FLORENCE WARDEN

A WITCH OF THE HILLS, V. 2

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CHAPTER XIV

That visit of Mr. Ellmer's,—hard as I tried, and, as I believe, Babiole tried, to cheat myself into believing the contrary,—spoiled the old frank intercourse between us for ever. It was my fault, I know. Dreams that stirred my soul and shook my body had sprung up suddenly on that faint basis of a spurious tie between me and the girl I had before half-unconsciously loved. Now my long-torpid passions stirred with life again and held Walpurgis Night revels within me. Our lessons had to be laid by for a time, while I went salmon-fishing, and tried to persuade myself that it had been long neglect of my rod that had caused forgotten passions and yearnings to run riot in my blood in this undisciplined manner. But it would not do. Tired out I would drag my way home, eat a huge dinner, and sink half-asleep into my old chair. Instead of my falling into stupid, happy, dreamless slumber, the leaden numbness of fatigue would settle upon my limbs, while the one figure whose growing ascendancy over my whole nature I made these energetic efforts to throw off, would pass and repass through my mind's dull vision, the one thing distinct, the one thing ever-recurring, enticing me to follow it,

eluding me, coming within my grasp, escaping me, and so on for ever.

Then I tried a new tack: the lessons were resumed. But we were both more reserved than in the old days, and I, at least, was constrained also. It was not the old child-pupil sitting by my side; it was the woman I wanted to cherish in my bosom. The old free correction, discussion, were exchanged for poor endeavours by little implied compliments, by mild attempts at eloquence, by appeals to her sentiment when the subject in hand allowed it, to gain her goodwill, to prepare her for the time, which must come, when I should have to entreat her to forget my hideous face and try to love me as a husband.

I knew I was making hopeless, ridiculous mistakes in my conduct towards her; that the change in my manner she took merely as an acknowledgment that she was now in some sort 'grown-up,' and answered by a little added primness to show that she was equal to the requirements of the new dignity. I felt that eight years' neglect of the sex threw a man a century behind the times with regard to his knowledge of women, and I was growing desperate when a ray of light came to me in the darkness of my clumsy courtship. I would consult Normanton, who was in the swim of the times, and who might be able to advise me as to the prudence of certain bold measures which, in my desperation, from time to time occurred to me. Neither Babiole nor I ever spoke about her father's visit, but the attempt to go on as if nothing had happened never grew any easier, and I welcomed the

visit of my four friends, which took place rather earlier in the year than usual.

It was in the beginning of July that they all dropped in upon me in their usual casual fashion, and we had our first dinner together in a great tempest, excited by Edgar's announcement that this was his last bachelor holiday, as he was going to be married. I listened to the torrents of comment that, by long-standing agreement among us, were bound to be free, with new and painful interest; at any rate, I reflected that the private advice I was going to ask of Edgar later would now have the added weight of experience, and would, therefore, be more valuable than it could have been in the old days of his unregenerate contempt for women. To hear my Mentor browbeaten on this subject was not altogether disagreeable to me, for I had a keen memory of his somewhat lofty tone of indulgence to me in the old times.

'And—er—what induced you to take this step?' asked Fabian, in an inquisitorial tone, which implied the addition, 'without consulting us.' He was holding a glass of sherry in his hand, and he looked at it as if he thought that his friend's unaccountable conduct had spoilt its flavour.

Edgar blushed and looked conscience-stricken. I feasted my eyes upon the sight.

'Well, I believe there is always a difficulty about giving a satisfactory account of these things,—an account, that is to say, which will satisfy the strict requirements of logic.'

'We expect an account consistent with your own principles,

often and emphatically laid down. If you have not sinned against those, you will be listened to with indulgence,' said Fabian dogmatically. 'You shall be judged under your own laws.'

'Come, that's rather hard upon him,' pleaded Mr. Fussell.

Edgar dashed into his explanation in an off-hand manner.

'I met her at a tennis-party.' Maurice Browne, who hated muscular exercise, groaned. 'She was dressed in light blue flannel.' Fabian, who had been at Oxford, hissed. Edgar stopped to ask if this conduct were judicial.

'As a set-off against your advantage of being judged by your own laws, we claim the right to express our feelings each in his own manner,' explained Fabian. 'Go on.'

'We entered into conversation.' Dead but excited silence. 'I found she had read Browning,'—Murmurs of disgust from Fabian, of incredulity from Browne; placid and vague murmur, implying ill-concealed non-apprehension, from Mr. Fussell, —'but did not understand him.' Explosion of mirth, in which everybody joined. 'I offered my services as some sort of interpreter.' Sardonic laugh from Browne. 'Merely on the assumption that a bad guess is better than none.' Interpellation from Fabian, "Tis better to have guessed all wrong, than never to have guessed at all.' Edgar continued: 'After that we met again,'—deep attention,—'and again.' Murmurs of disappointment. 'At last we became engaged.'

A pause. Fabian drank a glass of champagne off hastily, and rose with frowns.

'It seems to me, gentlemen, that a taste for Browning and blue flannel, which is all our honourable friend seems to be able to put forward in favour of this lady, is a poor equipment for a person who (unless our honourable friend has gone back very far from his often-declared views on the subject of matrimony) is to be his guiding genius to political glory, the spur to his languid ambition, the beacon to his best aspirations,—in fact, gentlemen, the tug-boat to his man-of-war.'

'And as no girl reads Browning except under strong masculine pressure,' added Browne gravely, 'our friend the man-of-war must make up his mind that other and perhaps handsomer vessels have been towed before him, with the same rope.'

'Is the lady handsome?' asked Mr. Fussell.

Edgar hesitated. 'She has an intelligent face,' he said.

Upon this there arose much diversity of opinion; Fabian holding that this was consistent and even praiseworthy, while Maurice Browne and Mr. Fussell agreed that to deliberately marry a woman without positive and incontestable beauty ought to disqualify a man for the franchise as a person unfit for any exercise of judgment. When, however, Edgar, after allowing the controversy to rage, quietly produced and passed round the portrait of a girl beautiful enough to convert the sternest bachelor, there was a great calm, and the conversation, with a marked change of current, flowed smoothly into the abstract question of marriage. Edgar was not only acquitted; he changed places with his judges. Every objection to matrimony was put forward

in apologetic tones.

'For my part, when I speak bitterly of marriage, of course I am prejudiced by my own experience,' said Mr. Fussell, with a sigh that was jolly in spite of himself. He was separated from his wife, —everybody knew that; but he ignored—perhaps even scarcely took in the significance of—the fact that he had previously deserted her again and again.

Maurice Browne averred that his only objection to marriage was that it was an irrational bond; men and women, being animals with the disadvantage of speech to confuse each other's reason, should, like the other animals, be free to take a fresh partner every year.

This was received in silence, none of us being strong enough in natural history to contradict him, though we had doubts. He added that a book of his which was shortly to be brought out would, he thought, do much to bring about a more logical view of this matter, and to do away with the present vicious, because unnatural, restrictions.

Mr. Fussell, the person present whose private conduct would the least bear close inspection, was sincerely shocked, and wished to speak in the interests of morality, when Fabian broke in, too full of his own views to bear discussion of other people's.

'Marriage,' he asserted in his excitable manner, 'for princes, for dukes, for grocers, and, in fact, the general rabble of humanity, is not a choice, but a necessity, according to the present state of things, which I see no pressing need to alter. But

for the chosen ones of the earth—the artists,'—involuntarily I thought of Mr. Ellmer,—'by which I, of course, mean all those who, animated by some spark of the divine fire, have obeyed the call of Art, and given their lives and energies to her in one or another of her highest forms,—for us artists, I say, marriage is so much an impediment, so much an impossibility, that I unhesitatingly brand as mock-artists those fiddlers, mummers, and paint-smudgers who prefer the vulgar joys of domestic union to the savage independence and isolation which Art—true Art—imperatively demands. The wife of an artist—for as long as the pure soul of an artist remains weighted by a gross and exacting body, as long as he has dinners to be cooked, shirt-buttons to be sewn on, and desires to be satisfied, he may have what the world calls a wife; that wife must be content with the position of a kindly-treated slave.'

At this point there arose a tumult, and somebody threw a cork at him. He wanted to say more, but even Browne, who had given him a little qualified applause, desired to hear no more; and amid kindly assurances that hanging was too good for him, and that it was to be hoped Art would make it hot for him, and so forth, he sat down, and I, perceiving that we were all growing rather warm over this subject, suggested a move to the drawing-room, into which I had had the piano taken.

A little figure in pale pink stuff sprang up from a seat in the corner as we came in, letting a big volume of old-fashioned engravings fall from her arms. It was Babiole, who had been too

deep in her discovery of a new book to expect us so soon. She gave a quick glance at the window by which she had prepared a way of escape; but seeing that it was too late, she came forward a few steps without confusion and held out her hand to Fabian, who seemed much struck with the improvement two years had brought about in her appearance. Then, after receiving the greetings of the rest, she excused herself on the plea that her mother was waiting for her at tea, and made a bow, in which most of us saw a good deal of grace, to Maurice Browne, who held open the door for her.

As Browne then made a rush to the piano, I lost no time in taking Edgar on one side under pretence of showing him an article in a review, and in unburdening myself to him with very little preface. I was in love, hopelessly in love. He guessed with whom at once, but did not understand my difficulty.

'She seems a modest, intelligent little girl; she has every reason to be grateful to you, even fond of you. Why should you be so diffident?'

I explained that she was beautiful, romantic, inexperienced; that her head was still full of silky-locked princes and moated castles, or with creatures of her fancy little less impossible; all sorts of dream-passions were seething in her girl's brain I knew, for I understood the little creature with desperate clearness of vision which only seemed to make her more inaccessible to me. If I could only conquer that terrible diffidence, that overwhelming awe that her fairy-like ignorance and innocence of the realities

of life imposed upon me, I felt that I could plead my cause with a fire and force that would surmount even that ghastly obstacle of my hideous face; but then, again, fire and force were no weapons to use against the indifference of childlike innocence; and to ask her in cold blood to marry me without making her heart speak first in my favour would be monstrous. She had looked upon me till lately as she would have looked upon her grandfather, and this unsatisfactory affection had given place lately to a reserve which was even more unpromising. Edgar listened to me, did not deny the enormous fascination of a young mind one has one's self helped to form, but thought that I should resist it, and was rather indignant that I had not taken the opportunity of her father's visit to rid myself of mother and daughter together. He inclined to the idea that the two unlucky women were imposing on my generosity and were determined to make 'a good thing' out of me, and it was not until I had spent some time in explaining minutely the footing upon which we stood to one another that his prejudices began to give way.

At this point I perceived that Maurice Browne was playing at chess with Mr. Fussell, while Fabian had disappeared. When the game was over, they insisted on our joining them at whist. Before we had played one game I began to grow nervous at Fabian's long absence, and Mr. Fussell, who was my partner, took to leaning over the table as soon as I put down a card, and with one finger fixed viciously in the green cloth, and his starting eyes peering up into my face over his double eyeglass, saying in a sepulchral

voice—

'*Did* you see what was played, Mr. Maude?'

I had trumped his trick, revoked, and done everything else that I ought not to have done before the missing Fabian came back in a tornado of high spirits, and with a tiny white Scotch rose at his buttonhole. Now there was only one Scotch rose-bush in the garden, and it grew by the porch of the cottage and was Babiole's private property. When the hand was played out I got Fabian to take my place, for my fingers shook so that I could not sort my cards.

While I had been arguing with Edgar the necessity of delicacy in making love to a young girl, Fabian had dashed into the breach, and now bore the trophy of a first success on his breast.

CHAPTER XV

I believe that Edgar, in the innocence of his heart, thought that Fabian's headlong flirtation and flaunting success with the girl I loved in such meek and forlorn fashion formed a salutary experience for me.

For while the young actor invariably sloped from fishing excursions, and disappeared from picnics, and had a flower which I absolutely recognised in his buttonhole every day, Edgar contented himself with preaching to me a philosophical calm, and ignored my pathetic insinuations that he might do some unspecified good by 'speaking to' Fabian. Indeed, that would have been a delicate business; especially as I had announced myself to be the girl's guardian, and she was thus undeniably well provided with protectors. All the consolation I had was the reflection that this flirtation could only last a fortnight; but as it was my guests themselves who fixed not only the date but the duration of their stay, even this comfort was destroyed by their agreeing among themselves to extend their visit by another ten days. When I learned that this was upon the proposal of Fabian I took a stern resolution. I invited Mrs. Ellmer and her daughter to join us in all our expeditions, so as to establish an effective check upon the freedom of their intercourse. The result of this was that Mrs. Ellmer abandoned herself to a rattling flirtation with Mr. Fussell, while Fabian walked off with Babiole to gather flowers,

or to climb hills, or to race Ta-ta, in the most open manner, and Edgar laughed at my annoyance, and talked about hens and ducklings to me in an exasperating undertone.

I think he began to believe that I was entering prematurely into the doddering and senile stage—this straight, wholesome, handsome fellow, who disdained the least pang of jealousy of the girl who was fortunate enough to have secured his magnanimous approval. If he had been branded with a disfiguring scar, he would have renounced the joys of love with such staunch, heroic, 'broad-shouldered' fortitude, that there would have been quite a rush for the honour of consoling him; it was not in him to find anything deeper than lip-compassion for feverish and morbid emotions. I admired his grand and healthy obtuseness, and wished that he could bind my eyes too. But I saw plainly enough the radiance of unnatural exaltation of feeling which lighted up the young girl's face after a walk with Fabian, and I knew that the hectic enthusiasm of his artist temperament was kindling fires in the sensitive nature, which it would be danger to feed and ruin to extinguish. With a morbid sensibility of which I was ashamed, I could look into the girl's glowing blue eyes as I shook her hand and bade her good-night, and feel in my own soul every emotion that had stirred her heart as she roamed over the hills with Fabian that day.

It was near the end of the third week of my visitors' stay, that I waited one night for Fabian's return from the cottage, to which he and Mr. Fussell had escorted the two ladies, who had dined

with us. Mr. Fussell had returned, and gone into the house to play cards. Fabian came back sixteen minutes later. There had been a proposal to extend my visitors' stay still further, and upon that hint I had determined to speak. I was leaning against the portico, as we called the porch of the house, to distinguish it from that of the cottage. I had smoked through two cigars while I was waiting, but at the sound of his footsteps I threw the third away. Fabian walked with a long swinging step: off the stage the man was too earnest to saunter; crossing a room, eating his breakfast, always seemed a matter of life or death to him; and if he had to call a second time for his shaving-water, it was in the tones of a Huguenot while the Saint Bartholomew was at its height. I had always looked upon him as a very good fellow, impetuous but honourable, doing intentional harm to no one. But I knew the elasticity of my sex's morality where nothing stronger than the sentiments is concerned, and I knew that his impetuosity was kept in some sort of check by his ambition. His restless erratic life, and his avowed principles, were antagonistic to happy marriage, and I knew that he was in the habit of satisfying the *besoin d'aimer* by open and chivalrous attachments to now one and now another distinguished lady; and this knightly devotion to Queens of Love and Beauty, though it makes very pretty reading in the chronicles of the Middle Ages, is not, in the interest of nineteenth century domestic peace, a thing to be revived. So, although I had miserable doubts that the steed was already stolen, I was determined to lock the stable door.

'Lovely night,' said he. 'I like your Scotch hills at night; and, for the matter of that, I like them in the daytime too.'

Fabian always sank the fact that he was a Scotchman, though I burned just now with the conviction that he was tainted with the national hypocrisy.

'I suppose you will be glad to get back to the hum and roar again by this time, though,' I said as carelessly as I could.

Fabian had none of Edgar's serene obtuseness. He looked at me to find out what I meant.

'Well, you know, we were thinking of imposing ourselves upon you for another week, if you have no objection.'

This show of civility was the first shadow on our unceremonious intercourse. In spite of myself I was this evening grave and stiff, and not to be approached with the customary affectionate familiarity. There was silence while one might have counted twenty. Then I said—

'That was *your* proposal, was it not?'

I spoke so gravely, so humbly, that my question, rude as it was in itself, could not offend.

'Why—yes,' said he in a tone as low and as serious as my own. 'What's the matter, Harry?'

'Will you tell me, honestly, why you want to stay?'

His big burning eyes looked intently into my face, and then he put one long thin hand through his hair and laughed.

'Well, after all that you've done to make our stay agreeable, that's a queer question to ask.'

I put my hand on his shoulder and forced him to keep still.

'Look here, Faby, I don't want to insult you, you know; but are you staying because of that little girl?'

He drew himself up and answered me with a very fine and knightly fire—

'Do you take me for a scoundrel?'

'No; if I did you would never have touched the child's hand.'

'Then what do you mean?'

'Simply this, that I know Babiole better than you do, and I can see that every word you say to her strikes down deeper than you think. She is an imaginative little—fool if you like; she believes that the romance of her life is come, and she is beginning to live upon it and upon nothing else.'

Fabian considered, looking down upon the grass, in which he was digging a deep symmetrical hole with his right heel. At last he looked up.

'I think you're wrong; I do indeed,' he said earnestly. 'You know as well as I do that my trotting about with her has always been as open as the day; that it was taken for granted there was no question of serious love-making with a mere child like that. I'm sure her mother never thought of such a thing for a moment.'

Now I knew that Mrs. Ellmer, on principle, scoffed so keenly at love in her daughter's presence, by way of wholesome repression of the emotions, that she would be sure to think that she had scoffed away all danger of its inopportune appearance.

'My dear boy, I acquit you of all blame in the matter. The

mother we can leave out of account; she is not a person of the most delicate discrimination. But I tell you I have watched the girl–'

'That is enough,' interrupted Fabian abruptly, and with off-hand haughtiness. 'Of course, if I had understood that you were personally interested in the little girl–'

I interrupted in my turn. 'I am interested only in getting her well, that is—happily—married.'

Fabian bowed. 'You are anticipating your troubles with your ward, or pupil, or whatever you call her,' said he lightly, though he was angry enough for his words to have a bitter tone. 'However, of course I respect your solicitude, and Babiole and I must, for the next few days, hunt butterflies on separate hills.'

And shaking me by the shoulder, and laughing at me for an old woman, he went into the house.

But he was obstinate, or more interested than he pretended to be. I know that it was he who next morning at breakfast put up Fussell and Maurice Browne to great eagerness for the extension of their stay. When I regretted that I had made arrangements for going to Edinburgh on business on the date already settled for their departure, Fabian glanced up at my face with a vindictive expression which startled me.

This was the last day but one of my visitors' stay. We all went on the coach to Braemar, having taken our places the night before. As we all walked in the early morning to Ballater station, from which the coach starts, I overheard Fabian say to Babiole—

'We shan't be able to see much of each other to-day, little one. Your maiden aunt disapproves of my picking flowers for you. But I'll get as near as I can to you on the coach, and this evening you must get mamma to invite me to tea.'

'Maiden aunt!' she repeated, evidently not understanding him.

They were behind me, so that I could not see their faces; but by a glance, a gesture, or a whisper Fabian must have indicated me; for she burst out—

'Oh, you must not laugh at him; it is not right; I won't hear anything against Mr. Maude.'

'Sh! Against him! Oh dear, no!' And the sneer died away in words I could not hear.

They had fallen back, I suppose, for I lost even the sound of their voices; but I heard no more than before of the monologue on the New Era in literature to which Maurice Browne was treating me. He was the pioneer of this New Era, so we understood; and there was so much more about the pioneer than about the era in his talk on this his favourite subject, that we, who were quite satisfied to know no more of the inmost workings of his mind than was revealed by the small talk of daily existence, seldom gave him a chance of unburdening himself fully except when our minds, like mine on this occasion, were deeply engaged with other matters.

On the coach Fabian sat next to Babiole, who looked so sweet in a white muslin hat and a frock made of the stuff with which drawing-room chairs are covered up when the family are out of

town, that Maurice Browne, in a burst of enthusiasm, compared her to a young brown and white rabbit. Fabian had brought his umbrella, so I told myself, for the express purpose of holding it over his companion in such a manner as to prevent me, on the back seat, from seeing the ardent gaze of the man, the shy glances of the girl, which I jealously imagined underneath. Everybody declared that it was a beautiful drive; I had thought so myself a good many times before. The winding Dee burnt its way through the valley in a blaze of sunlight on our left, past the picturesque little tower of Abergeldie, with its rough walls and corner turret; past stately, romantic Balmoral, whose white pinnacles and battlements peeped out, with royal and appropriate reserve, from behind a screen of trees, on the other side of the river, far below us. Near here we found our fresh team, standing quietly under a tree, by a ruined and roofless stone building. Oddly frequent they are, these ruinous farms and cottages, in the royal neighbourhood. As we drew near Braemar the scenery grew wilder and grander. Between the peaks of the bare steep hills, where little patches of tall fir-trees grow on inaccessible ledges on the face of the dark-gray rock, we caught glimpses of Lochnagar, with its snow-cap dwindled by the summer sun into thin white lines. We passed close under steep Craig Clunie, where the story goes that Colonel Farquharson, of Clunie, hid himself after the battle of Culloden, and heard King George's soldiers making merry over their victory in his mansion, which, in common with all old Scotch country-houses,

is called a castle. As the castle is three-quarters of a mile from the Craig, Edgar opined that the Colonel must have had sharp ears. Then he scoffed a little at the obstinate ignorance of the Highland gentlemen who would hazard an acre in defence of such a futile and worthless person as Charles James Stuart. Edgar had advanced political notions, which, in another man, I should have called rabid. I said that if it had been merely a matter of persons, and not of principles, I should have backed up the Colonel, since I would sooner swear allegiance to a home-born profligate than to one of foreign growth; but then I own I would have English princes marry English ladies, and I feel a sneaking regard for Henry the Eighth for having given his countrywomen a chance, and thereby left to the world our last great sovereign by right of birth, Queen Elizabeth.

That umbrella in front of me had made me cantankerous, I daresay; at any rate, I disagreed persistently with Edgar for the rest of the way, and called Old Mar Castle a mouldy old rat-hole merely because he was struck with admiration of its many-turreted walls. We had luncheon at the Fife Arms, where we were all overpowered by Mr. Fussell, who, having been allowed by the coachman to drive for about half a mile as we came, became so puffed up by his superiority, and so tiresomely loud in his boasts about his driving that, Fabian being too much occupied with Babiole to shut him up, and nobody else having the requisite dash and disregard of other people's feelings, we all sneaked away from the table, one by one, as quickly as we

could, and left him to finish by himself the champagne he had ordered. These three, therefore, spent the hours before our return in the neighbourhood of Braemar together. While keeping within the letter of his promise to have no more *tête-à-tête* walks with Babiole, Fabian thus easily violated the spirit of it; since Mr. Fussell, being too stout and too sleepy after luncheon to do much walking, suggested frequent and long rests under the trees, which he spent with gently-clasped hands, and a handkerchief over his face to keep the flies off.

The rest of us took a beastly hot walk to the Falls of Corriemulzie, and I wondered what I could have before seen to admire in them. Coming back, Mrs. Ellmer chased Maurice Browne for some indiscreet compliment. A tropical sun would not have taken the vivacity out of that woman! and Edgar fell through a fence on which he was resting, was planted in a bramble, and said 'Damn' for the first recorded time in the presence of a lady. That is all I remember of the expedition.

For the return journey, as Mr. Fussell had retired into the interior of the coach for a nap, being the laziest of men when he was not the busiest, I took the box-seat by the coachman, and was thus spared the sight of another *tête-à-tête*. After dinner that evening Fabian disappeared as usual in the direction of the cottage, and on the following day, which was the last of my visitors' stay, he threw his promise to the winds so openly that I began to think he must have made up his mind to let his principles go by the board, and make love seriously. In that case, of course,

I could have nothing to say, and however much I might choose to torment myself with doubts as to the permanent happiness of the union, I had really no grounds for believing that his vaunted principles would stand the test of practical experience better than did the ante-matrimonial prattle of more commonplace young men.

On the morning of my guests' departure the house was all astir at five o'clock in the morning. There was really no need for this effort, as the train did not leave Ballater till 8.25, and my Norfolk cart and a fly from M'Gregor's would not be at the door before half-past seven. But it was a convention among us to behave to the end like schoolboys, and, after all, a summer sunrise among the hills is a thing to be seen once and remembered for ever.

So there was much running up and down stairs, and sorting of rugs and collecting of miscellaneous trifles (I declare if they had been professional pickpockets I could not have dreaded more the ravages they made among the more modern and spicy of the volumes in my library), and there was a general disposition to fall foul of Edgar for the approaching vagary of his marriage, which would break up our Round Table hopelessly.

'I look upon this as a "long, a last good-bye" to Normanton,' said Maurice Browne, shaking his head. 'No man passes through the furnace of matrimony unchanged. When we see him again he may be a *better* man, refined by trial, ennobled by endurance; but he will not be the *same*. He will be a phœnix risen from the ashes of the old–'

'Or a wreck broken up by the waves,' added Mr. Fussell.

I looked out of one of the eastern windows at the red sun-glow, in which I took more pleasure than the Londoners, perhaps because I considered it as a part of my Highland property. To the left, standing in the long wet grass, shyly hiding herself among the trees, was Babiole; I went to another window from which I could see her more plainly, and discovered that her little face was much paler than usual, that she was watching the portico with straining eyes; in her hand, but held behind her, was a red rose, that she drew out from time to time and even kissed. I think she was crying. It was half-past six o'clock. I turned away and went back to my friends, who were already deep in a gigantic breakfast. From time to time I went back, on some pretext or other, to the window: she was always there, in the same place. The fourth time I looked out she was shivering; and her hands, red with the cold of the morning, were tucked up to her throat, red rose and all. I went up to Fabian, who I am sure must have been at quite his third chop, and touched him on the shoulder.

'There's some one waiting outside,—waiting for you, I think,' said I, in a low voice, under cover of the rich full tones of my true friend Fussell, who was waxing warm in the eloquence of his farewell to Scotch breakfasts.

Fabian got up at once and went out. I saw the child start forward, crimson in a moment, and the tears flowing undisguisedly; and with a choking feeling at my throat I turned away.

'Hallo, why you're not eating, Harry,' cried Maurice presently. 'You must be in love.'

'Another of 'em!' groaned Fussell.

'No,' said I hastily. 'The fact is I had something to eat before you came down.'

There was a roar at my voracity, but their own appetites were too vigorous for them to disbelieve me. I remember clearly only this of our final departure for the station: that Fabian turned up late, dashing after us down the drive in fact, and leaping up on to the Norfolk cart beside me. And that his eyes were dry, but that the front of his coat, just below the collar, was wet, perhaps with the dew. Nevertheless, if Edgar had not been behind us, I should have felt much inclined, when we drove along the road by the Dee, just where the bank is nice and steep, to give a jerk of the reins to the left, pitch my artistic friend out into the river's stony bed, and take my risk of following him.

CHAPTER XVI

Life seemed to move in a somewhat slow and stagnant manner for several days after the departure of my guests. I scarcely saw Babiole, and never spoke to her, a great shyness towards each other having taken possession of both of us. Mrs. Ellmer, upon whom I made a ceremonious call when I could contain my anxious interest no longer, was stiff in manner, haughty and depressed. She had evidently been informed of my opposition to Fabian's intention of extending his stay, and I soon learnt, to my great surprise, that she considered me responsible for the destruction of Babiole's first chance—'and the only one she is likely to have, poor child, living poked up here,' of 'settling well.'

'Oh,' said I, raising my eyebrows, and putting into that one exclamation as much sardonic emphasis as I could, while I kept my eyes fixed upon the cat and my hands much occupied with my deer-stalker, 'and may I be permitted to learn how I have done this?'

'It is useless to put on a satirical manner with me, Mr. Maude,' said the lady with dignity; 'I am perfectly aware that it was you who objected to Mr. Scott's remaining here long enough to make proposals for my daughter, and that, in fact, you interfered in the most marked way with his courtship of her.'

'And are you ignorant of the fact, madam, that to interfere with a man's courtship is the very way to increase its warmth,

and that if my interference, as you call it, could not screw him up to the point of proposing, nothing ever would?'

Mrs. Ellmer dropped into her lap the work which she had snatched up on my entrance, and at which she had been stitching away ever since, as a hint that she was busy and would be glad to be left alone; at the same time being, I think, not sorry to vent her ill-humour on some one.

'You are using very extraordinary expressions, Mr. Maude,' she said acidly. 'If her mother was satisfied with the gentleman's behaviour, I really don't see what business you had in the affair at all.'

'Do you forget that her father has made me responsible for the care of her? that she is certainly under my guardianship, and nominally engaged to me.'

'Nominally! There it is. To be engaged to a man who acknowledges that he never means to marry you! There's a pretty position for a girl, as I've said to Babiole scores of times!'

My heart leaped up.

'You've said that to Babiole!' I echoed, in a voice of suppressed rage that brought the little slender virago at once to reason.

'Well, Mr. Maude, with all respect to you, the position is something like that,' she said more reasonably.

'It is not at all like that,' I answered in my gravest and most magisterial tones. 'If your daughter could by any possibility overcome a young girl's natural repugnance to take for husband such an unsightly object as accident has made me, I should be a

much happier man than I am ever likely to be. But she could not do so; there is such a ghastly incongruity about a marriage of that sort that I could scarcely even wish her to do so.'

Mrs. Ellmer's eyes had begun to glow with the carefully but scarcely successfully subdued interest of the match-making mamma. This, however, gave place to uneasy disappointment as I went on—

'All the same I take an interest in your daughter's happiness quite as strong as if it were a more selfish one. It was that interest which prompted me to prevent the prolonging of a flirtation which might have serious consequences for your sensitive and impressionable little daughter.'

'Serious consequences!' stammered Mrs. Ellmer. 'Do you mean to say that Mr. Scott, your friend, is a dishonourable man?'

'No,' said I, 'I would not say anything so severe as that. But I am certainly of opinion that Mr. Scott had no more serious intention than to fill up his time here pleasantly by talks and walks with a pretty and charming girl. Lots of pretty and charming girls accept such temporary devotion for what it is worth, and their regrets, when the amusement is over, are proportionately light. But I know that Babiole is not like that, and so I did all that my limited powers of guardianship could do to lessen the danger.'

'But he may still write and propose,' murmured the dismayed mother. 'Even if his intentions were not serious while he was here, he may find he cannot get on without her!'

I wanted to shake the woman, or to box her ears, and ask her how she had dared wittingly to expose her daughter to the misery of hanging on to such a hope as this.

'I don't think it's likely,' I said drily; and questioning my face with doubt in her eyes, the match-maker tried another tack.

'After all, Mr. Maude, it may be for the best,' she began in a conciliatory tone. 'It was I, rather than Babiole, that was so hot upon this match, not understanding that my poor child had any chance of a better husband. For my part, I don't see that you have any reason to talk about yourself in the disponding manner you do, and if you will only trust for a little while to my diplomacy, and speak to her when I give you the word that it's the right moment–'

I interrupted her by standing up suddenly, and I can only hope my face did not express what I thought of her and her miserable diplomacy.

'You will oblige me by saying not one word to your daughter on the subject of me and my impossible pretensions,' I said authoritatively, but with a sickening knowledge that my demand would be disregarded. 'I am sensitive enough and humble enough on the score of my own disadvantages, I admit. But I am not a miserable wreck of humanity who would take what perfunctory favours a woman would throw to him, and be satisfied. I am a man with powers of loving that any woman might be proud to excite; and no girl shall ever be my wife who does not feel of her own accord, and show, as an innocent girl can, that I have done

her a honour in loving her which she is bound to pay back by loving me with all her might.'

And much excited by my own unexpected burst of unreserve, but somewhat ashamed of having rather bullied a poor creature who, however she might assume the high hand with me, was after all but an unprotected and plucky little woman, I held out my hand with apologetic meekness and prepared to go. Mrs. Ellmer shook my hand limply and showed a disposition to whimper.

'Don't worry yourself and don't bother—I mean—er—don't talk to the child. It will come all right. She's hardly grown up yet; there's plenty of time for half-a-dozen princely suitors to turn up. And what do you say to taking her once a week to Aberdeen and giving her some good music lessons? It will distract her thoughts a bit, and do you both good.'

This suggestion diverted the little woman's tears, and her face softened with a kindly impulse towards me.

'You are very good, Mr. Maude, you really are,' she said in farewell as I left her.

And though I was grateful for this *amende*, I should have been more pleased if I could have felt assured that she would not, in default of Mr. Scott, tease her daughter with recommendations to get used to the idea of myself in the capacity of lover.

Of course after this interview I was more shy than ever of meeting Babiole, and even when, on the second evening afterwards, I saw her standing in the rose garden, apparently waiting for me to come and speak to her, I pretended not to

see her, and after examining the sky as if to make out the signs by which one might predict the weather of the morrow, I turned back to finish my cigar in the drive. But the evening after that I found on my table a great bowl full of flowers from her own private garden, and on the following afternoon, while I was writing a letter, there came pattering little steps in the hall and a knock at my open study door.

'Come in,' said I, feeling that I had gone purple and that the thumping of my heart must sound as loudly as a traction engine in the road outside.

Babiole came in very quietly, with a bright flush on her face and shy eyes. Her hands were full of tiny wild flowers, and among them was one little sprig carefully tied up with ribbon.

'I found a plant of white heather this morning on one of the hills by the side of the Gairn,' said she quickly. 'You know they say it is so rare that some Highlanders never see any all their lives. It brings luck they say.'

'Why do you bring it to me then?' I asked, as she put the little blossom on the table beside me. 'You should keep luck for yourself, and not waste it on a person who doesn't deserve any.'

She had nothing to say to this, so she only gave the flower a little push towards me to intimate that I was to enter into possession without delay. I took it up and stuck it in the buttonhole of my old coat.

'It has brought me luck already, you see, since this is the first visit I have had from you for I don't know how long,' I said,

looking up at her, and noticing at once with a pang that she had grown in ten days paler and altogether less radiant.

She blushed deeply at this, and sliding down on to her knees, put her arms round Ta-ta, and kissed the collie's ears.

'Ta-ta has missed you awfully,' I went on; 'she told me yesterday that you never take her out on the hills now, and that her digestion is suffering in consequence. She says her tail is losing all its old grand sweep for want of change of air.'

Babiole smoothed the dog's coat affectionately.

'I haven't been out much lately,' she said in a low voice; 'there has been a great deal to do in the cottage, and here too. I've been hemming some curtains for Janet, and helping mamma to make pickles. Oh, I've been very busy, indeed.'

'And I suppose all this amazing superabundance of work is over at last, since you can find time to come and pay calls of ceremony on chance acquaintances.'

She looked up at me reproachfully. My spirits had been rising ever since she came in, and I would only laugh at her.

'I'm sure it is quite time those curtains were hemmed and those pickles were made, so that you can have a chance to go back to Craigendarroch and look about for those roses you've left there.'

'Roses! Oh, do I look white then?' And she began to rub her cheeks with her hands to hide the blush that rose to them.

'Has your mother said anything to you about Aberdeen and the music lessons?'

'Yes.' She looked up with a loving smile.

I had turned my chair round to the fireplace, where a little glimmer of fire was burning; for it was a wet cool day. Babiole had seated herself on a high cloth-covered footstool, and Ta-ta sat between us, looking from the one to the other and wagging her tail to congratulate us on our return to the old terms of friendship. The sky outside was growing lighter towards evening, and the sun was peeping out in a tearful and shamefaced way from behind the rain-clouds. The girl and the sun together had made a great illumination in the old study, though they were not at their brightest.

'Well, and how do you like the idea?'

'It is quite perfect, like all your ideas for making other people happy.'

'I'm afraid I don't always succeed very well.'

This she took as a direct accusation, and she bent her head very low away from me.

'Has your mother been talking to you, Babiole?'

'Yes'—as a guilty admission.

'What did she say?'

'Oh, she talked and talked. That was why I didn't like to come and see you. You see, though I told her she didn't understand, and that whatever you thought must be right, yet hearing all those things made me feel that I—I couldn't come in the old way. And then at last I missed you so—that I thought I would dash in and —get it over.'

From which I gathered that Mrs. Ellmer had babbled out the

whole substance of our interview, and coloured it according to her lights, so I ventured—

'Didn't you feel at all angry with me for something I said—something I did?'

A pause. I could see nothing of her face, for she was most intent upon making a beautifully straight parting with my ink-stained old ivory paper-knife down the back of Ta-ta's head.

'I had no right to be angry,' she said at last, in a quivering voice, 'and besides—I am afraid—that what you said will come true.'

And the tears began to fall upon her busy fingers. I put my hand very gently upon her brown hair and could feel the thrill sent through her whole frame by a valiant struggle to repress an outburst of grief.

'You are afraid then that–' And I waited.

'That he will never think of me again,' she sobbed; and unable any longer to repress her feelings, she sat at my feet for some minutes quietly crying.

I hoped that the distress which could find this childlike outlet would be only a transient one, and I thought it best for her to let her tears flow unrestrainedly, as I was sure she had no chance of doing under the sharp maternal eyes. I continued to smooth her hair sympathetically until by a great effort she conquered herself and dried her eyes.

'I am a great baby,' she said indignantly; 'as if I could hope that a very clever accomplished man, whom all the world is talking about, would be able to remember an ignorant girl like me, when

once he had got back to London.'

'Well, and you must pull yourself together and forget him,' I said—I hope not savagely.

But there came a great change over her face, and she said almost solemnly—

'No, I don't want to do that—even if I could. I want to remember all he told me about art, and about ideals, and to become an accomplished woman, so that I may meet him some day, and he may be quite proud that it was he who inspired me.'

So Mr. Scott had known how, by a little dash and plausibility, and by deliberately playing upon her emotions, to crown my work and to appropriate to himself the credit and the reward of it all.

But after this enthusiastic declaration the light faded again out of her sensitive face.

'It seems such a long, long time to wait before that can happen,' she said mournfully.

And a remarkably poor ambition to live upon, I thought to myself.

'And do you think Mr. Scott's approbation is worth troubling your head about if, after all his enthusiasm about you, he forgets you as soon as you are out of his sight?' I asked rather bitterly.

Cut at this suggestion, corresponding so exactly with her own fears, she almost broke down again. It was in a broken voice that she answered—

'I can't think hardly about him; when I do it only makes me break my heart afterwards, and I long to see him to ask his pardon

for being so harsh. He was fond of me while he was here, I couldn't expect more than that of such a clever man. And he has sent me one letter—and perhaps—I hope—he will send me another before long.'

'He has written to you?'

'Yes.' As a mark of deep friendship for me she not only let me see the envelope (preserved in a black satin case embroidered with pink silk) but flourished before my eyes the precious letter itself, a mere scrap of a note, I could see that, and not the ten-pager of your disconsolate lover.

I was seized with a great throb of impatience, and clave the top coal of the small fire viciously. She must get over this. I turned the subject, for fear I should wound her feelings by some outburst of anger against Mr. Scott, who must indeed have worked sedulously to leave such a deep impression on the girl's mind.

'Well, you will have to be content with your old master's affection for the present, Babiole,' I said, when she had put her treasure carefully away.

'Oh, Mr. Maude!' She leant lovingly against my knee.

'And if the worst comes to the worst you will have to marry me.'

She laughed as if this were a joke in my best manner.

'Didn't your mother say anything to you about that?' I asked, as if carrying on the jest.

Babiole blushed. 'Don't talk about it,' she said humbly. 'I lost

my temper, and spoke disrespectfully to her for the first time. I told her she ought to be ashamed of herself, after all you have done for us.'

Evidently she thought the idea originated with her mother, and was pressed upon me against my inclination. Seeing that I should gain nothing by undeceiving her, I laughed the matter off, and we drifted into a talk about the garden, and the croup among Mr. Blair's bare-footed children at the Mill o' Sterrin a mile away.

According to all precedent among lovelorn maidens, Babiole ought to have got over her love malady as a child gets over the measles, or else she ought to have dwindled into 'the mere shadow of her former self' and to have found a refined consolation in her beloved hills. But instead of following either of these courses, the little maid began to evince more and more the signs of a marked change, which showed itself chiefly in an inordinate thirst for work of every kind. She began by a renewed and feverish devotion to her studies with me, and assiduous practice on my piano whenever I was out, to get the fullest possible benefit from her music lessons at Aberdeen. This, I thought, was only the outcome of her expressed desire to become an accomplished woman. But shortly afterwards she relieved her mother of the whole care of the cottage, filling up her rare intervals of time in helping Janet. Walks were given up, with the exception of a short duty-trot each day to Knock Castle or the Mill o' Sterrin and back again. When I remonstrated, telling her she would lose her health, she answered restlessly—

'Oh, I hate walking, it is more tiring than all the work—much more tiring! And one gets quite as much air in the garden as on Craigendarroch, without catching cold.'

She was always perfectly sweet and good with me, but she confessed to me sometimes, with tears in her eyes, that she was growing impatient and irritable with her mother. I had waited as eagerly as the girl herself for another letter from Fabian Scott, but when the hope of receiving one had died away, I did not dare to say anything about the sore subject.

About the middle of December she broke down. It was only a cold, she said, that kept her in the cottage and even forced her to lay aside all her incessant occupations. But she had worked so much too hard lately that she was not strong enough to throw it off quickly, and day after day, when I went to see her, I found my dear witch lying back in the high wooden rocking-chair in the sitting-room, with a very transparent-looking skin, a poor little pink-tipped nose, and large, luminous, sad eyes that had no business at all in such a young face.

On the fifth day I was alone with her, Mrs. Ellmer having fussed off to the kitchen about dinner. I was in a very sentimental mood indeed, having missed my little sunbeam frightfully. Babiole had pushed her rocking-chair quickly away from the table, which was covered with a map and a heap of old play-bills. By the map lay a pencil, which the girl had laid down on my entrance.

'What were you doing when I came in?' I asked, after a few

questions about her health.

The colour came back for a moment to her face as she answered—

'I was tracing our old journeys together, mamma's and mine; and looking at those old play-bills with her name in them.'

The occupation seemed to me dismally suggestive.

'You were wishing you were travelling again, I suppose,' said I, in a tone which fear caused to sound hard.

'Oh no, at least not exactly,' said the poor child, not liking to confess the feverish longing for change and movement which had seized upon her like a disease.

I remained silent for a few minutes, struggling with hard facts, my hands clasped together, my arms resting on my knees. Then I said without moving, in a voice that was husky in spite of all my efforts—

'Babiole, tell me, on your word of honour, are you thinking about that man still?'

I could hear her breath coming in quick sobs. Then she moved, and her fingers held out something right under my averted eyes. It was the one note she had received from Fabian Scott, worn into four little pieces.

'Look here, dear,' I said, having signified by a bend of the head that I understood, 'do you think a man like that would be likely to make a good husband?'

'Oh no,' readily and sadly.

'But you would be his wife all the same?'

'Oh, Mr. Maude!' in a low trembling voice, as if Paradise had been suddenly thrown open to mortal sight.

I got up.

'Well, well,' I said, trying to speak in a jesting tone, 'I suppose these things will be explained in a better world!'

Mrs. Ellmer came in at that moment, and the leave-taking for the day was easier.

'Won't you stay and lunch with us, Mr. Maude? I've just been preparing something nice for you,' she said with disappointment.

'Thank you, no, I can't stay this morning. The fact is I have to start for London this afternoon, and I haven't a minute to lose.'

Babiole started, and her eyes, as I turned to her to shake hands, shone like stars.

'Good-bye, Mr. Maude,' she faltered, taking my hand in both hers, and pressing it feverishly.

And she looked into my face without any inquiry in her gaze, but with a subdued hope and a boundless gratitude.

Mrs. Ellmer insisted on coming over to the house to see that everything was properly packed for me. As I left the cottage with her I looked back, and saw the little face, with its weird expression of eagerness, pressed against the window.

It was an awful thing I was going to do, certainly. But what sacrifice would not the worst of us make to preserve the creature we love best in the world from dying before our eyes?

CHAPTER XVII

I arrived at King's Cross at 8.15 on the following morning, and after breakfasting at the Midland Hotel, went straight to Fabian Scott's chambers, in a street off the Hay-market. It was then a little after half-past ten.

Fabian, who was at breakfast, received me very heartily, and was grieved that I had not come direct to him.

'What would you have said,' he asked, 'if I had gone to have breakfast at the Invercauld Arms in Ballater, instead of coming on to you?'

'That's not quite the same thing, my impetuous young friend. You didn't expect me, for one thing, and London is a place where one must be a little more careful of one's behaviour than in the wilds.'

'No, that is true, I did not expect you; though when I heard your name, I was so pleased I thought I must have been living on the expectation for the last month.'

'Out of sight, out of mind, according to the simple old saying.'

I was looking about me, examining my friend's surroundings, feeling discouraged by the portraits of beautiful women, photographs on the mantelpiece, paintings on the walls, the invitation cards stuck in the looking-glass, the crested envelopes, freshly torn, on the table; the room, which seemed effeminately luxurious, after my sombre, threadbare, old study, gave no

evidence of bachelor desolation. It was just untidy enough to prove that 'when a man's single he lives at his ease,' for an opera hat and a soiled glove lay on the chair, a new French picture, which a wife would have tabooed, was propped up against the back of another, and on the mantelpiece was a royal disorder, in which a couple of pink clay statuettes of pierrettes, by Van der Straeten, showed their piquant, high-hatted little heads, and their befrilled, high-lifted little skirts above letters, ash trays, cigarette cases, 'parts' in MS., sketches, a white tie, a woman's long glove, the 'proof' of an article on 'The Cathedrals of Spain,' and a heap of other things. In the centre stood a handsome Chippendale clock, surmounted by signed photographs of Sarah Bernhardt and a much admired Countess. Fresh hot-house flowers filled two delicate Venetian glass vases on the table, long-leaved green plants stood in the windows. I began to suspect that the feminine influence in Fabian Scott's life was strong enough already, and I felt that any idea of an appeal to a bachelor's sense of loneliness must straightway be given up. There was another point, however, on which I felt more sanguine. Fabian had no private means, his tastes were evidently expensive, and he had had no engagement since the summer. Having made up my mind that to marry my little Babiole to this man was the only thing that would restore her to health and hope (about happiness I could but be doubtful), I could not afford to shrink from the means.

I had been listening with one ear to Fabian, who never wanted much encouragement to talk. He treated me to a long monologue

on the low ebb to which art of all kinds had sunk in England, to the prevailing taste for burlesque in literature, and on the stage, and for 'Little Toddlekins' on the walls of picture galleries.

'I thought burlesque had gone out,' I suggested.

He turned upon me fiercely, having finished his breakfast, and being occupied in striding up and down the room.

'Not at all,' he said emphatically. 'What is farcical comedy but burlesque of the most vicious kind? Burlesque of domestic life, throwing ridicule on virtuous wives and jealous husbands, making heroes and heroines of men and women of loose morals? What is melodrama but burlesque of incidents and of passions, fatiguing to the eye and stupefying to the intellect? I repeat, art in England is a dishonoured corpse, and the man who dares to call himself an artist, and to talk about his art with any more reverence than a grocer feels for his sanded sugar, or a violin-seller for his sham Cremonas, is treated with the derision one would show to a modern Englishman who should fall down and worship a mummy.'

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.