her over."

Lady Estelle used her fan vigorously; her face had suddenly grown burning red.

"They are very much attached to each other," continued Mark. "I never saw anything like the way in which he worships her. I am sure that if he lost her he would go mad."

"Let us hope not," said the duchess, with a smile. "Going mad is a very serious matter."

"Then," said the low, sweet voice of Lady Estelle, "your *protegee* is provided for, Mr. Brace? Her future is safe?"

"I hope so, my lady," said cautious Mark. "But as the wedding does not take place for a year, much may happen in that time."

"We will hope it will all end happily," said her grace, kindly.

Then Mark understood that his interview had ended. Lady Estelle murmured a careless adieu: the duchess spoke kindly of Patty, and Mark went home that night a proud and happy man.

He was greeted with innumerable questions; his wife seemed to think that Mark had been the principal person present: that except for the fact of his presence, the dinner-party would have been insignificant. Doris positively bewildered him with questions. Mrs. Brace and Mattie sat with awe and wonder on their faces.

"I cannot answer so many questions, Doris," said Mark, at last. "I tell you what – I am going to the Castle again on Tuesday to renew my lease; will you go with me?"

Her beautiful face flushed crimson.

"Will I? Of course I will," Doris said.

"What would they say?" asked Mattie.

"They would not say anything," said Mark. "I should tell them that my daughter Doris had a great fancy for seeing the inside of a castle; and you may take my word they will be kind enough."

"Let Mattie go," suggested Mrs. Brace.

But Mattie shrank back.

"Oh, no!" she said, "I should not care for it, I would rather not."

"And I would give a year of my life," said Doris.

"You need not give anything," said Mark. "Dress yourself tidily, not finely," he added, with a touch of natural shrewdness. "One does not require finery in going to see a duchess."

"Shall I see the duchess?" asked Doris, opening her eyes wide with surprise.

Then Mark Brace perceived his error.

"I am a poor hand at keeping a secret," he thought. "If you go to the Castle," he replied, "it is very probable you will see the Duchess of Downsbury."

"I shall not be able to sleep from this moment till then," cried Doris.

And when Earle Moray came she could talk to him about nothing but the intensity of the pleasure in store for her. A hundred times and more did Mark repent giving the invitation; he had no peace, no rest; even Earle himself could not persuade her to talk about anything except the grandeur of Downsbury Castle.

"I am quite sorry I cannot go back to school for a few days," she said, "just to make all my school-fellows mad with jealousy."

"Why should they be mad?" asked Mattie.

"You do not know how much they talk about Downsbury Castle," she replied. "My dear, they call England a Christian land, and they pray for the conversion of all pagans and idolaters. There are no such idolaters as these same English, who worship rank, title, and wealth, as they never worshiped Heaven."

"You are one of them, Doris," said Mattie.

"Not altogether. Underneath my worship there is a vein of cynicism, but no one suspects it. If you want to learn a few lessons of that kind, Mattie, you should go to a fashionable boarding-school. I declare that I never heard any one quoted for being good or virtuous; it was always for being nobly born, rich, titled. I learned my lesson quickly, Mattie."

"You did, indeed," was the brief reply, "and it is a lesson that I am sorry Earle's wife should ever have taken to heart."

The only reply was a careless laugh. Doris did not even care to quarrel with her sister, so highly delighted was she at the prospect of going to the Castle.

At length, to the intense delight and the relief of every one, Tuesday came, and it was time to go.

Doris did not love nature. She had no appreciation of its beauties; but in after years she did remember how the sun had shone on this day, and how blithely the little birds had sung in the trees;

how sweet was the perfume of the flowers and the fragrance of the hedges as they drove to Downsbury Castle.

CHAPTER XX

"THEY TELL ME, CHILD, THAT YOU ARE REALLY PROMISED IN MARRIAGE."

It was a busy morning at Downsbury Castle. Several visitors had called, and when Mark, with his beautiful *protegee*, arrived, they were shown into the library to await the duke's leisure. It was evident to Mark that they had been expected, for a tempting lunch was served to them; a lunch the servants called it – to Mark and Doris it seemed a most sumptuous dinner. Mark could not help watching the girl. He himself was strange, embarrassed, confused; the silver fork was heavy, the napkin confused him; she sat with the easy grace and dignity of a young queen, sipping the rosy wine from the richly cut glass, and looking quite at her ease over it.

"You seem quite at home, Doris," said Mark, enviously.

"I feel so," she replied. "I could live happily enough here; it is so easy to be good when one is rich."

He looked at her in dull wonder, as he generally did when she puzzled him.

"But Doris," he said, "that is just exactly the opposite of what the Bible says. Don't you remember the text about the rich man, the camel, and the needle's eye?"

"I remember it," she replied. "Those who have no money long for it, and some desire it so ardently they will do anything to win it; the rich have no need to be envious or jealous."

He was not clever enough to argue with her; the only thing he could do was to tell her she was wrong, and that she should not talk that way.

Before there was time to reply, the door opened, and the duke came in.

He spoke kindly, saying that the duchess was engaged with some visitors, but that Lady Estelle Hereford would see Miss Brace, and would be pleased to show her the pictures and the flowers.

Mark looked astounded at the condescension; even the duke himself felt some little surprise when she had made the offer.

"You had better let the housekeeper take her, my dear," he had said.

"Very well, papa," she replied, carelessly; but after a few minutes she added: "I think it will amuse me to see this young girl, papa. I will show her some of the pictures and my flowers."

"She would be more comfortable with the housekeeper," he said; "but do as you wish, my dear."

When he saw the beautiful, refined, high-bred young girl seated at the table, he changed his mind – it did not seem so certain that she would be more comfortable with the housekeeper. He looked in wonder at her perfect face and graceful figure.

"She looks like a young princess," he said to himself: and his manner almost involuntarily changed – something of chivalrous respect came into it; and Doris, so marvelously quick, detected the change. She saw that he admired her, and then she felt quite at her ease.

He said something to Mark about the agent who was waiting to see him. Then the door opened, and Lady Estelle entered.

As her eyes fell upon the young girl she started, and her face grew deadly pale – so pale that the duke stepped hastily forward, and cried out:

"Are you ill, Estelle?"

"No," she replied; "the day is warm, and warm weather never suits me. Good-morning, Mr. Brace. Is this your daughter?"

Mark bowed to the pale, stately lady.

"This is my daughter, my lady," he replied.

Lady Estelle Hereford, going nearer to her, looked into the beautiful, radiant face. Doris returned the glance, and the two remained for one minute looking, for the second time in their lives, steadily at each other.

"I am glad to see you," said Lady Estelle, kindly. "I remember having seen you when you were a child."

Doris bowed. There was perfect ease, perfect grace in her manner, and the duke, looking at her, was fairly puzzled; that high-bred, perfect repose, that fascinating charm of manner surprised him. He looked at his daughter to see if she shared his surprise, and felt anxious about her when he saw that her face was still deadly pale.

Then he asked Mark to go and see the agent. Lady Estelle, with her rigid lips, smiled at Doris.

"I will take charge of you," she said. "Come with me." They left the room together. "We will go to the boudoir first," she said. "There are some very fine paintings; you will like to see them."

When they reached the boudoir Lady Estelle seemed to forget why they had gone there. She sat down on the couch, and placed Doris by her side.

"I saw you once when you were quite a little child," she said. "How you have altered; how tall you have grown!" She laid her hands on the shining waves of hair. "What beautiful hair you have!" she continued, and her fingers lingered caressingly on it. "They tell me, child, that you are really promised in marriage – is it true?"

There was no flush on that lovely young face; no sweet, tender coyness in the beautiful eyes; they were raised quite calmly to the questioning face.

"Yes," she replied; "it is quite true."

A look quite indescribable came over Lady Estelle; something yearning, wistful; then she slowly added:

"A love-story always interests me; will you tell me yours?"

"I have none," was the quick reply. "Earle Moray asked me to marry him, and I said yes."

"But you love him?" asked Lady Estelle.

"Yes, I love him – at least I suppose so. I do not know what love is; but I imagine I love him."

"You do not know what love is?" said Lady Estelle, in a tone of suppressed vehemence. "I will tell you. It is a fire that burns and pains – burns and pains; it is a torrent that destroys everything in its way; it is a hurricane that sweeps over every obstacle; it is a tempest in which the ship is forever and ever tossed; it is the highest bliss, the deepest misery! Oh, child! pray, pray that you may never know what love is!"

Who could have recognized the quiet, graceful, languid Lady Estelle? Her face shone like flame, and her eyes flashed fire – the calm, proud repose was all gone. Doris looked at her in wonder.

"There must be many kinds of love. I know nothing of that which you describe, and Earle loves me quite differently."

"How does he love you?" asked Lady Estelle.

"He is always singing to me, and these are his favorite lines:

"Thou art my life, my soul, my heart,
The very eyes of me;
Thou hast command of every part,
To live and die for thee."

"And that just expresses Earle's love."

The lady's eyes were riveted on the glorious face; the rich, sweet voice had given such force and effect to the words. Then she said, anxiously:

"You will be very happy in your new life, I hope – even should I never see you again – I hope you will be happy."

"I hope so," replied Doris, in a dubious voice. Then her face brightened as she looked round the magnificent room. "I should be happy enough here," she said. "This is what my soul loves best – this is better than love."

The lady drew back from the girl as though she had been struck.

"Faithless and debonair," she murmured.

Doris looked inquiringly at her.

"This is what you love best?" she said. "You mean luxury and magnificence?"

"Yes, I mean that – it is ten thousand times better than love."

"But," said Lady Estelle, "that is a strange doctrine for one so young as you."

"I am young, but I know something of life," said Doris. "I know that money can purchase everything, can do everything, can influence everything."

"But," said Lady Estelle, drawing still further from her, "you would not surely tell me that of all the gifts of this world you value money most."

"I think I do," said Doris, with a frank smile.

"That is strange in one so young," said Lady Estelle. "I am so sorry." Then she rose, saying, coldly: "You will like to see the pictures. You think it strange that I should speak to you in this fashion. As I told you before, a love-story interests me. I am sorry that you have none."

The change was soon perceived by Doris, and just as quickly understood.

"I do not think," she said, gently, "that you have quite understood me. I do not love money; that is, the actual gold. It is the pleasures that money can purchase which seem to me so enviable, that I long so urgently for."

Lady Estelle smiled.

"I see – I understand. You did not express just what you meant; that is a different thing. There seems to me something hateful in the love of money. So you long for pleasure, my poor child. You little know how soon it would tire you."

"Indeed, it never would," she replied, eagerly. "I should like – oh, how much I should like! – to live always in rooms beautiful as these, to wear shining jewels, rich silks, costly laces! I do not, and never have, liked my own home; in some strange way it never seems to belong to me, nor I to it."

Lady Estelle drew near to her again.

"You do not like it, poor child?" she said. "That is very sad. Yet they are very kind to you."

"Yes, they are kind to me. I cannot explain what I mean. I never seem to think as they think, or do as they do. I am not good either, after their fashion of being good."

"What is your idea of being good?" asked Lady Estelle.

"Pleasing myself, amusing myself, making myself happy."

"It is comfortable philosophy at least. What is he like, this Earle Moray, whom your father calls poet and gentleman?" asked Lady Estelle.

Doris smiled. She did not blush, nor did her eyes droop; there was no shyness nor timidity.

"He is fair," she replied, "and he has a noble head, crowned with clustering hair; his face is spiritual and tender, and his mouth is beautiful as a woman's."

"That is a good description; I can almost see him. You love him or you could not describe him so."

"He will be a great man in the future," replied the girl.

Then she started at finding on what familiar terms she was with this daughter of a mighty duke. They were sitting side by side, and Lady Estelle had again taken the shining hair in her hand. Doris' hat had become unfastened, and she held it with careless grace. It even surprised herself to find she was as much at home and at her ease with Lady Estelle Hereford as she was with Mattie.

"Where shall you live after you married?" asked Lady Estelle, gently.

"At Lindenholm for some little time: but Earle has promised me that I shall go to London. I live only in that hope."

"Why do you wish so ardently for London?"

"Because people know what life means there. They have balls, parties, *fetes*, music, operas, theaters, and I long for a life of pleasure."

"How much you will have to suffer?" said Lady Estelle, unconsciously.

"Why?" asked Doris, in surprise.

"Because you expect so much, and the world has so little to give – that is why. But come, we are forgetting the pictures."

In the long gallery they were joined by the duke: curiosity to again see the beautiful face had brought him there. Doris was looking at a portrait that pleased her very much, and her beautiful profile was seen to perfection. The duke started as his eyes fell upon it.

He went up to his daughter.

"Estelle," he said, in a low voice, "who is it that young girl resembles – some one we know well? Look at the curve of the lip, the straight, clear brow!"

"I do not see any likeness," she replied, with white, trembling lips, "none at all; but, oh! papa, I am so tired. I am not so well as usual to-day; I seem to have no strength."

She sat on one of the crimson seats, and the duke forgot all about their visitor in his anxiety for her.

"I will send these people home," he said; but she interrupted him.

"Not just yet, papa; it will be such a pleasure to me to show that pretty young girl my flowers."

CHAPTER XXI

HER EYES INVITED HIM

Lady Estelle and Doris went together through the beautiful conservatories that formed one of the great attractions of the Castle, and Doris fancied herself in fairyland. She showed them, that although she might have no particular love for nature, she had a grand eye for the picturesque. Lady Estelle desired her here and there to gather a spray of choice blossoms. She did so, and the way in which she grouped and arranged them was marvelous.

"You have a good eye for color," said Lady Estelle, as she watched the white fingers, with the scarlet and amber flowers. It pleased her to see the girl lingering among them – to see the beautiful face bending over the blossoms.

They came to a pretty little corridor, roofed with glass; but the glass was hidden by the luxuriance of an exotic climbing plant. Great scarlet bells, with white, fragrant hearts, hung down in glorious profusion. In the middle of the corridor stood a large fountain, and the water was brilliant with gold fish. There were pretty seats, half overhung by the leaves of the hanging plant. It was when they reached here that the servant came in search of Lady Estelle; she was wanted in the drawing-room, to see some visitors who had arrived. She turned to Doris, with a kindly smile:

"I am sure you must be tired," she said; "will you rest here? I am sorry to leave you, but I shall not be long."

With the dignified air of a young princess, Doris seated herself, the footman looking on in silent wonder; he had rarely seen his languid mistress so attentive even to her most intimate friends.

Then Doris was left alone in the rich, mellow light. The rippling spray of the fountain and the gleaming of the gold fish amused her for some time: then she took up her magnificent flowers, and began to arrange them.

She was so deeply engaged with them, that she did not hear the sound of footsteps; the velvet curtain at the end of the corridor was raised, and a tall, handsome man stood looking in mute wonder at the picture before him.

There, in the mellow light, was a picture that for beauty of coloring could not be surpassed. A young girl, with the face of an angel, and hair of the purest shining gold; white hands that shone like snow-flakes, among crimson and amber blossoms; the background was formed by the scarlet bells and green leaves of the drooping plant.

He stood for some minutes looking on in silent wonder; and while he so stands, Lord Charles Vivianne is an object worth studying; tall, well made, with a fine, erect figure, and easy, dignified bearing, he would attract attention even among a crowd of men. His face is handsome, but not good; the eyes are dark and piercing; the brows are arched and thick; but the mouth, the key to the whole face, is a bad one. The lips, thick and weak, are hidden by a mustache. It is the face of a man who lives entirely to please himself – who knows no restraint – who consults his own inclinations, and who would sacrifice every one and everything to himself.

The dark eyes are riveted on the golden hair and exquisite face of the girl.

It is some minutes before she becomes aware of his presence, and then something causes her to look up, and she sees those same dark eyes, full of admiration, glancing at her.

She does not blush, but the dainty rose-bloom deepens on her face, and the violet eyes flash back a look of archest coquetry into his own.

That look decided him. If she had blushed or looked at all embarrassed, he, being what is called a gentleman, would have turned away; that glance, so full of fire, of coquetry – so subtle, so sweet – seemed to start something like delicious poison through his veins.

He comes nearer to her, making a most profound and respectful bow. Then he sees her dress, so plain and homely, although coquettishly worn, and he is at a loss to imagine who she can be. The loveliness, the perfect aristocratic grace of face and figure, are what he would have expected from a visitor at Downsby Castle. The impress of high birth is on both of them, but the dress is not even equal to that of a lady's-maid, yet she is sitting there so perfectly at her ease, she must be a visitor.

Lord Charles Vivianne, with his eyes still riveted upon her, speculates in vain.

"I beg pardon," he says at last. "I hope you will accept my apologies; but I was told that Lady Estelle was here, and I wish to see her."

"She will return very soon," replies Doris. The words are brief and simple, but the eyes seem to say, "stay with me till she comes."

"Have I the pleasure of speaking to a visitor at the Castle?" he asks, with a bow.

Then she blushes, feeling more ashamed than ever of Brackenside and its belongings.

"I came to see the Castle," she replies; "and Lady Estelle is kind enough to show me the flowers."

He understood at once. Then, saying to himself that in all probability she was a *protegee* of my lady's, the daughter of some tenant-farmer, who had, as a great treat, been promised a sight of the wonders of the Castle – he was perfectly at his ease then.

There was no such admirer of fair women in all the world as Lord Vivianne, and this was the fairest he had ever seen. A farmer's daughter, without the prestige of rank and wealth to save her – fair prey for him. Had she been the daughter of a duke, an earl, a baron, he would simply have laid his plans for flirting with her; as it was, he sat down and deliberately said to himself that heart and soul should be his.

Some little faults lay at her door. Her eyes invited him; they said things that the lips would not have dared to utter; they were full of the sweetest and most subtle invitation, gracefully veiled by the long, dark lashes. Lord Charles had done as he would all his life, and now that his eyes rested on this fairest of all faces, it was not likely that he would let anything baffle him.

"You have a beautiful resting-place," he said. "I have never seen anything to equal the beauty of this plant."

"It is very beautiful," she replied; "to me it seems like fairyland."

"I have been staying here for a week," he continued, "and I have not seen half the beauty of the Castle yet."

"You have been staying here!" she said, with unconscious stress on the word "here."

"Yes; I admire the scenery hereabouts. I think it is almost about the finest we have."

"I have never been out of this county," she replied, "so I cannot tell."

He raised his dark brows in surprise.

"You have never been away from home?" he said; "what a pity, and what a shame!"

"Why is it a shame?" she asked, with another of those sweet glances that invited him to woo her.

"Providence does not send such a face as yours in the world once in a century," he replied, "and then all the world should see it." Doris looked pleased, not shy or timid; she was perfectly at home with him, and he saw it. "I must introduce myself," he said, "as Lady Estelle does not return – I am Lord Charles Vivianne – if I dare, I should ask to whom I have the honor of speaking."

She did blush then with gratified vanity and delight. It was something that she should have a handsome lord by her side, and that he should admire her. He did admire her, she knew; she could read it in his eyes and the flattering homage of his smile.

Lord Charles Vivianne! – she wondered whether he was very rich, great, and celebrated. A lord! – oh, if she could only make a conquest of him!

"I wish I dare ask to whom I have the honor of speaking."

And then she raised her eyes with something of defiance, and said:

"My name is Doris – Doris Brace."

He said the name softly.

"Doris! What a pretty name! Now that you have been kind enough to answer me one question, I should like to ask another – do you live near here?"

"I live at Brackenside," she replied. "My father is a tenant of the duke's – he is a farmer."

"Then I was right in my first surmise," he said.

"Pray, what was that?" asked Doris.

"I was watching you for some minutes before you saw me, and I guessed that you were a daughter of one of the duke's tenants."

She raised her head with a magnificent pride and lofty disdain that almost annihilated him.

"That is to say you thought I looked like a farmer's daughter. I thank you so much for the compliment."

"Nay," he replied; "I thought that you looked like a queen."

The dark eyes seemed to flash light and love into her own. It must be admitted that Lord Charles Vivianne thoroughly understood the art of winning women.

"Doris!" he said; "I am struck with the name, because I do not remember that I ever met with any one who bore it before. How beautiful these flowers are! Will you give me one to keep in memory of this, our first meeting?"

She tightened her hold on the scarlet and amber blossoms. He could not help noticing the beauty of the white hand that held them.

"I think not," she replied. "In all the poems that I ever read something is done to win a flower before it is given."

"I have done something to win it," he replied.

She raised her beautiful eyes to his.

"Have you? I did not know it. Will you tell me what it is?"

"If you will promise me not to be angry," he whispered.

She drew back from him and laughed.

"How can I be angry?" she asked. "I beg of you to tell me what you have done to win a flower."

His eyes seemed to light his face with love and passion.

"I will tell you what I have done," he said. "In one minute I have laid at your feet, in silence, the homage that another could not have won in a whole year. Now will you give me a flower?"

He took one of the scarlet blossoms, and in doing so his fingers touched hers.

"I shall never part with it," he said. Then he heard the sound of the opening of the conservatory door, and he knew that Lady Estelle was coming. "Shall you be very angry with me," he asked, in a quiet whisper, "if you see me near your home."

"No," she replied.

Then he arose and went over to the other end of the conservatory, so that when Lady Estelle entered, she could not have any idea that they had exchanged one word.

Still she looked surprised, and not very well pleased at finding him there. He came forward quickly, never even looking at Doris.

"I had hoped to find you here, Lady Estelle," he said. "I have waited your return. I am going over to Hyndlow this morning, and you said that you wished me to take something to Lady Eleanor."

"Yes," she replied; "I will attend to it. I shall see you before you go."

She dismissed him with a queenly bow, and he went, never once looking at Doris, but her eyes lingered on him till he was out of sight; then she looked at Lady Estelle, and they seemed to reproach the duke's daughter that she had not considered her worthy of an introduction.

Lady Estelle perfectly understood the mute reproach, but would not notice it.

"I am sorry," she said, languidly, "that the duchess is so busily engaged this morning. She has asked me to say that she wishes you well in the new life opening to you."

"It is time to go," thought Doris. Her quick tact seemed to be almost a sixth sense. She thanked Lady Estelle for her kindness, and Lady Estelle did what was very unusual for her – held out her hand.

"Good-bye!" she said, with a faint, sad smile. "You will remember our little argument, and always bear in mind that the greatest of earthy blessings is love."

"I shall remember that you have said so," laughed Doris, wondering why the cold, jeweled hand held hers so tightly.

"If I never see you again," said the languid, caressing voice, "I shall not forget you, and I wish you well."

There was something so strange in the lady's face and manner that Doris was half startled.

The usual light, graceful words did not come so easily.

"Good-bye!" she repeated. "This has been the happiest day in my life, and I thank you for it."

She turned away to follow the servant who had come in search of her, but the quiet, gentle eyes of Lady Estelle rested on her until she was out of sight.

CHAPTER XXII

"I SHALL NEVER BE A MODEL WOMAN."

Lord Charles Vivianne had been completely spoiled by good fortune. An only son, he had succeeded quite early to a magnificent estate, a large fortune, and an ancient title. As a handsome boy, he had been caressed, indulged, and spoiled; his mother never allowed him to be thwarted in any wish or desire; his father thought there was no one equal to him. They both died while he was still in his early youth, and he was left to the care of guardians who were just as indulgent.

Some young men would not have suffered so terribly from this as he did; but he was not naturally good, and circumstances fostered all the evil that was in him.

Fair women flattered him; he was a great prize in the matrimonial market. He knew that some of the fairest and noblest women in England would have been proud and pleased to have shared his lot; he knew that he could choose where he would, but, although the chains of Hymen might be made of the fairest roses, he would never wear them. He had resolved to have as much enjoyment as possible out of his life, and, to secure that, he decided upon roaming like a butterfly, and marrying when he grew older.

He was wealthy, and the possessor of an ancient title and magnificent estates; but the name of Lord Charles Vivianne was not held in highest honor by the world – it was not one of purest renown.

Husbands with beautiful wives, fathers with fair young daughters, looked reproachfully on him, for neither virtue, honor, friendship, principle, nor pity, ever stood in his way when he had a caprice to gratify or a whim to indulge. He laughed at the notion of a broken heart. In his creed, women were quite an inferior order of creation – they might have souls or they might not, that was a mere matter of belief – they were created simply for the amusement of the passing hour, and to do the real drudgery work of the world. How many women's hearts he broke, how many fair young lives he blighted, will all be known on that terrible day when sin is called by its right name, and there is no gloss thrown over it.

He had had numerous flirtations, but love he had never known. If he saw a face that pleased him, he pursued it until he won it, and then it might perish like a faded rose-leaf – it was of no more interest to him.

Ah, it was an evil hour in which he saw the promised wife of Earle Moray! He had never met any one so lovely; his heart was on fire as he thought of the perfect beauty of her face and figure. There was not the least pity in his heart as he said to himself he must win her, no matter what it cost him; she was well worth some little trouble, and she was willing to be won, if he could judge from her eyes.

The last thing Doris saw, as she drove away from the Castle gates, was Lord Charles Vivianne watching her intently, with love and admiration in his face. He was not so handsome as Earle; he lacked the fair, spiritual beauty of the poet; but he was a lord, and, to some people, that one fact makes the whole world of difference.

Doris went home with her thoughts in a maze, her head whirling with all she had seen and heard; but the one dominant idea was that she had been admired by a lord.

It had been a most unfortunate thing for her, the visit to Downsby Castle; but for it she might in time have grown reconciled to her lot; she might have learned to love and appreciate Earle; she might have lived and died happily; but for it this story had never been written: it was the turning point in her life; it seemed to bring into sudden and vivid life all the evil that had lain dormant; it roused the vanity, the ambition, the love of luxury and pleasure, the love of conquest and admiration, until they became a living flame nothing could extinguish.

How plain and homely the little farm seemed to her after the magnificence of Downsbury Castle! How homely and uncouth Mattie and her mother were after the languid, graceful Lady Estelle! Nothing pleased her, nothing contented her.

"I have been foolish," she thought; "I wish I had not promised to marry Earle. Who knows but there might have been a chance for me to win this handsome lord. Lady Doris Vivianne! – I like the sound of that name; what a difference between that and Mrs. Earle Moray. How foolish I was to be in such a hurry."

So that evening, when poor Earle came, impatient to see her, longing for one kind word, thirsting to talk to her, he was received with great coldness by her. Ah, heaven! how pitiful it was to see the handsome face droop and sadden, the lips tremble, the eyes grow dim with tears. He might be master of the English language, that he certainly was; he might be master of the heart of poesy, but he was a slave to her, to her whims, her caprices, her humor. It was the first time she had been cold to him, the first time her face had not brightened for him. She did not even smile when he entered the room. He hastened up to her, and bending down he kissed the beautiful face.

"My darling Doris," he said, "I thought the day would never come to an end. I have been longing to see you."

Another time the sweet face would have been raised to his; she would have given kiss for kiss; she would have welcomed him as he loved best to be welcomed; but to-day she merely turned impatiently aside.

"I wish you would be more careful, Earle," she said. "You make my hair so untidy."

"I am very sorry, dear," he said, gently. "It is such beautiful hair, Doris, and I think it looks even more beautiful when it is what you call untidy."

"There is no reason why you should make it so," she retorted.

Then he looked with wondering eyes into her face.

"You are not well, or are you tired; which is it?"

"I am tired," she replied; "tired to death, Earle. Do not tease me."

"I ought to have remembered your long journey – of course you are tired. You ought to lie down, and I will read to you. That will rest you."

"Pray, do not be fussy, Earle. Other people get tired, but no one likes a fuss made over them."

Again he looked at her. Could this girl, who received him so coldly, so indifferently, be his own beautiful, bright Doris? It seemed incredible. Perhaps he had been so unfortunate as to offend her. He bent over her again.

"Doris," he said, gently, "have I been so unfortunate as to displease you?"

"No," she replied. "I do not remember that you have."

"You're so changed, I can hardly imagine that this is you."

The pain in his voice touched her. She looked at him; his face had grown very pale, and there was a cloud in his clear, loving eyes. She laughed a low, impatient laugh.

"Pray do not be so unhappy because I am cross," she said. "I never pretended to have a good temper. I am always impatient over something or other."

"But why with me? You know that your smile makes heaven to me: your frown, despair. Why be cross with me, darling? I would give all I have on earth to save you from one unhappy moment."

"I am tired," she said, "and I cannot forget the Castle, Earle. I wish so much that I had been born to live in such a place; I should have been quite at home and happy there."

"Are you not at home and happy here?" he asked.

"No," she replied. "Happy in a lonely, dreary farm-house!"

"With the kindest of parents, the sweetest of sisters, the most devoted of lovers, it seems to me, Doris, that you have all the elements of happiness."

She did not even hear him; she was thinking of the grandeur she had seen.

"I call that something like life," she continued – "luxury and gayety. I would sooner never have been born at all than be condemned to spend all my life here."

"But it will not be spent here, my darling; it will be spent with me."

His face glowed; the rapture of content came over it. There was no response in hers.

"I shall change Brackenside for Lindenholt," she said. "I cannot see that it will make much difference. It is only exchanging one farm-house for another."

"But I who love you am in the other," he said, gently. "Oh, Doris, you pain me so greatly! I know that you do not mean what you say, but you wound me to death."

Again she hardly heard him.

"I should very much like to know," Doris continued, "if it is fair to place me, with a keen, passionate longing for life, gayety, and pleasure, here, where I have none of the three."

"None of the three!" he repeated, sadly, "and I find heaven with you." He knelt down in front of her, where he could see her face, and he drew it gently down to his own. "I will not believe you mean this, my darling; if I did believe it I should go mad. Your beauty-loving, artistic nature has been aroused by what you have seen, and it makes you slightly discontented with us all. You ought to reign in a palace, my darling, because you are so beautiful and brilliant; but the palace shall be of my winning. You shall have every luxury that you have seen and envied."

"When?" she asked, briefly, bringing his castle in the air suddenly to the ground.

"Soon, my darling – you do not know how hard I am working – soon as I can possibly accomplish it."

"Work!" she replied. "A man may work for a lifetime and yet never earn sufficient to build a house, much less a castle. Look at my father, how hard he works, yet he is not rich, and never will be."

"But my work is different from his, Doris. There have been poets who have made large fortunes."

"And there have been poets who starved in a garret," she replied.

"But I have not that intention," cried Earle, with a look of power. "I will win wealth for you – the thought of you gives me skill, nerve, and courage for anything. Have patience, my darling!"

"Oh, Earle, it was so beautiful!" she cried, pitilessly interrupting him; "and that Lady Estelle wore such a beautiful dress! She has a strange way of moving – it produces a strange effect – so slowly and so gracefully, as though she were moving to the rhythm of some hidden music. And those rooms – I can never forget them! To think that people should live and move in the midst of such luxury!"

He raised the white hand to his lip.

"They are not all happy, Doris. Oh, believe me, darling! money, luxury, magnificence cannot bring happiness. Sooner or later one wearies of them."

"I never should," she answered, gently. "If I could live twenty lives, instead of one, I should never weary. I should like every hour of each of them to be filled with pleasure."

"That is because you have had so little," he said, wistfully. "You shall have a bright future."

Just at that moment Mattie Brace entered the room, and Doris looked at her with a smile.

"A little brown mouse, like Mattie," she said, "can easily be content. You are happy as the day is long, are you not, Mattie?"

The quiet brown eyes, with their look of wistful pain, rested for one moment upon Earle, then the young girl said, calmly:

"Certainly I am happy and content. Why should I not be? I always think that the same good God who made me knew how and where to place me, and knew best what I was fitted for."

"There," said Doris, "that is the kind of material your model women are made of. I shall never be a model woman – Mattie will never be anything else."

"Mattie is quite right," said Earle. "There is nothing so vain and so useless as longing for that which we can never attain. Come, Doris, you look better and brighter than you did when I first came in. Tell me all about your day at the Castle."

She told him of the duke's kind reception, of Lady Estelle's condescension, of all the beautiful things she had seen, and how the duke's daughter had given her some flowers, and talked to her. But not one word did she say of Lord Charles Vivianne. It was better, she thought, not even to mention that.

"I am sorry you ever went near the Castle," said Mattie, gravely. "I do not think you will ever be quite the same girl again, and I have a presentiment that in some shape or other evil will come of it."

And Earle, as he heard these words, turned away with a heavy sigh.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE COQUETTE AND THE MAN OF THE WORLD

Earle wondered much what had happened to change his lady-love so completely. Looking back, he found that she had never been quite the same since the day she went to the Castle. At first he thought it merely a girlish feeling of discontent; that it would pass away in time as the remembrance of all the luxury and splendor she had seen faded from her. Every morning when he arose he thought, "It will come all right to-day; she will put her sweet arms around my neck, and bend her beautiful face to mine, and tell me she is sorry – oh! so sorry, that she has been cold to me."

But the days passed on, and that golden dream was never verified; the coldness seemed to grow greater, and the shadow deeper.

Once, when she was walking out with Earle, she saw Lord Vivianne. He was walking down the high-road, and she knew well that he had been at the farm to look for her. Her heart beat when she saw him as it had never done for the man she had promised to marry. Earle was an ordinary man; this was a lord, and he had been purposely to look for her. He looked so handsome, so distinguished; she turned almost involuntarily from him to Earle, and the contrast was not in the poet's favor. Lord Vivianne was beautifully dressed in the most faultless and exquisite taste. Earle had not the advantage of a London tailor.

As they drew nearer, Earle, quite unconscious that Doris had ever seen the stranger before, made some remark about him.

"He has a handsome face," said Earle, "but it is not a face I like; it is not good."

"Good!" repeated Doris; "that is like you and Mattie. Earle, you think every one must be good."

"So they must," replied Earle.

Then they were both silent, for the stranger was just passing by. He looked at Doris, but he did not bow or speak to her; only from his eyes to hers there passed a strange gleam of intelligence. He did not think it wise to make any sign of recognition before the young escort who looked at him with such keen, questioning eyes.

"He would only begin to ask half a hundred questions about me, which she would find it difficult to answer," he thought; so he passed on in silence, and for a few minutes Doris was beside herself with vexation.

"It is all because this tiresome Earle is with me," she thought. "If I had been alone he would have stopped and have talked to me. How can I tell what he would have said? Perhaps he would have asked me to marry him – perhaps he is going away, and he wanted to bid me good-bye. Oh, if I could but see him alone!"

She looked again at Earle, and it seemed to her that in comparison with this other young man he was so inferior, she felt a sudden sense of impatience that made her unjust to him.

Earle thought no more of the stranger who had passed them on the high-road – it was nothing very unusual – strangers passed them continually. But Doris thought of nothing else. She had begun the walk in the best of spirits, but now she hardly spoke. Earle could not imagine what change had passed over the summer sky of his love. She was impatient, complained of being tired, turned to go home.

He was growing accustomed to her caprices now; and though they pained him, as the unkindness of those we love is certain to pain us, still he bore it patiently; he used to think that as she was young the quiet home life tired her. It would be all right when he could take her away, where she would be happy and bright; still the pain was very keen, so keen that it blanched his face, and made his lips tremble. If she could make him so happy, why could he not suffice for her?

Doris wanted to be alone and to think over what had happened. Lord Vivianne had been there in the hope of seeing her, that was certain. If he had been once, it was just possible that he might come again. She resolved on the morrow to be out alone, no matter what Earle said. Chance favored her. Earle came over quite early, and remained but a short time. His mother wished him to go over to Quanton, and he would not return till evening. "So that I shall not see much of you, my beautiful Doris," he said.

She was so relieved to hear it that it made her more than usually kind to him. She looked up to him with a sunny smile; she held her bright face for him to kiss; she was so kind to him that all his fears died away, and he rejoiced in the sunshine of his perfect love.

She was kind to him, gentle, caressing, loving, because she was going to deceive him. Women are so constituted, they can veil the greatest cruelty with a pretense of the greatest affection.

There was no fear in the heart of her young lover, while she knew that, if the opportunity were given to her, she would assuredly perjure herself.

Earle went away completely happy, and when he was gone Doris breathed freely. She went to the dairy where her mother and sister were busy at work. She looked for a minute with great contempt on the cans of rich milk and cream. Mattie was deeply engaged in the mysteries of curds and whey.

"Mother," said Doris, "you do not want me?"

"Well, for the matter of that, it is not much use wanting you, my dear; you do not like work."

"Indeed I do not. It is such a pleasant morning, I thought of going through Thorpe Woods."

"Very well. Though mind, Doris, it is not quite right for you to go out amusing yourself while Mattie works so hard."

"But if I stay at home I shall not work, so I am better out of the way."

Mrs. Brace knew it was false reasoning; but what was the use of saying so; she had long since ceased arguing with Doris.

"Do not expect me back very early. I may go on to see Lottie Granger," said Doris.

Thinking it wise that no hour should be set for her return, she intended to cross the high-road and linger in the hope of seeing him. There was no fear of discovery. Her mother and Mattie were settled for the day, Earle had gone to Quanton, her father was away in some distant meadow-land. She hoped that she could see her lord, for no time could be more favorable for a long conversation. She was singing up stairs in her own room.

"I must make myself look as nice as I can," she thought.

She inspected her wardrobe; there was really nothing in it worth wearing. She gave an impatient sigh.

There was a plain white hat, trimmed with blue ribbon; there was a black lace shawl and a white muslin dress. She hastened down into the garden and gathered a beautiful rose; she fastened it into her hat, and it was instantly transformed into the most becoming head-gear. The black lace shawl, by a few touches of the skillful fingers, became a Spanish mantilla, and hung in graceful folds over the pretty muslin.

Her toilet was a complete success; she had that marvelous gift of transforming everything she touched. At school she had been the envy of her companions; she had a taste that was at once artistic and picturesque, and it was nowhere displayed to greater advantage than in her own dress.

When she looked in the little glass all doubts as to the success of her appearance faded at once. There was a dainty flush on her lovely face, the beautiful eyes were bright as stars. What matter the fashion of the hat that covered that luxuriant hair? She smiled at herself.

"There is not much fear, my dear," she mused, "that you will fail in anything you undertake."

Then, in the fair June morning, she went out to meet her doom.

She had not gone many steps on the high-road when she saw Lord Vivianne coming. Like a true coquette she feigned unconsciousness, and pretended to gather the woodbines from the hedges.

He smiled at the transparent artifice. She did not know how well he had studied the nature of woman, how perfectly he was acquainted with every little art.

She muttered a most musical exclamation of surprise. When she turned suddenly round and saw him, she made what she considered a grand effect by suddenly dropping all her wild flowers, as though the surprise had overcome her.

"Let them be," he said; "happy roses do die by so fair a hand. I am so pleased to see you, Miss Brace. What happy fortune sent me on this road?"

She did not play off the same pretty airs on him that had so completely captivated poor Earle; she did not ask him to call her Doris, and say how she detested the name "Brace." Peers and poets require different treatment.

"My poor roses," she said; "I had been so happy in gathering them."

"Never mind the roses," said Lord Vivianne; "there are hundreds more. I want to talk to you. Are you going for a walk? May I go with you?"

"I am going to Thorpe Woods," she replied, "and if you wish to go with me I am willing."

She spoke with the proud grace of a young princess. For the moment he actually forgot she was but the daughter of a tiller of the soil.

"I thank you," he said, gravely; and they turned aside from the high-road to the fields that led to Thorpe Woods.

The day was so lovely that it might have reminded him that life had brighter aims than the wrecking of a woman's soul and the winning of a woman's love; but it did not. The birds sang in the trees, the fair sun shone, the hawthorn covered the hedges, the woodbine scented the air, and they walked on, never even hearing the myriad voices that called them to look from earth to heaven.

"I was so anxious to see you again," said Lord Vivianne. "I tried to forget you, but I could not."

"Why should you wish to forget me?" Doris asked, coquettishly.

"Some men would flatter you," he replied, "and tell you that you are so fair they dreaded to remember you. I tell you the honest truth. I heard something which made me wish that I had never seen you, or that, having seen you, I might forget you."

"What did you hear?" she asked.

"You can guess. I heard that – young, lovely as you are – some one has been wise enough and quick enough to win you."

She smiled a slow, cruel, peculiar smile, and when Lord Vivianne saw that expression on her face, he felt that his victory was won.

"They tell me," he continued, "that this fair beauty, which ought to have the world to do it homage, is to be shut up in the obscurity of a country home; that the fair girl, who might win the hearts of all men, has promised herself to a farmer. Is it true?"

Her eyes were raised to his, and in them there was a cold glitter, as of steel.

"Supposing that it is true, what then?" she asked.

"Then I regret, with my whole heart, having seen you, for I have met you too late."

And after that they walked in silence for some minutes. He gave the words full time to do their work; he saw that they were full of meaning to her, for her face flushed, and her eyes drooped. He continued in a lighter tone:

"Pray do not think me very impertinent if I inquire whether that was your shepherd lover with whom I saw you yesterday?"

She raised her beautiful head proudly. Because he was her lover, no one should ridicule Earle. She might desert him, betray him, break his heart, but no one should utter one word against him – not one.

"That was my lover with whom you saw me," she said, in a cold, clear voice. "You have spoken of him as a farmer, he is not that. I should not have fallen in love with a farmer. He is a poet and a gentleman."

"He looks like it," said my lord, seeing that he was altogether on the wrong track, "therefore I say how deeply I regret that I have met you too late. You cannot surely, Miss Brace, be angry with me for saying that?"

"I am not angry at all," said Doris, and the beautiful eyes were raised frankly to his. "How can I be angry," she continued, "when you pay me the greatest compliments in your power."

CHAPTER XXIV

AN IMPASSIONED WOOING

"This is the very place for lovers," said Lord Vivianne.

They had reached an open piece of moorland, where the shadows of the tall trees danced on the grass, and great sheets of bluebells contrasted with starry primroses. There was a bank where the wild thyme grew, sheltered by a tall linden-tree. The birds seemed to have made their home there, for the summer air resounded with sweet song.

Lord Vivianne drew aside the fallen branch of a slender willow, that she might find room to sit down.

"The very place for lovers," he repeated.

She looked at him with a smile:

"But we are not lovers," she said; "therefore it is not the place for us."

"False logic! fairest of ladies!" he replied; "there is no knowing how soon we may become lovers, though. I feel sure we did not meet for nothing."

"Can a girl have two lovers?" she asked, looking up at him with the frank eyes of an innocent child.

He laughed.

"That quite depends on the state of one's conscience," he replied, "and the elasticity of one's spirits. If two lovers are objectionable, the proper thing is to send one away."

"Which should be sent away?" she asked.

"I should say the one that is loved the least. Tell me, now, do you really love this country admirer of yours very much?"

"I do not understand why you ask me."

"Do you not? I will tell you. Because everything that interests you interests me; your pains and pleasures would soon be mine."

"I have no pains," she said, thoughtfully, "and no pleasures."

"Then yours must be a most dull and monotonous life. How can you, with so keen a capacity for enjoyment – how can you bear it?"

"I do not bear it very well," she replied; "I am always more or less bad-tempered."

He laughed again.

"You improve upon acquaintance, Miss Brace. You are the first lady whom I have heard plead guilty to bad temper. As a rule, women prefer making themselves out to be angelic."

"I am very far from that," said Doris, frankly; "nor am I naturally bad-tempered. It is because nothing in my life pleases or interests me."

"Not even your lover?" he said, bending over her and whispering the words.

She blushed under his keen gaze. Her words had betrayed more than she meant to betray.

Then he added:

"Would you like it changed – this dull life of yours – into one of fairy brightness?"

"I should; but it will not be possible. My fate in the future is fixed – nothing can alter it."

"Yes," he said, gently, "there is one thing that can alter it, and only one – your will and mine."

Then he seemed to think that for a time he had said enough. He looked over the trees, and began to talk to her about the flowers. Doris did not much care about that – she had not come out to listen to the praises of flowers; she would rather ten thousand times over that her lordly lover had praised herself.

While he was talking, she was thinking of many things. Was it a dream, or a reality, that she, Doris Brace, daughter of Mark and Patty Brace, was really talking to a lord, listening to his

compliments, that he admired her quite as much as Earle did? It was more like a dream than a reality. He, who had been half over the world, who belonged to the highest society, who had seen and known the most beautiful women in England, to be talking to her so easily, so kindly.

"I must be beautiful," thought the girl, in her heart, "or he would never have noticed me."

Then she recalled her wandering thoughts. The sun was shining full upon them, and all its light seemed to be concentrated in a superb diamond that he wore on his left hand. No matter where she looked, her eyes seemed to be drawn to that stone; the fire of it was dazzling. Then her eyes wandered over the well-knit figure. What a difference dress made. Earle, in such garments as these, would look like a nobleman. Her attention was suddenly attracted.

"You do not answer me," he was saying.

She looked up at him.

"I beg your pardon," she said; "I was not really listening to you."

"I was telling you that I ought to have left the Castle three days ago, but I was determined that I would not leave until I had seen you. I do not know how I can tear myself away."

Again she blushed crimson. Could it be possible that he had stayed purposely to see her?

"I should rather think that you stayed to enjoy a little more of Lady Estelle's society," she said.

"Lady Estelle," he repeated. "You do not suppose that any one could find any pleasure in that perfect icicle."

"Icicle! I should never give her that name. She seemed to me, on the contrary, almost sentimental."

"My dear Miss Brace," he said, "it is simply impossible that we can be speaking of the same lady. I assure you that Lady Estelle Hereford is known everywhere as the coldest and proudest of women. She has had many admirers, but I do not think she ever loved any one."

The girl's eyes were now fixed on him in perplexity and wonder.

"Never in love!" she repeated. "Why, she gave me a long lecture about love, and advised me never to marry without it. When she spoke of it her face quite changed, her eyes lost their indolent expression and filled with light. I thought she was the most romantic and sentimental lady I had ever met."

"I can only say that I believe it to be the first romantic idea of her life. She is cold, reserved, high-bred, and graceful, I admit; but as for sentiment, she has none of it."

"We have evidently seen her from different points of view," said Doris. "I wonder which is the correct one."

"I dislike contradicting a lady, but must state that I am likely to know her better than you. I have known her many years, and you have only met her once."

"Still we differ considerably," said Doris.

"And you think it possible that I should remain for her sake? Of all the people in the world she interests me the least."

"She interests me most deeply. I thought of fire and ice, sun and snow, and all kinds of strange contradictions while I talked to her."

"It is for you I remained – never mind Lady Estelle. We will not waste the sunny hours of this lovely morning talking about her. You have not told me yet if you prefer this country admirer of yours to all the world; if you do, there remains for me nothing except to take up my hat and go. I know how useless it is even to attempt to win even one corner of a preoccupied heart."

"Why should you wish to win one corner of mine?" she asked, stealing from underneath her long lashes one sweet, subtle glance that was like fire to him.

"Why!" he replied, passionately; "because I long to win your whole heart and soul; your whole love and affection for myself. I cannot rest; I know no peace, no repose; I think of nothing but you! Why should I not win your heart if I can?"

She shrank back, trembling, blushing; the fire and passion of his words scared her.

"Your face haunts me; I see it wherever I gaze," he continued. "Your voice haunts me, I hear it in every sound. I would fain win you, if I can, for my own; but if you tell me that you love this country admirer of yours – this man to whom a perverse fate has bound you – if you tell me that, I will go, and I will never tease you again."

Then she knew that she held the balance of her life in her own hands, and that the whole of her future rested with herself. Should she be true to Earle, say she loved him, and so lose the chance of winning this love from a lord, and resign herself to her quiet, dull, monotonous life? or should she cast him from her and betray him?

"One word – only one word," whispered Lord Vivianne, bending his evil, handsome face over her.

"You think such a question can be answered in a minute," she said. "It is impossible. I can only say this, that I liked him better than any one else one short month ago."

He grasped her hand and held it tightly clasped in his own.

"You say that – you admit that much! Oh, Doris, the rest shall follow. I will not leave Downsbury until I have won the rest."

Then his eyes fell upon the diamond ring, shining and scintillating in the sun. A sudden thought struck him: he held her white hand in his own, and looked at it as he held it up to the light.

"How fine and transparent," he said. "I can see every vein. Such a hand ought to be covered with jewels."

She was of the same opinion herself. Then he drew off the diamond ring that shone like flame on his own finger; he looked entreatingly at her.

"I wonder," he said, "if you will be angry? This was my mother's ring, and I prize it more than I do anything in the wide world. I am afraid. Promise me you will not be angry."

It was, to say the least of it, a great stretch of imagination. Lord Charles Vivianne would never have troubled himself to have worn his mother's ring; but even he, bold and adventurous as he was, thought some little preamble necessary before he offered her so valuable a gift.

"There is a strange, sad love-story connected with it," he said, "which I will tell you some day; but it is dear to me, because it was my mother's ring." Then he drew it from his finger. "I should like to see how it looks on that pretty white hand of yours," he said, laughingly; and, as he spoke, he drew the ring on her finger.

It shone and glanced like fire; the sunbeams seemed to concentrate themselves on it; and, certainly, the beautiful white hand looked the lovelier for the ring. He looked at it admiringly.

"You were born to wear jewels," he said. "You ought never to be without them."

She laughed with the faintest tinge of bitterness.

"I do not see from whom I am to get them," she said.

"As my wife you could get them, and everything that your heart could wish. Think of it, and compare a life of ease and luxury with your dull existence here. You will let me see you again? I have so much to say to you."

"Yes," she replied; "I will see you, if I can get away from home."

"You can always do that." Then he held the little hand even more tightly in his own. "I am half afraid," he said, quietly; "but I wish that you would allow me to offer you this ring."

She looked at him suddenly, and with a burning flush on her face.

"To me?" she said, hesitatingly.

"Yes, if you will only make me happy by accepting it as a little memento of the day on which we first met."

"But it is so costly – it is so very valuable."

"If it were not it would not be worth offering to you," he replied. "I should be so happy if you would wear it – it is the first time a jewel has given me such pleasure."

"How can I wear such a splendid ring?" she said. "Every one who sees it will wonder where it came from."

"You will be able to manage that," he replied; "you are so clever. I cannot doubt your skill. Say you will accept it, Doris?" She was quite silent for some minutes, then a low voice whispered to her: "I will hang jewels more costly than this on your beautiful neck, and round your white arms; you shall be crowned with diamonds, if you will. See how marvelously fair it makes that sweet hand of yours. Jewels crown a beautiful woman with a glory nothing else can give. You, above all others, ought to be so crowned, for there is no other woman so fair."

The flush died from her face. She had not quite made up her mind. There came before her a vision of her past lover, with his wild worship, his passionate love; of all the vows and promises she had made to him; of his trust and faith in her. If she took this lord's ring, and promised to meet him again, it meant forsaking Earle. Besides, he had spoken of making her his wife. Was he in earnest?

She rose hurriedly from her seat. He saw that her lips quivered and her hands trembled; she was agitated and confused.

"Give me time," she said. "You frighten me. I can hardly understand. I must go now; they will think that I am lost."

He rose with her, and stood by her side.

"You will keep the ring, Doris, for my sake, in memory of the time when I first saw you?"

"I will keep it," she replied, hastily. "Oh, Lord Vivianne, let me go; I am frightened – this is so different to being with Earle. Let me go."

"You will meet me again," he urged, "say on Friday – you will not refuse – at this same time and same place? I will lavish the luxury of the whole world on you, if you will only care for me."

But now that her ambition was satisfied, was realized, she was frightened at her own success, and hastened away.

CHAPTER XXV

THE FALSE LIPS OF WOMAN

Earle was not the only one who found Doris changed. She had hastened home from that interview almost wild with excitement. Could it be that the wildest dream of her life was realized at last; that this handsome lord had offered her every luxury in the world; it seemed too bright a vision to be real; she was obliged to look again at the diamond on her finger to convince herself of its truth.

Mark Brace and his wife, as well as Mattie, wondered when Doris reached home, where her animation and high spirits had gone. Mattie spoke, and she seemed hardly to hear her; her mother asked her some trifling question and she made no answer. She was like one in a dream. As a rule she was the delight and torment of Mark's life. As they sat together in the evening, she would puzzle him with questions – she would tease, irritate, charm, and annoy him. But on this night Doris said no word, and Mark fancied it was because Earle was away. He sat looking at her with great solemn eyes, wondering who could fathom the mysteries of a woman's heart. He had never thought Doris fond of Earle, yet there she was, wretched, miserable, and lonely, because he was away.

How little he guessed that in her mind Earle was already of the past. She had loved him as well as it was in her power to love any one, but that was not much; and now that the grand temptation of her life was before her all regard for Earle sank into insignificance. She was faint with wonder, and amazed that she, Doris Brace should have made such a conquest; her heart beat with delight, then sank with fear. Was he only trifling with her, this handsome lord? Her face flushed proudly.

"If I thought he was only trifling with me," she said to herself, "I should know how to treat him."

Then one look at the jewel on her finger reassured her.

"Gentlemen do not give jewels that cost hundreds of pounds unless they really love and intend marriage."

There was some assurance of success in the gleam of the diamond. She had been obliged to remove the ring lest her mother and Mattie might see it.

On the morning following Earle hastened to Brackenside. He was longing to see his lady-love again; she was so kind to him when they parted – she had been so unusually gentle that he had longed for more kindness. He was at Brackenside before the breakfast was finished. One look at the beautiful face of his love sufficed; she was dreamy, abstracted; she seemed hardly to notice his entrance. No light came in her eyes as she spoke to him; she did not make room for him by her side. When he went up to her and tried to kiss the face he loved so well, she drew back, not angrily, but carelessly.

"I never said you might kiss me every day, Earle," she said.

"I know, my darling, but I cannot help it. It has grown into a custom now."

"When anything becomes a custom it ceases to be a charm," she said, with unconscious philosophy.

Earle looked down sadly at her.

"Doris," he said, "you are so sadly changed to me, I cannot understand it, dear. You say that I have not displeased you?"

"No," she said, carelessly, "I am not in the least displeased."

"Then, what have I done, my darling? I love you too madly to suffer anything to come between us. If I could win your love by dying for it, I would cheerfully die. Tell me what I can do to make you as you were once to me?"

She raised her head impatiently.

"You are always talking nonsense, Earle. I cannot regulate my words and thoughts as I would regulate a clock. I cannot undertake to be always the same."

"You are charming, but your variety used to be one of your greatest charms. I do not complain of that – the summer sky changes; it goes from crimson to blue, and then white – you changed from grave to gay, and in each mood you seemed to me most charming. It is not that now."

"What is it, then?" she asked.

He looked so wistfully at her that, if she had had any heart, it must have been touched.

"I can hardly tell – I dare not even to myself say what your manner seems to me. Doris, you cannot surely repent of having promised to marry me – it cannot be that?"

His honest eyes grew so dim with pain – his face grew so white – she would sooner, heartless coquette as she was, have stabbed him to the heart than have answered "Yes." She turned away from him.

"I suppose you cannot help talking nonsense, Earle? I am not sentimental myself, and so much of it wearies me. When you can talk about anything else I shall be glad."

As soon as she could she quitted the room, and Earle was at a loss to know what to do or say. He tried to comfort himself.

"She is so beautiful, my darling," he said, tenderly, "and beauty is always capricious; it is but the caprice of a young girl. I must be patient." He tried to school himself to patience, but he felt unutterably sad. There was something in her manner he could not understand. "I know what lovers' quarrels are," he thought to himself – "they are the renewal of love; but I cannot understand this dark, cold shadow which comes between us, and seems to hide from me the beauty and light of her face."

He went out and tried to interest himself in his work, thinking to himself that her mood would soon change, and then the sun would shine for him again. But he found work impossible; he could think of nothing else but the loved one's face with the shadow on it.

He went through the meadows, and stood leaning over the gate. When Mattie saw him she watched him for some minutes in silence, her sweet, homely face full of wistful anxiety, her eyes full of tenderest love. To her simple mind he was as far above her as the angels were; but she loved him as she never loved any one else. She had feared greatly for him, and it had been some relief to her to find that Doris had really promised to marry him and intended to keep her word. It was the first time since she had heard the news of the engagement that she had seen that look of doubt, almost despair, on his face, and it troubled her greatly.

"What can have happened?" she said to herself; then, with a sudden sense of foreboding, it seemed to her what she had always dreaded had come at last.

Involuntarily the girl clasped her hands: "God save Earle!" she said; then she went up to him.

She spoke twice to him before he heard her; then she started in alarm as the white face, with its expression of bitter sorrow, was turned to her.

"Earle, what has happened?"

"Nothing," he replied. Then the sweet, mild, sympathizing face reproached him with kindness.

"Nothing has happened, Mattie," he said, "but I am not happy; I am afraid that I have grieved Doris."

"What have you done to her?" she asked, briefly.

"That is what I want to find out and cannot," he replied. "Tell me, Mattie, have you noticed a change in her?"

"Yes," replied the young girl, gravely, "I have, Earle, ever since the day she went to the Castle. I wish she had never seen it. We were very happy until then."

"Yes, we were happy," he replied sadly. "What has changed her, Mattie? Tell me truthfully; never mind about giving me pain."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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