

ADA CAMBRIDGE

A MERE
CHANGE: A
NOVEL. VOL. 1

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A Mere Chance: A Novel. Vol. 1

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A Mere Chance: A Novel. Vol. 1

CHAPTER I. A MARSHAL NEIL ROSE

A few years ago there was a young *débutante* in Melbourne whose name was Rachel Fetherstonhaugh. She had risen upon the social horizon suddenly, like a new star – or, one might almost say, like a comet, so unusually bright was she, and so much talked about; and no one quite knew where she had come from. Mrs. Hardy had introduced her as her niece – everyone knew that – but there were sceptics who, having never heard of female relatives previously (except the three daughters, who had married so well), declared that she might be "anybody," picked up merely for matchmaking purposes – it being well understood that Mrs. Hardy had for an unknown period sustained life, figuratively speaking, upon the stimulus of matrimonial intrigues, and had now no more daughters to provide for.

That this pretty creature had been unseen and unsuspected until the last Miss Hardy, as Mrs. Buxton, was fairly away on her honeymoon, and almost immediately after had been introduced to society as Mrs. Buxton's successor, was a kind of circumstance that seemed, of course, bound to have a mystery at the bottom of it. But, as a matter of fact, there was no mystery. Rachel Fetherstonhaugh was a *bona-fide* niece, and her entrance into the Hardy family at a particular juncture could be quite easily accounted for.

Her father had been Mrs. Hardy's brother – a good-for-nothing, unlucky brother, whose clever brains could do anything but earn money, and whose pockets could no more hold it than a sieve could hold water – a brother whom, long ago, before she had become rich and fastidious, Mrs. Hardy had loved, and served, and worked for, but whom, of late years, she had – with some mild self-reproach for doing so – ignored as far as possible.

This man had married a girl without a penny, as such a man was certain to do; and his wife had left him a widower, with an only child, a few years afterwards. Since then, for fifteen years, he had rambled about from place to place, seeking his fortune in all kinds of visionary and impracticable schemes, whose collapse one after the other, never deterred him from fresh enterprises, until a sunstroke closed the list of his life's many failures at the early age of forty-five.

A formal little note was sent by his orphan daughter to Mrs. Hardy to announce this sad event; and for half an hour after receiving it the bereaved sister was inconsolable, tormenting herself with unavailing regrets for her neglect of "her own flesh and blood," and with harrowing reminiscences of loving early years.

At the end of that time, however, she had made many generous plans for her dead brother's child, which cheered and comforted her; and in time these gave place to the prudent, unemotional dictates of worldly wisdom. Mrs. Hardy dried her tears, bought herself a black bonnet, and stole out of town in a surreptitious fashion, to see what manner of niece had been thrown upon her hands.

She pictured to herself what the child's life had probably been – the motherless child of a vagabond speculator, who had lived very indifferently by his wits; and the most she hoped for was to find her a raw bush girl, rudimentally educated, and uncontaminated by the low society in which she had been brought up. For such a niece she had mapped out what seemed to be a suitable career – that of a nursery governess in some *distant* colony; and she had resolved to be a good friend to the girl, to set her up in clothes, and to see that she never came to want or misfortune if by any reasonable means it could be helped.

To her intense surprise her young relative turned out to be a remarkably pretty and refined young woman, obviously accustomed to the decorous and reticent poverty of people who had "seen better days" and appreciated the fact, and not raw in any sort of sense, though diffident and shy; the kind of young woman, indeed, who, it was evident at a glance, was capable under good management of bringing honour and glory upon the family.

The result was as above indicated. Rachel Fetherstonhaugh, instead of being sent into obscurity to earn her bread, was adopted in the sight of all men as a daughter of the house – that great white house at Toorak, which had achieved local fame for its profuse entertainments, its social diplomacies, and its three great marriages.

Her father's debts were paid; her wardrobe was supplemented with the very best style of new clothes – less expensive, but more becoming, than any that Mrs. Buxton and Mrs. Buxton's sisters had worn; and by and bye when, having got over the first shock and grief of her father's death, she made her appearance in public, and began to take an interest in her new life, she found herself, to her great astonishment, a personage – if not *the* personage – in the society around her.

It must be said, and not to her discredit, I hope, that Miss Fetherstonhaugh liked being a personage very much indeed. She had grown up a sensitive little gentlewoman, full of delicate thoughts and tastes, in the midst of dull, uncultured people of sordid cares and occupations, and of uncongenial surroundings of all sorts; and the mere physical enjoyment of her changed circumstances, in which everything was orderly, and dainty, and plenteous, and "nice," was something like the enjoyment that a flower must feel when the sun shines.

And the sudden discovery that certain shy conjectures about her personal appearance (which she had hardly had leisure or heart to attend to) were confirmed by the best authority – to know herself a pretty girl, and to see that society paid her homage accordingly – this was an experience that no woman born, being in possession of her faculties, could help delighting in. And having all the grateful consciousness of the value of life and its good things that nature gives to the young and healthy, unspoiled by artificial sentiment, her delight was unbounded, and consequently unconcealed.

Rachel Fetherstonhaugh was, as her uncle said, "A modest, good girl, with no nonsense about her." All the same, she was proud and glad of her fair, clear-cut features, and her pensive, large, sweet eyes that were full of tender suggestions, for which no authority existed when she lifted them meekly to an admirer's face; and that figure which with all its slenderness had the curves of beauty everywhere, and those waves of ruddy auburn hair.

"I am so glad I am not plain," she once said to her cousin, Mrs. Thornley (who strange to say did not repeat the remark to all her friends with disparaging comments, but responded confidentially with a sympathising kiss, and said she could quite understand it). "I have always thought that it must be the most charming thing in the world to be a really pretty woman. And now I know it."

On a grey afternoon in the beginning of May this young lady was enjoying the luxury of a slow drive up and down Collins Street, shopping with her aunt. She nestled in a soft corner of a well-appointed Victoria, with a great rug of native bearskins about her knees, showing her delicate fresh face, like a well-hung picture, to the crowd of passers-by on the pavement, and yet sitting just enough above them to see into the shop-windows over their heads; and she felt – though she did not formulate the sentiment – perfectly happy and satisfied.

If the truth must be told, she found the sight of more or less well-dressed men and women, streaming up and down the busy street, more interesting than the most lovely landscape she had ever seen. She took as much pleasure in the exquisite fit of her gloves as in the exquisite colour and fragrance of a Marshal Neil rose that she wore in her button-hole; and she had never seen a moonrise or a sunset that had fascinated her *more* than that sealskin jacket in Alston and Brown's window, which she observed was exactly the size for her. It is not, therefore, to be supposed that she is a heroine unworthy of the name.

At Alston and Brown's Mrs. Hardy stepped out of her carriage for perhaps the fifth time. She was a very large, masculine kind of woman, with a remarkably fine Roman nose, of which she was excessively proud, and justly, for it had been a valuable weapon to her in the battle of life, literally carrying all before it. When he had got over the effect of her nose, the beholder of Mrs. Hardy's person, as a rule, was pleasantly impressed by it. It had a generous and a regal air.

"My dear," she said to her young companion, "I only want to match some lace. Will you go in with me, or will you stay where you are?"

"I think I will stay, if you please, aunt," replied Rachel. "The carriage is so comfortable, and I like to look at the street."

"Don't look too much," said Mrs. Hardy, smiling anxiously. "There are all kinds of office clerks and people mixed up with the crowd at this hour."

"I don't want to look at *men*," said Miss Fetherstonhaugh, with more dignity than one would have given her credit for. "It is the ladies' dresses I like to see – and the horses."

Mrs. Hardy marched into the shop with that imposing mien which became more and more pronounced as she grew older and stouter, and her social successes accumulated; and her niece sat still in her corner, and looked for a long while at the sealskin jacket.

"All my cousins have sealskin jackets," she mused, "but I don't think they had them until they were married. Perhaps I shall have one when I am married. I can't expect my aunt to buy me one, of course; she has bought me so many pretty things. How lovely and soft that brown fur is! How well it would suit my complexion! If my husband is rich, and asks me what I should like for my first birthday present, I shall not have any difficulty in making up my mind. I wonder *will* he be rich? like Mr. Thornley, and Mr. Buxton, and Mr. Reade. At any rate, he must not be poor; if he is, I won't have him. I know enough of poverty" – with a little shudder and a sudden solemnity in her face – "and I don't mean to run into it again if I can help it."

Here she fell into a rather mournful reverie, thinking of her old life, with its shifts and privations – of her poor father, who had been so happy through it all, never feeling the weight of the petty debts and dishonours that lay like lead on her – of her struggles to keep his affairs straight – of her prayers that she might not live to despise and desert him, which was a temptation that grew with her growing years – and as she thought, she gazed absently, tenderly, pensively, not on the sealskin jacket, but on the faces of the passers-by. She had no idea how excessively interesting and pretty she looked to those passers-by with that expression in her eyes.

However, a gentleman came by presently, a well-preserved young man of fifty or sixty, with a waxed moustache, and a slender umbrella carried musketwise over his shoulder; and his attention was violently arrested.

"Where *have* I seen that charming creature?" he asked himself, imploring his memory, which had a great store of miscellaneous treasures, to be quick and help him. "Surely I have been introduced to her somewhere. Oh, of course! it is old Hardy's niece, or ward, or whatever she is. Good day, Miss Fetherstonhaugh," turning back when he had nearly passed her, and making a profound obeisance with his hat off. "Fine afternoon for a drive."

She recognised *him* immediately. She had danced a quadrille with him at her memorable first evening "out," and she had learned a great deal of him since from the gossip of her aunt's circle. There was a time, she had been told, when he was nearly becoming a member of the family himself. He was a great merchant – or an ex-merchant rather – who had dealt in some mysterious commodity that had brought enormous profits; and he had risen by all kinds of good luck, from no one knew what depth of social insignificance to the proud position of a man of fashion about town, whom ladies delighted to honour.

"Good day, Mr. Kingston," she responded, looking very pink and bright, and a little flurried as she returned his salutation. She had the daintiest complexion that ever adorned a youthful face, and whenever she was startled or embarrassed, however slightly, she blushed like a rose. Mr. Kingston,

accustomed to appraise the charms of his female friends with an almost brutal impartiality, was unjustifiably touched and flattered by this innocent demonstration. He was really very glad he had remembered who she was before he had lost so good an opportunity for looking at and talking to her.

"I don't think it *is* a very fine afternoon," she remarked presently, as the gentleman seemed to find himself for once a little at a loss for a subject; and she smiled at him through her blushes, which went and came suddenly and delicately, as if they were breathed over her by the air somehow. "It has been looking grey, like rain, ever since we started; and it is rather cold, don't you think?"

"Is it? Ah! so it is. But we must expect cold weather in May. I suppose it is rather strange to you to be finding winter coming on at this season?"

"No. Why should it be strange to me?"

"I thought – I am sure somebody told me – that you were recently out from England."

"Oh, dear, no," she replied, frankly. "I was born in this colony, and have lived in it all my life."

"In the name of fortune, where?"

"In different places; at Sandhurst, at Ballarat, and on the Upper Murray, and in little townships here and there in the bush; and sometimes in Melbourne."

"I am sure I never saw you in Melbourne until I met you at that dance the other night," he protested earnestly. "I never should have forgotten your face if I had once seen it."

"I daresay not," she said, and she was angry to find herself blushing again. "I was but a child when I lived in Melbourne before, and – and my home was not in Toorak then."

Mr. Kingston understood. She had been a poor relation in those days, and the Misses Hardy were unmarried. He had a constitutional antipathy to poor relations, and he was a little disappointed. For a few seconds he kept silence, while he wondered what her antecedents could have been. Then he looked at her again, and she was regarding him with a curious gravity of demeanour, almost as if she had divined his thoughts. There was a meek majesty about her that commanded his respect, and that he considered was excessively becoming.

After all, what did it matter about her antecedents? Did she not look a thoroughly well-bred little woman, sitting there in her furs and soft cushions, with her head held so straight? Did he not hear other men – better men than he from a genealogical point of view – singing her praises wherever he went? Whatever she had been, she was a distinguished personage now, whose acquaintance it behoved a veteran lady-killer to cultivate, and that without delay.

"I am very glad your home is in Toorak now," he said gallantly. "I have some land there myself, quite close to your uncle's place."

"Indeed," murmured Rachel.

"Yes, and I am going to build on it soon. I have just got the plans out from home – capital plans. I shall bring them in for Mrs. Hardy's opinion. When my house is built we shall be neighbours. You will have to help me, you and your aunt, with the furnishing and all that sort of thing that ladies understand."

"I don't think I understand much about it," she said; "but I shall like to see it done. I am very fond of pretty furniture. Will your house be very big?"

"Oh, nothing out of the way. I'm not going to spend *more* than twenty thousand pounds on it. My friends tell me I ought to do the thing properly when I am about it; but I don't see the fun of locking up a lot of money in bricks and mortar. I might want to change my residence any day, you see."

Rachel looked at him with awe. There was a flippancy in the way he spoke of that twenty thousand pounds which almost shocked her.

"If you are going to build a palace," she said, "don't talk of asking my help. I have never had anything to do with that kind of thing."

"Oh, my dear Miss Fetherstonhaugh – really it will be nothing but an ordinary good-sized, comfortable house, and I am sure your taste would be perfect. At any rate, you will help me with the

gardens? I mean to have good grounds, whatever else I go without; and ladies always know how to lay out beds and things better than we do."

"I shouldn't know," she said, smiling; "but I think my aunt is very clever at that. We have beautiful flowers – even so late as this."

"So I see." He glanced admiringly at the rose on her breast, and she stuck her pretty chin into her throat and looked at it too. "What a lovely bud that is! Marshal Neil, is it not? Oh, don't take it out – the black fur on your jacket makes such a charming background for it."

Rachel already had it in her hand, and was stroking the velvety yellow petals and the dark green leaves.

"We have plenty of them," she said; "there is a wonderful autumn bloom of roses just now. This is a picture, isn't it? with that deep colour like an apricot in the heart, and those scarlet stains streaking it outside. Would you like to have it?" And she held it out with a frank gesture and the most captivating smile; and then, as he took it with a low bow and much ostentatious gratitude, she blushed the deepest crimson to the roots of her golden hair.

At this moment Mrs. Hardy emerged from the shop, her ounce-weight of purchases being carried behind her; and Mr. Kingston turned to receive an effusive greeting.

"Oh, my dear Mr. Kingston, is it you?" the stately matron exclaimed. "How *glad* I am to see you – I have not met you for an age! Where *have* you been? And when *are* you coming to call on me again?"

"I will come whenever you will allow me," this illustrious person replied, with an alacrity of demeanour that did not escape notice. "I thought of coming this afternoon, and on my way I saw your carriage, and your niece told me that you were shopping."

"No; I did not tell you that," interposed Rachel gravely.

He looked at her and laughed, and his laugh for some unaccountable reason called her retreating blushes back. Mrs. Hardy glanced sharply from one to the other, and then she also laughed, in decorous matronly fashion.

"Well, come and dine with us to-night," the elder lady said, "and take us to the opera. That would be a friendly thing to do, if you are disposed to be friendly. Beatrice and Mr. Reade are coming – nobody else; and you can take Mr. Hardy's ticket. He is always glad to get off going."

"I will indeed – I will with pleasure," was the prompt response; and with some further exchange of civilities, the friends separated.

Mr. Kingston walked away to his club, with his flower in his button-hole, swinging his umbrella gently, and wondering to what class of woman this pretty Miss Fetherstonhaugh belonged.

"Is she a coquette?" he asked himself over and over again; "or is she charmingly fresh and simple?"

Mrs. Hardy rolled home in her little Victoria, and she also asked herself questions which were by no means easy to answer, as she stole furtive glances at the little black figure sitting, watchful and alert, beside her.

"My dear," she said presently, breaking a long silence, "where is your rosebud gone to?"

"I gave it to Mr. Kingston, aunt."

"You gave it to Mr. Kingston!" Mrs. Hardy almost shouted in the vehemence of her surprise. Then, pausing for a moment while she stared, not unkindly, at the torrent of blushes that flowed over her pretty face, she ejaculated, almost in a tone of awe, "Good gracious!"

CHAPTER II. FAMILY COUNSELS

THE drawing-room of the house in Toorak where our heroine lived, looked very cosy and comfortable a few hours later in the ruddy glow of the firelight. It was a little before the days of domestic high art in Victoria, and it was by no means the charming apartment that it is now. There was no dado, no parquetry floor, no tiled hearth, no *étagère* mantelpiece – nor Persian rugs under foot, nor Limoges plaques and Benares dishes on the walls, nor Japanese screens and jars, nor treasures of jade and china, nor anything, in fact, that there ought to have been.

The pleasant firelight danced upon a whitewashed ceiling, plentifully adorned with plaster-of-Paris mouldings, and upon whitey-grey walls sprigged with golden flowers. The floor was completely covered with a vivid green carpet, also sprinkled with flowers; and the windows were draped with brilliant damask to match, depending from immense gilt cornices in festoons looped with cords and tassels. There was a cut-glass chandelier hanging down in the middle, and there was a gigantic pier-glass reaching from the marble chimney-piece to the plaster-of-Paris frieze, with little gold cupids sitting on the top of it, tying wreaths of gold flowers into a knot. The chairs and couches shone in slippery satin, with wonderful rosewood convolutions wriggling out from them, that one could hardly venture to call legs; and there was a terrible chiffonniere, full of looking-glasses, with a marble top, reflecting all these splendours over and over again – which was quite unnecessary.

Nevertheless, though Mrs. Hardy cannot look back upon it without a shudder, the old room was a pleasant room. She herself came into it on this occasion, having dressed a little earlier than usual, and was struck by its air of luxurious warmth and comfort. She saw nothing to shock her artistic susceptibilities; she liked the twinkle of her glass drops, and the shine of her spacious mirror, and the deep glow of her emerald satin and damask – though she would die sooner than own to it now.

She went leisurely over to the fire, sank down in a low arm-chair, and put up her feet on the fender to warm, with a distinct impression upon her mind of congenial surroundings and satisfied aspirations. Long ago she had been a poor man's wife – the most estimable and devoted of poor men's wives – doing her own housework, making her own bread and butter, nursing her own babies, mending her husband's clothes; and in those days she had beautified her bush hut with cheap paper and chintz, and thought it prettier than a palace.

Later on she had had a smart brick and stucco cottage, and in it a drawing-room – her first drawing-room – with a green and scarlet drugget on the floor, lace curtains over the window, a centre table (with a basket of wax flowers under a shade in the middle), and a "suite" in green rep disposed around; and this in its day had seemed to her an apartment quite too good for common use. Next she had aspired to a Brussels carpet, and by and bye to a pier-glass and a piano. And so she had come by degrees to this Toorak splendour, in each stage feeling that she had reached the summit of her ambition, and vindicated her claim to the most correct taste.

The same process of evolution and development had taken place in herself, outwardly and inwardly. She was naturally a kindly, honest, good-hearted woman, and she was by birth a lady. But year by year nature having much to struggle with had retired, step by step into the background of her personality, and she was simply what the education of society – her society – made her. Practically, fashion and *les convenances* were her gods. Those men or women who were not what she generally termed "well-bred" – who were behind the times in social matters, who had no place in her great world, nor any capacity for making one – were not people to be received into her house, or to have anything to do with. Her demeanour to such unfortunate individuals, when she did happen to come into contact with them was, to say the least, chilling.

Yet those who knew her best, declared that if any of these ineligible were to fall into great trouble, she would be the first to help and befriend them if she could; and that if her husband were to lose his fortune and suddenly plunge her into poverty again, she would set to work to cook his dinners and mend his clothes with the same cheerful willingness as of yore.

She sat in the warm firelight, toasting her feet, and her brain was busy with projects. For some weeks past she had been troubled about her young niece, on account of her too absurd innocence, and her ignorance of social etiquette in many important details. The girl's manner and carriage had been particularly easy and graceful, but she had constantly counteracted the effect of this by a deplorable want of penetration as to who was who, and of reticence concerning her own history and experiences, which had been very mortifying to an aunt and *chaperon* accustomed to better things; and her efforts to teach and train one who seemed so gentle and pliant had been singularly unfruitful. Rachel was a sweet child, and she was fond of her, and proud of her beauty; nevertheless, she had declared to herself and to Beatrice more than once, that she had never known a human creature so hopelessly dense and stupid.

To-night, however, she took another view of the case. That rural freshness had possibly found favour in the eyes of Mr. Kingston, who had been the ideal son-in-law to so many mothers of so many polished daughters. She was surprised, but she could understand it. For she knew that men had all sorts of queer, independent, unaccountable ways of looking at things – at women in particular; and she had already noticed that they liked those ridiculous blushes – which to her mind showed a painful want of culture and self-possession – in which the girl indulged so freely.

What if she should be able to marry her to Mr. Kingston – who had foiled the artifices of well-meaning matrons, and resisted the fascinations of charming maidens exactly suited for him for so many years – after marrying all her own children so well? That was the theme of her meditations, and she found it deeply interesting. She longed for the arrival of Beatrice, who was her eldest daughter and her chief *confidante* and adviser, to hear what she had to say about it.

She had been by herself about ten minutes, during which time a servant had lit up the cut-glass chandelier, when there was a ring at the door-bell, and Mr. and Mrs. Reade were ushered in. Mrs. Reade was a tiny little dark woman, with a bright and clever, though by no means pretty, face, in which no trace of the maternal features was visible.

She was beautifully dressed in palest pink, with crimson roses in her hair, and delicate lace of great value about her tight skirt and her narrow shoulders; and her distinguished appearance generally rejoiced her mother's heart. Behind her towered her enormous husband, in whom blue blood declined to manifest itself in the customary way. He was an amiable, slow-witted, honest gentleman, with a large, weak face, rather coarse and red, particularly towards bedtime, and heavy and awkward manners; and he was as wax in the hands of the small person who owned him.

"Ned," she said, looking back at him as she swept across the room, "you go and find papa, and let mamma and me have a talk until the others come in."

Ned obediently went – not to find his host, who was probably in the dressing-room, but to read "The Argus" by the dining-room fire, while the servants set the table. And the mother and daughter sat down together to one of the confidential gossips that they loved. Mrs. Reade began to unfold her little budget of news and scandal, but immediately laid it by – to be resumed between the acts of the opera presently – while she listened to Mrs. Hardy's account of the transactions of the afternoon. It did not take that experienced matron long to explain herself, and the younger lady was quick to grasp the situation. At first she was inclined to scoff.

"Oh, we all know Mr. Kingston, mamma. He dangles after every fresh face, but he never means anything. *He* will never marry – at any rate, not until he is too old to flirt any more."

"But, my dear, he is going to build his house."

"I don't believe a word of it," said Mrs. Reade. "He has been going to build that house ever since I can remember. It is just one of his artful devices. Whenever he wants to make a girl like him

he tells her about that house – just to set her longing to be the mistress of it. That is the only use he will ever put it to. You'll see he will tell Rachel all about it to-night. He will beg her to help him with her exquisite taste, and so on. Oh, I know his ways. But he means nothing."

"He has already told Rachel," said Mrs. Hardy, laughing. "And, what is more, he is going to bring the designs to show her, and he says he is really going to put the work in hand at once."

"If so," said Mrs. Reade, gazing into the fire meditatively, "it looks as if he had been proposing to settle himself – though I shall not believe it till I see it. But then he must have made his plans before he ever saw Rachel. It must be Sarah Brownlow he is thinking of, mamma."

"Sarah Brownlow passed him this afternoon, Beatrice, and he hardly noticed her. While as for Rachel – well, I only wish you had been there to see the way he looked at her, and the way he said good-bye. My impression is that he thinks it is time to settle – as indeed it is, goodness knows – and so has begun with his house; and that he is looking about for a mistress for it, and that something in Rachel has struck him. I am certain he is struck with Rachel."

Mrs. Reade gazed into the fire gravely, while she pondered over this solemn announcement.

"It is possible," she said presently. "It is quite possible. All the men are saying that she is the prettiest girl in Melbourne just now. An elderly club man, who has seen much of the world, is very likely to admire that kind of childish, simple creature. If it should be so," she continued, musingly, "I wonder how Rachel will take it."

"Rachel," said Mrs. Hardy, with sudden energy, "is not so simple as she seems. You mark my words, she will be as keen to make a good marriage as anybody as soon as she gets the chance."

"Do you think so?" her daughter responded, looking up with her bright, quick eyes. "Now that is not at all my notion of her."

"Nor was it mine at first, but I am getting new lights. It never does to trust to that demure kind of shy manner. I assure you she made such use of her opportunities this afternoon as surprised me, who am not easily surprised. In about ten minutes – I could not have been in Alston's more than ten minutes – they were on the most frank and friendly terms possible, and she had given him a rose to wear in his button-hole."

"Nonsense!"

"I assure you, yes. And I know, by the look of him, that he never saw through it. It is wonderful how even the cleverest men can be taken in by that *ingénue* manner. He evidently thought her a sweet and unsophisticated child. Sweet she is – the most amiable little creature I ever knew; but she knows what she is about perfectly well."

Mrs. Reade gazed into the fire again with thoughtful eyes; then after a pause she said:

"I think you don't understand her, mamma. I think she really saw no more in Mr. Kingston than she would have seen in any poor young man without a penny."

"No, Beatrice. She talked about his new house, and all the money he was going to spend on it, in a ridiculous way. She was completely fascinated by the subject."

"I can't imagine little Rachel scheming to catch a rich husband," the young lady exclaimed, with a mocking, but pleasant laugh.

"You don't see as much of her as I do, my dear Beatrice," her mother replied, with dignity. "If you did, you would know that she is as fond of money and luxury as any hardened woman of the world could be. She quite fondles the ornaments I have put in her room. She goes into raptures over the silver and china. A new dress sends her into ecstasies. She annoys me sometimes – showing people so plainly that she has never been used to anything nice. However, it will make it easier for me to settle her than I at first thought it would be. It will be all plain sailing with Mr. Kingston, you will see."

"Mother," said Mrs. Reade – she only said "mother" when she was very much in earnest – "let me give you a word of advice. If you want to marry Rachel to Mr. Kingston – and I hope you will, for it would be a capital match – don't let her know anything about it; don't do anything to help it on; don't let her see what is coming – leave them both alone. I think I know her better than you do, and

I have a pretty good idea of Mr. Kingston; and any sort of interference with either of them would be most injudicious – most dangerous. I shall see to-night – I'm sure I shall see in a moment – "

There was a ring at the door-bell, and the stir of an arrival in the hall, and the little woman did not finish what she wanted to say. She rose from her chair, and shook out her pink train; and the mother to whom she had laid down the law rose also, looking very majestic.

"Mr. Kingston," said the servant, throwing the drawing-room door open.

The great man entered with a springing step, bowing elaborately. His glossy hair (some people said it was a wig, but it was not) was curled to perfection; his moustaches were waxed to the finest needle-points; he wore flashing diamond studs on an embroidered shirt front; and there was a Marshal Neil rose in his button-hole, not very fresh, and too much blown to be any ornament to a fine gentleman's evening toilet, hanging its yellow head heavily from a weak and flabby stalk.

CHAPTER III.

MR. KINGSTON'S QUESTION

WHILE her aunt and cousin were discussing her downstairs, Miss Fetherstonhaugh was dressing herself for dinner in her little chamber at the top of the house. This was a part of the daily ceremonial of her new life, in which she took a deep and delighted interest. The whole thing, in fact, was charming to her. To come sweeping down the big staircase in dainty raiment, all in the spacious light and warmth – to have the doors held open for her as she passed in and out – to go into the dining-room on her uncle's arm, and sit at dinner with flowers before her – seeing and feeling nothing but softness and colour, and polish and order everywhere – was at this time to realise her highest conception of earthly enjoyment.

Her bedroom was not magnificent, but it had everything in it that she most desired – the whitest linen, the freshest chintz and muslin, a fire to dress by, an easy chair, and above all, a cheval glass, in which she could survey her pretty figure from head to foot. She stood before this cheval glass to-night a thoroughly happy little person. Hitherto, with a mirror twelve inches by nine, that had a crack across it, she had seen that her face was fair and fresh, and that her hair had a wonderful red-gold lustre where the light fell upon it; but she was only now coming to understand what perfection of shape and grace had developed with her recent growth into womanhood, to make the *tout ensemble* charming.

She looked at herself with deep content – no doubt with a stronger interest than she would have looked at any other lovely woman, but in much the same spirit, enjoying her beauty more for its own sake than for what it would do for her – more because it harmonised herself to her tastes and circumstances, than because it was a great arsenal of ammunition for social warfare and conquest.

She was still in mourning for her father, and had put on a simple black evening dress. Her natural sense of the becoming dictated simple costumes, but education demanded that they should be made in the latest fashion; and she regarded the tightness of her skirt in front, and the fan of her train behind, with something more than complacency.

As yet the lust for jewels had not awakened in her, which was very fortunate, for she had none. The tender, milky throat and the round white arms were bare; and all the ornament that she wore, or wanted, was a bouquet of white chrysanthemum and scarlet salvia on her bosom, and another in her hair.

Pretty Rachel Fetherstonhaugh! If Roden Dalrymple could have seen her that night, only for five minutes, what a deal of trouble she might have been spared!

The dinner bell rang, and she blew out her candles hurriedly, and flitted downstairs. On the landing below her she joined her uncle – a small, thin, sharp-faced person, with wiry grey hair, and "man of business" written in every line of his face – as he left his own apartment; and they descended in haste together to the drawing-room, where four people were solemnly awaiting them.

The first thing that Rachel saw when she entered was her Marshal Neil rose. She glanced from that to its wearer's face, eagerly turned to meet her, full of admiring interest; and, as a matter of course, she blushed to a hue that put her scarlet salvias to shame.

Why she blushed she would have been at a loss to say; certainly not for any of the reasons that the assembled spectators supposed. It was merely from the vaguest sense of embarrassment at being in a position which she had not been trained to understand.

An hour or two before, her aunt had made that rose the text of a discourse in which many strange things had been suggested, but nothing explained; and now they all looked at her, evidently with reference to it, yet with painful ambiguity that perplexed her and made her uneasy; and she could only feel, in a general way, that she was young and ignorant and not equal to the situation. Much less than that was amply sufficient to cover her with a veil of blushes.

At dinner she sat between Mr. Reade and her uncle, and, being on the best of terms with both of them, she confined her conversation to her own corner of the table, and scarcely lifted her eyes; but when dinner was over – dinner and coffee, and the drive to the opera-house – then Mr. Kingston, deeply interested in his supposed discovery of a new kind of woman, and piqued by her shy reception of his generally much-appreciated attentions, set himself to improve his acquaintance with her, and found the task easy. They were standing on the pavement, in the glare of the gaslight, with a lounging crowd about them.

Mrs. Hardy had dropped a bracelet, for which she and her son-in-law were hunting in the bottom of the brougham, and Mrs. Reade was chatting to an acquaintance, whose hansom had just deposited him beside her – a bearded young squatter, enjoying his season in town after selling his wool high, who stared very hard at Rachel through a pair of good glasses, as soon as he had a favourable opportunity.

Mr. Kingston stood by the girl's side, staring at her without disguise. The shadow of the street fell soft upon her gauzy raiment and her white arms and the lustre of her auburn hair, but her face was turned towards the gaslight – she was looking wistfully up the long passage which had something very like fairy land at the end of it – and he thought he had never seen any face so fresh and sweet.

"You like this kind of thing, don't you?" he said, gently, as if speaking to a child, when in turning to look for her aunt she caught his eye.

"Oh, yes," she replied, promptly, "I do, indeed! I like the whole thing; not the singing and the acting only, but the place, and the people, and the ladies' dresses, and the noise, and the moving about, and the lights – everything. I should like to come to the opera every night – except the nights when there are balls."

Mr. Kingston laughed, and said he should never have guessed from what he had seen of her that she was such a very gay young lady.

"You don't understand," she responded quickly, looking up at him with earnest, candid eyes; "it is not that I am gay – oh, no, I don't think it is that! though perhaps I do enjoy a spectacle more than many people. But it is all so new and strange. I have never had any sightseeing – any pleasure like what I am having now, that is why I find it so delightful."

"Come, my dear!" cried Mrs. Hardy sharply (she had found her bracelet and overheard a part of this little dialogue), "don't stand about in the wind with nothing over you. What have you done with your shawl?"

"It is here, aunt," replied Rachel meekly, lifting it from her arm.

Her cavalier hastened to take it from her and adjust it carefully over her shoulders. During this operation Mrs. Hardy swept into the lobby, taking the arm of her big son-in-law; and Mrs. Reade, having parted from her friend, glanced round quickly, followed her husband, and put herself also under his protection. Mr. Kingston, smiling to himself like Mephistopheles under his waxed moustache, was left with Rachel in the doorway.

"How *does* it go?" he said, fumbling with a quantity of woolly fringe. "All right – there's no hurry. It is not eight o'clock yet. Pray let me do it for you."

She stood still, while he dawdled as long as he could over the arrangement of her wrap, but she cast anxious looks after the three receding figures, and she was the colour of an oleander blossom. He was a little disconcerted at her embarrassment; it amused him, but it touched him too.

Poor little timid child! Who would be so mean as to take advantage of her inexperience? Not he, certainly. He gave her his arm and led her into the house, with a deferential attentiveness that did not usually mark his deportment towards young girls. On their way they were accosted by a boy holding a couple of bouquets in each hand.

"Buy a bouquet for the opera, Sir?" said he, in his sing-song voice.

Mr. Kingston paused and put his glass in his eye. They were bright little nosegays, and one of them, much superior to the other, had a fringe of maiden hair fern and a rich red rose in the middle of it. He took this from the boy's hand, and offered it to Rachel with his elaborate bow.

"Permit me," he said, "to make a poor acknowledgment of my deep indebtedness to you for *this*."

And he touched the drooping petals of the Marshal Neil bud, and imagined he was paying her a delicate sentimental compliment.

If Rachel had been the most finished fine lady she could not have undeceived him more gracefully.

"Thank you," she said, simply, and she smiled for half a second.

To be sure her red rose was not redder than she was, but she held her head with a gentle air of maidenly dignity that quite counteracted the weakness of that blush.

Mr. Kingston began to suspect, with some surprise, that she was not so easy to get on with as she appeared. However, that did not lessen his interest in her by any means.

"I am afraid you think I have taken a liberty," he suggested presently. What had come to him to care what a bread-and-butter miss might think? But somehow he did care.

"Oh, no," she said, "it is very kind of you. But you must not talk of being indebted to me. Flowers are not – not presents, like other things."

By this time they had reached the top of the stairs, and Mrs. Reade was sweeping out of the cloak-room, where she had been "settling" her hair, and putting a little powder on her face.

"Mamma is gone in," she said, taking the girl's hand kindly; "there are plenty of people here to-night, Rachel. You must look for a lady sitting on the right of the Governor's box, in a high velvet dress. She is one of our Melbourne beauties."

So they went in and took their seats; and Rachel found herself sitting in the front tier, not very much to the left of the viceregal armchairs, and her cousin Beatrice was on one side of her and Mr. Kingston on the other.

She was perfectly contented now. She smiled at her flowers; she furled and unfurled her fan; she looked round and round the house through her glasses, whispering questions and comments to Mrs. Reade, who knew everybody and everybody's history; and it made Mrs. Hardy quite uneasy to see how thoroughly and evidently she enjoyed herself. Mr. Kingston recovered his spirits which she had damped a little while ago.

He watched her face from time to time – generally when she was absorbed in watching the stage; and the more he looked, the more charming he found it. So fresh, so frank, so modest, so sweet, with those delicate womanly blushes always coming and going, and that child-like fun and brightness in her eyes. He had never been so "fetched," as he expressed it, by a pretty face before; that is to say, he did not remember that he ever had been.

It was, indeed, very seldom that he regarded a pretty face with such a serious kind of admiration. He found himself wondering how it would fare, how long it would keep its transparent innocence and candour in the atmosphere of this new world – this second-rate Hardy set, which was full of meretricious, manœuvring, gossip-loving women – with a touch of anxiety that was quite unselfish. He was sure now that she was not a coquette; he was experienced enough to know, also, that, however humble her origin and antecedents, she was a girl of thoroughly "good style;" and it would be a thousand pities, he thought, if the influence of her surroundings should spoil her.

When the curtain fell and the gas was turned up, he noticed that people all round the house were turning their glasses upon her. Certainly she made a charming study from an artistic point of view. What taste she had shown in the grouping of her white chrysanthemums, and the way she had mixed in those few velvety horns of red salvia. They were colours proper to a brunette, but they seemed to accentuate the delicacy of her milky complexion and the fine shade of her red-gold hair.

What a chin and throat she had! and what soft, yet strong, round arms! – white, but warm, like blush rose petals that had unfolded in the dews of dawn at summer time, against the black background of her dress. And her shape and her colour were nothing compared with the expression of utter content and happiness that shone out of her face, irradiating her youth and beauty with a tender light

and sweetness that, like sunshine on a sleeping crater, gave no hint of the tragic trouble hidden away for future years. No wonder people looked at her. Of course they looked.

The glasses that she had been using belonged to Mrs. Reade, and now that lady was busy with them, hunting for her numerous acquaintances. Mr. Kingston held out his own, curious to see if she would discover what attention she was receiving, and what the effect of such a discovery would be.

"Thank you," said Rachel gratefully; and she settled herself back in her seat, and proceeded to take a thorough survey of all the rank and fashion that surrounded her. For a long time she gazed attentively, shifting her glasses slowly round from left to right; and Mr. Kingston watched her, leaning an elbow on the red ridge between them, and twiddling one horn of his moustaches.

He expected to see the familiar blush stealing up over the whiteness of her face and neck. But she remained, though deeply interested, quite cool and calm. Presently she dropped her hands in her lap and drew a long breath.

"There is a lady over there," she said in a whisper, "who has something round her arm so bright that I think it must be diamonds. Do you see who I mean? When she holds up her glasses again, tell me if they are real diamonds in her bracelet."

Much amused, Mr. Kingston did as he was bidden.

"Oh, yes," he said, "they are real diamonds. That lady is particularly addicted to precious stones. She walks about the street in broad day with a Sunday school in each ear, as that fellow in *Piccadilly* says. Are you like the majority of your sex – a worshipper of diamonds? I thought you did not care for jewellery."

"I do," she replied, smiling. "I don't worship jewels, but I should like to have some. I should like to have some real diamonds *very* much."

"I daresay you will have plenty some day, and very becoming they'll be to you. Not more so, though, than the flowers you are wearing to-night," he added, looking at them admiringly.

Rachel touched up her ornaments with a thoughtful face.

"There is such a light about diamonds," she said musingly; "no coloured stones seem so liquid and twinkling. I don't care in the least about coloured stones. If I were very rich I would have one ring full of diamonds, to wear every day, and one necklace to wear at night – a necklace of diamond stars strung together – and perhaps a diamond bracelet. And I wouldn't care for anything else."

"Should you like to be very rich?" asked her companion, smiling to himself over these naïve confessions. He was gazing, not only into her eyes, but at her lovely throat and arms, and imagining how they would look with diamonds on them.

"Yes," said Rachel. "But the great thing I wish is not to be poor. I hope – oh, I do hope – I shall never be poor any more!"

"I don't think you stand in the least danger of that," said Mr. Kingston.

"I know all about it," continued the girl gravely; "and I don't think you do, or you could not laugh or make a joke of it. You *cannot*

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