

Coleridge Christabel Rose

Hugh Crichton's Romance



Christabel Coleridge
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Coleridge Christabel R. Christabel Rose Hugh Crichton's Romance

Part 1, Chapter I Hugh's Story

“The light that never was on sea or land.”

Part 1, Chapter II

Violante

Elle était pâle et pourtant rose,
Petite, avec de grands cheveux,
Elle disait souvent, “Je n’ose,”
Et ne disait jamais, “Je veux.”

The sunshine of a summer evening was bathing Civita Bella with an intensity of beauty rare even in that fair Italian town. When the shadows are sharp, and the lights clear, and the sky a serene and perfect blue, even fustian and broadcloth have a sort of picturesqueness, slates and bricks show unexpected colours, and chance tree tops tell with effect even in London squares and suburbs. Then harsh tints harmonise and homely faces look fair, while fair ones catch the eye more quickly; every flower basket in the streets shows whiter pinks and redder roses than those which were passed unseen in yesterday’s rain, the street gutters catch a sparkle of distant streamlets, and the street children at their play group into pictures. For the sun is a great enchanter, and nothing in nature but sad human hearts can resist his brightness. Civita Bella needed no adventitious aid to enhance its beauty. The fretted spires and carved balconies, quaint gables and decorated walls, were the inheritance of centuries of successful art, and their varied hues were only harmonised by the years that had passed since some master spirit had given them to the world, or since they had grown up in obedience to the inspiring influence of an art-loving generation. Down a side street, apart from the chief centres of modern life, stood an old ducal palace. The very name of its princely owners had long ago faded out of the land, and no one alive bore on his shield the strange devices carved over its portico. It lay asleep in the sunshine, lifting its broken pinnacles and mutilated carvings to the blue sky, still beautiful with the pathetic beauty of “the days that are no more.”

The old palace was let in flats, and on one of the upper stories flower-pots and muslin curtains peeped gaily out of the dim, broken marbles with a kind of pleasant incongruity, like a child in a convent.

Within the muslin curtains was a long, spacious room, with inlaid floor and coloured walls, with a broad band of bas-reliefs round the top leading the eye to the carved and painted ceiling above. There was very little furniture, a grand piano being the most conspicuous object, and the lofty windows were shaded by Venetian blinds; but round the farthest, which was partly open, were grouped a few chairs and tables, with an unmistakable attempt to give an air of modern, not to say English, comfort to one part of the vast, half-inhabited chamber.

A brown-faced, shrewd-eyed Italian woman, with gold pins in her grey hair and gold beads round her neck, and a young lady in an ordinary muslin dress, were standing together contemplating and criticising a young girl who stood in front of them, dressed in the costume of an Italian peasant. That is to say, she wore a short skirt and a white bodice, but the skirt was of rose-coloured silk, the bodice of fine cambric; her tiny hat was more coquettish than correct in detail, and the little hands playing with the cross round her neck had surely never toiled for their daily bread. Yet she looked a little tired and a little sad, and her companions were noticing her appearance with the gravity that pertains to a matter of business.

“I think that will do,” said the young lady, in a clear, decided voice. “She looks very pretty.”

“Oh, bella – bellissima!” said the old Italian woman, clapping her hands. “But when is not la signorina charming?”

“It does not alter her much. Violante, does it inspire you?”

“I think it is very pretty; and you know, Rosa, I shall be rouged, and perhaps my eyes will be painted if they don’t show enough,” said Violante, simply.

“You don’t mind that?” said Rosa, curiously.

“No!” with a half-surprised look in the soft pathetic eyes; “I am glad. Then father will not see when I am pale. It will be hidden.”

“Oh, my child, you will not look pale then. So, Zerlina, you want another bow on your apron; and then this great dress is off one’s mind. We must let father look at you.”

“Do you think he will say I look handsome enough?” said Violante, anxiously.

Rosa laughed. “I don’t know what he may say, but I am sure of what he will think. And besides, he is not the public. Thank you, Maddalena, we need not keep you now.” And, as the old woman departed, Rosa took the little muslin apron and began to sew a bright bow on it; while Violante stood by her side, manifestly afraid of injuring her costume by sitting down in it. She looked very pretty, as her sister had said, but her anxious, serious look was little in accordance with her gay stage costume.

“You see,” said Rosa, as she pinched up her loops of ribbon, “we have a great many friends. All the members of the singing-class will go, so you will not feel that you are acting to strangers.”

“I think Madame Tollemache will go,” said Violante.

“Of course, and her son, and Emily, and they will take Mr Crichton.”

A sudden brightness came over the girl’s soft eyes and lips, as she stood behind her sister’s chair.

“Rosa, mia,” she said, “you understand about England. What is it il signor – ah, I cannot say his name – does in his own country?”

“Violante, you talk a great deal of English, why cannot you learn how to call people’s names? Crichton; Spencer Crichton.”

“He should not have two hard names,” said Violante, with a little pout. “I would rather call him il signor Hugo.”

“Well, as you like,” said Rosa, laughing. “And he lives in a beautiful palazzo, with trees and a river?”

“Does he?” said Rosa, “I should doubt it exceedingly. I dare say he has a very nice house. There are no palaces, Violante, in England, except for bishops, and for the Queen; certainly not for bankers.”

“And what is a banker?”

“Well,” said Rosa, a little puzzled in her turn; “he takes care of people’s money for them; it is a profession.”

“And he is not noble?”

“No; but as he has this country-seat, I suppose he has a position somewhat equivalent to what we mean here by noble. You can’t understand it, dear; it is all different. Mr Crichton works very hard, no doubt, in his own country, and I suppose his long holiday will soon be over.”

Violante started, and as she stood behind her sister’s chair, she hid her face for a moment in her hands.

“But his brother is coming – his brother, who so loves art,” she said, after a pause.

“Ah, yes; then I daresay they will go home together. But you will have this artistic gentleman to look at you on Tuesday; and we must take care and please your chief admirer before all.”

“Shall I please him?” said the girl, with a smile shy and yet half-confident.

“I hope so. Signor Vasari’s opinion is of importance.” Violante’s face fell, as if it were not the manager of the Civita Bella opera-house whose opinion she had thought of such consequence, but she did not speak till a hasty step sounded on the stair without.

“That is father!”

“Yes! Here, the apron is ready; tie it on. Oh, my darling, do not look so frightened; you will spoil it all!”

Violante crept close to her sister and took her hand; her bosom heaved, her mouth trembled. Manifestly either the result of the inspection was of supreme importance, or she greatly feared the inspector.

Rosa kissed her, and, with an encouraging pat on the shoulder, put her away, and Violante stood with her gay fantastic dress, a strange contrast to the timid, uneasy face of the wearer.

“Ah ha, Mademoiselle Mattei! So; very pretty, very pretty. But no; this is fit for a drawing-room. She might go and drink tea with Madame Tollemache at the Consulate; she might wear it on a Sunday to church.”

“Oh, father, I am sure I could not!” cried Violante, scandalised.

Signor Mattei stood with his head on one side, contemplating her with critical attention, and stroking his long grizzled beard the while. “She will be effaced by the footlights and the distance! More ribbons, Rosa; more braid, more chains, more gilding. A knot there, a bow *there*; here a streamer, here some – some effect!”

“But, father, Zerlina was only a peasant girl,” said Violante, timidly.

“Tut-tut, what do you know about it?” he said, shortly. “A peasant girl! She is the sublimated essence of the coquetry and the charm of a thousand peasant girls; and till you see that, you silly child, you will never be her worthy representative!”

“I understand, father,” interposed Rosa, hastily. “It is soon done. Will you go and take the dress off, Violante?”

But as Violante moved, there was the sound of another arrival, and Maddalena announced “Il signor Inglese.”

“Stay, child,” cried Signor Mattei, as Violante was escaping in haste. She paused with a start which might have been caused by the sudden sound of her father’s voice, for he let his sentences fall much as if he were cracking a nut. “Stop! I have no objection to give the world a tiny sip of the future cup of joy! What, how will you face the public on Tuesday, if you are afraid of one Englishman, uneducated, a child in Art?”

The little *cantatrice* of seventeen stood flushing and quivering as if only one atom of that terrible public were enough to fill her with dread. But perhaps her father’s eye was more terrible than the stranger’s, for she stood still, a spot of gaudy colour in the centre of the great bare room, yet shrinking like a little wild animal in the strange new cage, where it looks in vain for its safe shady hole amid cool ferns and moss.

Rosa came forward and shook hands with the new comer, saying, in English, “How do you do, Mr Crichton? You find us very busy.”

“I hope I am not in the way. I came for one moment to ask if I might bring my brother to the singing-class to-morrow. He is very fond of music.”

The speaker had a pleasant voice and accent, spite of a slight formality of address, and although he carried himself with what Signor Mattei called “English stiffness,” there was also an English air of health and strength about his tall figure. The lack of colour and vivacity in his fair grave features prevented their regularity of form from striking a casual observer, just as a want of variety in their expression caused people to say that Hugh Spencer Crichton had no expression at all. But spite of all detractors, he looked handsome, sensible, and well bred, and none of his present companions had ever had reason to say that he was grave because their society bored him, formal because he was too proud to be familiar, or silent because he was too unsympathetic to have anything to say. Such remarks had sometimes been made upon him, but it is always well to see people for the first time under favourable circumstances, and so we first see Hugh Crichton in the old Italian palace, enjoying a private view of the future *prima donna* in her stage dress.

“We shall be delighted to see your brother, signor,” said the musician, “as your brother, and, I understand, as a distinguished patron of our beloved art.”

“He would much enjoy being so considered,” said Hugh, with a half smile; and then, to Violante, “Is that the great dress, signorina?”

“It is only a rehearsal for it,” said Rosa, as Violante only answered by a blush.

“No doubt it is all it should be,” said Hugh.

It was not a very complimentary speech, and Hugh offered no opinion as to the details of the dress. It were hard to say if he admired it. But Violante looked up at him and spoke.

“They don’t think it fine enough,” she said.

Hugh gave here a quick sudden glance, and a smile as if in sympathy either with the words or the tremulous voice that uttered them. Then he said something both commonplace and extravagant about painting the lily, which satisfied Signor Mattei, and astonished Rosa, who thought him a sensible young man, and, saying he was bound to meet his brother, he rather hastily took his leave.

Violante went into her own room and gladly took off Zerlina’s dress, for it was hot and heavy, and her shabby old muslin was far more comfortable. She pulled her soft hair out of the two long plaits into which Rosa had arranged it, and let it fall about her shoulders, and then she went to the window and looked out at the deep dazzling blue. She could see little else from the high casement but the carving of the little balcony round it, a long wreath of rich naturalistic foliage among which nestled a dove, with one of its wings broken. Violante’s pet creepers twined their green tendrils in and out among their marble likenesses, a crimson passion flower lay close to its white image, and sometimes a real pigeon lighted on the balcony and caressed the broken one with its wings. Violante encouraged the pigeons with crumbs and sweet noises, and trained her creepers round her own dove, making stories for it in a fanciful childish fashion, she would go and sing her songs to it, and treat it like a favourite doll. But she took no heed of it now, she gazed past it at the sky as if she saw a vision. She was not thinking of the brilliant dreaded future that lay before her, not consciously thinking of the scene just past. She was only feeling to her very finger tips the spell of one glance and smile. Poor Violante!

Part 1, Chapter III

Mr Spencer Crichton

“Just in time to be too late.”

Hugh Crichton walked away from the musician's apartments towards the railway station, where he had promised to meet his brother. His tweed suit and large white umbrella were objects as incongruous with the picturesque scene around him as the somewhat similar figure often introduced into the foreground of photographs of buildings or mountains; but his thoughts, possibly, were less unworthy of the soft and lovely land in which he found himself, were less taken up with the home news which he expected to receive than perhaps they should have been.

Hugh was scarcely eight and twenty, but the responsibilities of more advanced life had early descended on him, and he owed his present long holiday to a fall from his horse, from the effects of which, truth to tell, he had some time since entirely recovered. But busy men do not often reach Italy, and his friend, the English consul, was about to leave Civita Bella for a more lucrative appointment, and why should not Hugh see as much as possible, when he would never have another chance? “Never have another chance.” Those words echoed in Hugh's ears and bore for him more than one meaning.

Some thirty years before, the Bank of Oxley, a large town not very far from London, with the old red-brick house belonging to it, had descended to a young James Spencer, who thenceforth held one of the best positions in the neighbourhood. For Oxley was a town of considerable importance, and the Spencers had been bankers there for generations, and had intermarried with half the families round. Nevertheless, when Miss Crichton, sole heiress of Redhurst House, refused Sir William Ribstone to marry Mr Spencer, it was said by her friends that she might have looked higher, and by his relations that no name, however aristocratic, should have been allowed to supersede the old Spencer, with all its honourable and respected associations. But Lily Crichton laughed and said that Sir William's father had drunk himself to death, and had been known to throw a beef steak at the late Lady Ribstone, and she was afraid that the practices might be hereditary. Mr Spencer smiled and said that he hoped his friends would find Spencer Crichton as safe a name as Spencer had been before it, he would not refuse his wife's estate because this condition was attached to it, and he could come into the Bank every day from Redhurst. And so, in Redhurst House, Mr and Mrs Spencer lived and loved each other, and their two sons, Hugh and James were born; while in course of time the banker's younger brother died, and his three children, Arthur, Frederica, and George, were transferred to their uncle's guardianship, and a little cousin of his wife's, Marion or Mysie Crofton, was left with her eight thousand pounds in the same kind and efficient care.

These boys and girls, all grew up together in the careless freedom of so-called brother and sisterhood, till the sudden death of the father clouded their happiness, and, in the absence of near relations, left all these various guardianships to his wife and to his son Hugh.

It was a great honour for a young man of twenty-five to be so trusted, and a great burden; but Hugh was sensible and steady, his cousin Arthur was already nearly of age, and his mother, whose elastic spirits soon recovered more or less from the shock of grief, was, of course, practically responsible for the girls. Hugh's own career at Rugby and at Oxford had been unexceptionable: he had no intention of making his office a sinecure. Conscientious and inflexible both in opinion and action, it would have been strange indeed if at twenty-five he had not been also rather hard and dictatorial; but the mischievous effects of these qualities was much modified by a certain clearness of judgment and power of understanding his own position and that of others which almost seemed to stand him in the stead of skilful tact, or even of gentle charity. He was really just, and, therefore, he saw difficulties as well as duties, and knew exactly where it would be foolish to strain an authority which he was too young to support, where it was wise to take the advice of others, and where it was necessary to depend

on himself. He was often lenient in his judgment of others' actions; but then he thought that there was not much to be expected of most people, and he was seldom made angry, because other people's folly did not signify much as long as he was perfectly sure that he was acting rightly himself. If a man did do wrong he was a coward if he would not own it, even to a child. And so Hugh on the rare occasions when he was cross or unjust, invariably begged pardon. But he did not care at all whether he was forgiven. He had done his part, and if the other side cherished anger, that was their own look out.

The ownership of the bank had descended to him, and he lived with his mother and helped her to manage the Redhurst property, which would some day be his own, fulfilling all his various offices with much credit to himself, and, on the whole, much advantage to other people. For if he thought most of what was due to himself, his view of his own duty included great attention to the interests of others, even to self-sacrifice on their behalf. Indeed, as his cousin Arthur said, "although the old saying might have been parodied with regard to Hugh, that —

"Though he never *did* a cruel thing, He never *said* a kind one."

"Neither did he ever say anything unkind, so they might all be thankful. Most likely old Hugh thought them all prodigies if they could only see into his heart."

"You never were more mistaken in your life, Arthur," said Hugh with perfect truth and much coolness.

"Now, why won't you take the credit of having some fine feelings to repress?" said Arthur, who was often guilty of trying to get a rise out of Hugh for the benefit of the younger ones.

But Hugh was so unmoved that he did not even reply that he did not care about credit.

"You'll get a scratch some day, Arthur," said James, who nearest in age to Hugh, and exempt from his authority might say what he pleased.

"Oh no, he won't," said Hugh, with a not unpleasant smile. "At least, if he does, I shall be much ashamed of myself."

"What?" said Arthur, "I should respect myself for ever if I could put Hugh in a rage."

"People should never be in a rage," said Hugh — "they should control themselves."

"If they can," said Arthur, conscious of the minor triumph of having caused Hugh to be very sententious.

Hugh was silent. It is one thing to have a theory of life, and quite another to mould your character and tame your passions into accordance with it. Years before, when Hugh was at Oxford and James had just left school for a public office; they, in the curious repetition and reversal of human events, had come across a certain Miss Ribstone, the daughter of their mother's old admirer, to whose many charms Hugh, then scarcely twenty, fell a victim. For one whole long vacation he had ridden, danced, talked fun and sentiment with her, until the whole thing had been put an end to by the announcement of her engagement to — somebody else. Then Hugh's pride and self-control proved weak defences against the sudden shock, and he met the girl and her half-saucy, half-sentimental demand for congratulations with such passionate reproaches as she never forgot. Probably she deserved them, but the mortification of having so betrayed himself, almost killed regret in Hugh's bosom. "It was not my fault, I was not to blame," he said to his brother. "I should have remembered that," and as he spoke he made a holocaust of all the notes and flowers and ribbons he had hitherto cherished.

"Dear me," said sentimental James, "what a pity, I keep dozens of them."

"I'll never have another," said Hugh.

The incident was only remembered as "Hugh's old flirtation with Nelly Ribstone," but Hugh forswore fine ladies and folly, and never forgot that he had once lost all control of his own words and actions. But all that was long ago when he had been a mere boy, not a shadow of sentiment hung over the recollection of it, and Hugh awaited his brother's arrival at Civita Bella with a certain self-consciousness and desire to appear specially pleased to see him, which perhaps he had not experienced since his relations had been wont to wonder "what Hugh *could* be doing *again* at Ribstone House."

He had not left himself much time to wait, for as he came up to the station, a slender little man in a velvet coat, with a conspicuously long, silky light brown beard, advanced to meet him.

“Ah, Hugh, there you are yourself.”

“How d’ye do, Jem? I never knew the train so punctual. I thought I’d ten minutes to spare. I’m so glad you have got your holiday.”

James Spencer would have been a much handsomer man than his brother if he had not been on so small a scale; as it was, the delicacy of his features, and the fairness of his complexion, gave him something of a finicking aspect; which was not diminished by the evident pains taken with his dress, hair, and beard; which were arranged with a view to the picturesque, rather trying to the patience of an ordinary observer. But on a close inspection, he had a good-tempered and kindly expression, which showed that he combined appreciation of other things and people with admiration for himself. And though he was very fond of talking Bohemianism, he went to his office every morning, and to church every Sunday with the regularity of a Philistine.

“Well, you look uncommonly jolly,” he said. “The Mum was afraid that as you had made so few expeditions, your back was not strong yet.”

Hugh despised excuses, so we will not suppose that this ready-made one offered him any temptation as he answered —

“Oh no; I was quite well a week after I got here. There is plenty to see here, I assure you.”

“I believe you,” said James ecstatically. “Were ever such colours and such a sky? Look there,” seizing his brother’s arm, “there’s a girl in a red petticoat – under that arch in the shadow – white on her head – oh!”

“You will have to get used to girls under archways in red petticoats,” returned Hugh.

“How were they all at Oxley?”

“Oh, very well; the mother was groaning after you. She said she couldn’t get the fences mended, and Jones’ cow had eaten the geraniums. Oh, and she wants to have a garden-party.”

“Well,” said Hugh, “what should hinder her having a dozen if she likes?”

“She can’t do it without you.”

“Isn’t Arthur there?”

“Arthur? yes. But it isn’t worth while asking the Miss Clintons to meet Arthur.”

“I should think that chattering Katie Clinton was just the girl he would admire.”

“Should you?” said Jem, rather meaningly. “However, Hugh, when are you coming home?”

“As soon as you do.”

“I have only a fortnight.”

“Then we can go back together. That church is considered very fine. Look at the spire.”

James looked with undisguised and genuine delight at the fair proportions and exquisite colouring of the building before him, and after various half-finished and inarticulate expressions of delight, exclaimed: “It’s intoxicating! Can’t we go in?”

“Not now. Mrs Tollemache will be waiting for us. There are a dozen such churches, besides the cathedral, and there’s an old amphitheatre, at least the remains of one.”

“Perish Oxley and its garden-parties in the ruins of its new town-hall and its detestable station,” cried James, mock-heroically, and striking an attitude.

“Then there’s a very good opera,” said Hugh – “and oh, wouldn’t the great singing-class be in your line to-morrow.”

“What singing-class?”

“Why, there’s a certain Signor Mattei here. He is first violin in the opera orchestra, and a very fine musician. I believe he followed music entirely from choice in the first instance.”

“Then I respect him,” said James. “What could he do better?”

“Exactly. I thought you would say so. Well, he has a great singing-class – more, I suppose, what would be called a choral society.”

“Yes,” said Jem; “I belong to the Gipsy Singers, and to Lady Newington’s Glee Society, and sometimes I run down to help the choir of that church at Richmond. I took you there once.”

“Well, Signor Mattei’s class is the popular one here. Tollemache takes his little sister, and having nothing better to do, I joined it. To-morrow is the last of the course, so you can go if you like.”

“I should like it immensely. Quite a new line for you though.”

“I don’t see why I should not sing as well as you or Arthur. I mean why I should not attempt it: of course I am no musician,” said Hugh, who had rather a morbid horror of boasting.

“No,” said Jem, “I have a theory that people’s lives are divided by too sharp lines. They should run into each other. Let each give something out, and each will get light and warmth and colour. Nobody knows how much there is in other people’s worlds till they get a peep at them. I should like to teach everybody something of what was most antipathetic to them, and show everyone a little of the society to which he was *not* born, whatever that may be.”

“There’s a great deal in what you say,” said Hugh, so meekly that Jem, on whose theories the sledge hammer of practice was commonly wont to fall, was quite astonished.

“Why, how mild and mellow Italian sunshine is making you. You’re a case in point. We shall have you getting that precious town-hall painted in fresco, and giving a concert in it, at which you’ll sing the first solo!”

And James burst into a hearty laugh, in which Hugh joined more joyously and freely than was often his wont. “Don’t you be surprised whatever I do,” he said. “See if I can’t catch some Italian sunshine and bring it home to Oxley! But here we are, come in, and you’ll see Mrs Tollemache.” James followed his brother; but an expression of unmitigated astonishment came over his face.

“Hallo! there’s something up,” he ejaculated under his breath. “*Is* it Miss Tollemache?”

Part 1, Chapter IV

The Singing-Class

The little maiden cometh,
She cometh shy and slow,
I ween she seeth through her lids
They drop adown so low.
She blusheth red, as if she said
The name she only thought.

“So you mean to accompany our party, Mr James Crichton, to the singing-class? I am very glad that you should go,” said Mrs Tollemache.

“Yes, for you will see Violante!” cried her daughter, Emily.

Mrs Tollemache was a little gentle lady, who, spite of several years of widowhood, spent in keeping house for her son in Civita Bella, always looked as if she were ready for an English country Sunday, with her soft grey dresses and white ribbons, slightly unfashionable, not very well made, and yet unmistakably lady-like, just as the diffidence and unreadiness of her manner did not detract in the least from its good breeding. Her daughter was a tall girl of sixteen, with bright, straight falling hair, and a rosy face, simple and honest, though her frank, fearless manners, and capacity for conversation, indicated a young lady who had seen something of the world. Her brother, the consul, many years her elder, represented English diplomacy in a pleasant, cheery, if not very deep or astute fashion to the benighted foreigners by whom he was surrounded.

“And who is Violante?” asked James.

“Violante,” said Mr Tollemache, “is the rising star of Civita Bella.”

“Violante,” said Emily, “is the dearest, sweetest, most beautiful creature in the world!”

“Violante,” said Mrs Tollemache, “is a very sweet young person, whose mother I knew something of formerly, and whose sister gives Emily music and Italian lessons.”

“She is Signor Mattei’s daughter?” said Hugh.

“I will tell you all about her, Mr Crichton,” said Emily. “Signorina Rosa – that’s her sister – brings her to talk Italian with me. But some time ago they found out that she had a wonderful voice, and so she is to go on the stage. She is to make her first appearance next Tuesday, as Zerlina in ‘Don Giovanni;’ but the odd thing is that she hates it, she is so shy. Fancy hating it, I wish I had the chance!”

“Emily, my dear!” ejaculated her mother. “A couple of nights will rub off all that,” said Mr Tollemache, “even if it is genuine.”

“Genuine!” cried Emily. “For shame, Charles. She cannot help it, and even singing in the class has not cured her. It is quite true, isn’t it, Mr Crichton?” turning to Hugh.

Hugh paused for a moment, and – Jem could hardly believe his eyes – blushed, as he answered decidedly, “Yes, but she is more afraid of her father than of the public.”

“Dear me,” said James, “this sounds very interesting. And she is a beauty, too, Hugh?”

“I don’t know if you would consider her so. I do, undoubtedly!” said Hugh, with a sort of desperate gravity.

“Very unlikely acquaintance for old Hugh,” thought James. “See if I submit to any more criticisms about my mixed society. Is she very young?” he said aloud.

“Oh, yes,” said Mrs Tollemache. “You see, the circumstances are altogether peculiar. These two sisters are most excellent girls, and knowing their antecedents, and having them here as occasional

companions for Emily, I could not, I cannot suppose that anything would ever accrue to cause me to repent the arrangement.”

There was a peculiar emphasis in Mrs Tollemache’s manner of making this remark, and it was accompanied by a little blush and nervous movement of her knitting needles.

“It must be a very pleasant kind of place,” said James, wondering if Charles Tollemache found this young songstress too bewitching.

“Yes, but perhaps it is not altogether inopportune that our leaving Civita Bella should coincide with Violante’s *début*. Things will be altered now, and I shall wish Emily to have more regular instruction.”

“Mamma, I shall love Violante as long as ever I live,” said Emily, “and I should not care if she sang at fifty operas.”

“You must go to school, Emmy,” said her brother, “and attend to the three R’s with twopence extra for manners.”

“I shall not mind if you will send me to that nice school Mr Crichton was talking about, where the governess is nearly as young as I am,” said Emily.

“Not quite,” said Hugh, laughing. “I only told you Miss Venning had a young sister.”

“I shall ask Mr Spencer Crichton about it,” said Mrs Tollemache.

“Have you been telling them about Oxley Manor?” said James. “I am sure Flossy Venning *is* the governess, whatever she may be called. You would make friends with our girls, Miss Tollemache?”

“Yes, I should like that. But now I want to show you my friend, and if we don’t make haste we shall be late,” said Emily, as she ran out of the room.

The little party of English took their way through the quaint and richly coloured streets of the Italian city to Signor Mattei’s apartments, and James could not repress his exclamations of delight at every patch of colour, every deep full shadow, and every graceful outline that met his eye. Emily pointed out the various lions, and asked questions in her turn about the England which was but a dim memory of her childhood, her bright English face gaining perhaps something of an added charm from its fair foreign setting, and itself giving just the last touch of piquante contrast to her companion’s sense of delightful novelty.

Young ladies never came amiss to James, and in the intervals of his raptures he amused himself by drawing out Emily’s ideas of English society derived from much and earnest study of such novels and tales as Mrs Tollemache allowed her to peruse, and which had evidently rendered Sunday-school teachings, parsonages, riding in the park, picnics, sportsmen, smoke, and rain, as great a jumble of picturesque confusion as Italian palaces and *prima donnas* might be to James. Such a state of mind entertained him, and while Hugh walked silently beside Mr Tollemache, he persuaded her to express her admiration of “The Daisy Chain” and “Dr Thorne,” her fervent wish to resemble the heroines of the former book; her rather more faintly expressed supposition that English country squires were like Frank Gresham; her desire to be kind to little girls in straw hats, and old women in red cloaks – though Mr Crichton says he never saw an old woman in a red cloak – and her evident belief that benevolent rectors, honest cottagers, and useful young ladies, were plenty as blackberries in the England that was a land of romance for her. “How delightful it would be to know such!”

“I am afraid you will be disappointed, Miss Tollemache,” said James. “Our lives in England are very commonplace, and the real Frank Greshams are rather stupid fellows, who wear muddy boots, care for little but riding and shooting, and are out of doors all day.”

“But that seems so manly,” said Emily, with a romantic vision of heather and mists, mountains and dashing streams, floating before her imagination.

“Well,” said James, “I suppose the romance is in people’s hearts, and anything may be picturesque if you can get the right point of view, and see it in the right light, and the truest artists are those who have the quickest insight, and the widest sympathies. But your dazzling beauty in this Palace of Art that we are approaching seems more like romance to me.”

“Violante?” said Emily, to whom the first part of his speech had been an enigma. “Oh, there is nothing romantic about her. She’s just a *cantatrice*, you know, but she is a clear little thing, and I love her.”

As Emily spoke they were mounting the great marble staircase that led to Signor Mattei’s apartments, and presently entered the long room, now arranged for the convenience of the musical performance that was about to take place. James looked round at the painted walls and delicate carvings, faded and injured, yet still soft and harmonious. This was a wonderful enchanted palace; where was the fairy princess? He was presented to Signor Mattei, who, in very good English, expressed his pleasure at seeing him there, and found him a place. Rosa came and offered him a copy of the music that they were going to sing, and as his companions took their seats, and the performance began, he had leisure to study, not his score, but the motley scene around him.

Signor Mattei was a tall striking man, with a long grizzled beard, a narrow face with a high forehead and ardent enthusiastic eyes. His long slender fingers looked as if they would have been at home on any instrument, and indeed he was a first-rate violinist as well as an admirable musician, and as he stood before the class conducting and teaching, he seemed pervaded by his art from top to toe, and though James could not follow his rapid vehement Italian, he perceived that no imperfection escaped him. Hugh’s hint that he might have held a different position but for his youthful musical enthusiasm seemed credible enough in sight of his refined features and fervid eyes.

He was a very popular teacher, and the class was a large one. Three or four English girls like Emily Tollemache attended it, whose fair rosiness and bad singing were alike conspicuous. Several slim, dark, demure Italian signorinas, with downcast eyes, shy or passionate, under charge evidently of elder ladies, were to be seen. Some looked like teachers, and the professional air of some caused James to guess that they were being prepared for the stage, or perhaps, their education already finished, were assisting the class with their voices. The men were mostly young teachers or singers, except Hugh and Mr Tollemache, and an enthusiastic English curate, music-mad, who was taking a holiday in Italy.

But where was the most beautiful creature in the world? James looked for her in vain. She was Italian, she was going to sing on the stage, she was a wonder of beauty. Which could she be?

A handsome girl, with splendid black eyes and crisp black hair, who was standing at the end of the sopranos and singing with a clear fine voice, suggested herself to James as the most likely person. Certainly she was very handsome, but she did not look a bit shy; however, Tollemache had insinuated a suspicion that shyness was interesting. She looked frank and bright, bold enough to face a crowd. Very picturesque, she knew that pomegranates became her. A model for any artist; but rather an unlikely friend for Miss Tollemache, and a very unlikely here James’ thoughts suddenly pulled themselves up with a start. “What an absurd fellow old Hugh is!” he mused. “Some one has been chaffing him about these classes, and he stands on his dignity until anyone would imagine – but *that* girl, oh dear, no!”

Suddenly there was a pause for the solo. Emily looked at James and nodded. Hugh gazed intently at his score. The dark beauty sat down, and a girl in grey, with a coral necklace, came forward and stood in front, alone. She stood in the full stream of the dusty evening sunlight, and James thought, —

“Why, this is no beauty, they are mad!”

She was tall rather than otherwise, and very slim. Her soft misty hair was twisted loosely about her head, and fell partly on her neck; it was of so dull a shade of brown that the sunshine whitened it instead of turning it to gold. Her skin was fair for an Italian, and now pale even to the lips. Her eyes were large, dark, and soft, and in them there dwelt an expression of terror that marred whatever beauty they might otherwise have possessed. She did not blush and bridle with a not unbecoming shyness, but she looked, as the saying goes, frightened to death.

“Poor little thing, what a shame to make her sing!” thought James, “but she is no beauty at all.”

And yet, what was it? Was it the fall of her hair, the curve of her cheek, or the piteous setting of her mouth, that made him look again and again as she began to sing?

James really loved music, and the sweet birdlike notes entranced him. It seemed the perfection of voice and execution, and the tones were full of power and pathos. She stood quite still with her hands before her – for she had no music – little child-like hands, and she never smiled or used her eyes, hardly moved her head, the voice seemed produced without effort, and she made no attempt to add to its effect. When it ceased there was an outburst of applause; she looked towards her father, and at a sign from him made the ordinary elaborate curtsey of a public singer; but still with never a smile. Then she went back to her place, and as she passed Hugh he whispered a word. She hung down her head and passed on, but her face changed as by magic, and then James knew that she was beautiful.

She did not sing again, her father was very chary of her voice, and she did not come forward when the music was over, though Signor Mattei hoped “il signor” had been pleased, and Emily lingered, spite of her brother’s sign to her to make haste.

“Indeed,” said James, “I have been delighted; one does not often hear a voice like your daughter’s.”

“Her voice is good,” said the father, “but she does not give it a chance; she has no notion what study was in my day.”

“Oh, father!” said Rosa Mattei, as these words were evidently intended to reach the ears of Violante, who was standing at a little distance. “She does practise, but she is so soon tired. My sister is only seventeen,” she added to James; “and her voice is not come to its full strength yet.”

“She must not over-strain it – it is so beautiful,” said James, while Emily echoed —

“Oh, it is lovely! oh, cara Violante, come here and let us tell you how beautifully you sang.”

“Violante!” said her father; and she came towards them, while James on a nearer view saw how lovely were the curves of cheek and throat, and how delicate the outline of the still white features. With a view to hearing her speak, he thanked her for her song, and said —

“I suppose I need not ask you if you are fond of music?”

Violante cast down her eyes, blushed, and stammered out under her breath, —

“Yes, Signor, thank you;” while her father said, “My daughter is very glad to have given you pleasure, and very grateful to those who are kind enough to express it. You must excuse her, Signor, she is not used to strangers.”

The poor child looked ready to sink into the earth beneath this public notice of her bad manners. Hugh looked so stern and fierce that, had he asked the question, she might well have feared to answer him; but Emily broke the awkward silence by saying eagerly -

“You will come and give me my lesson to-morrow, Signorina Rosa? Will Violante come too?”

“I am afraid,” said Rosa, “that she will be too busy.”

“Ah, well, I shall see her if she does not see me, next Tuesday. Good-bye, Violante. Good-bye, Signorina.”

“Why!” exclaimed James, as they emerged into the street, “That poor girl looked frightened to death.”

“Oh,” said Emily, “she is always frightened before strangers. How ever she will sing on Tuesday I cannot think; but what do you think of her, Mr Crichton?”

“I think she is very pretty,” said James, rather dryly.

“A pretty little simpleton,” said Mr Tollemache: “but a month or two’s experience will make all the difference. It is to be hoped her father will take care of her. But I believe she has an admirer – the manager of the operatic company here – so I suppose she may be considered very fortunate. Her voice is valuable, and she will be very handsome.”

James nodded assent, but something in the thought of the young childish girl with her shy solemn face and frightened eyes touched him.

“It’s rather a case of ‘Heaven sending almonds to those who have no teeth,’ isn’t it?” he said. “Poor little thing!”

“Oh, the almonds will taste sweet enough, I daresay,” said Mr Tollemache. “If not, they must be swallowed, somehow.”

“Well,” said Emily, “on Tuesday we shall see how she gets on.”

Part 1, Chapter V

The Mattei Family

Then joining hands to little hands
Would bid them cling together,
For there is no friend like a sister
In calm or stormy weather.

“Violante! Will you never learn common-sense? Your want of manners will give perpetual offence. And let me tell you, English people of influence are not patrons to be despised. It is always well for a *prima donna* to have irreproachable private friends. If ever we should go to England, and the Signora Tollemache would notice you, it would be a great advantage; and not amiss that those young men should report well of you.”

“Oh, father!”

“Why! They see your name announced. They say, ‘Ah, Mademoiselle Mattei! We knew her in Italy – pretty – fine voice. My friend, you should go and see her.’ They take a bouquet and applaud you; and you become the fashion. You should be grateful, and show it. But you – you are a musical box! You sing like a statue, like a wax-doll. Ah, where is your fire and your expression? You have no soul – you have no soul!”

“Father, I did try.”

“Oh, I have no patience! Where is my music? I have a private lesson. Go and practise, child, and study your part better;” and off whisked Signor Mattei in a great hurry, and a much disturbed temper.

Such scenes had been frequent ever since one unlucky day, two years ago, when the great opera manager, Signor Vasari, had heard Violante sing, and had told her father that she promised to have the sweetest soprano in Italy, and he must educate her for the stage, where she would make her fortune. And the owner of this sweet soprano was so timid that her music-master made her tremble, and possessed so little dramatic power that she could scarcely give a song its adequate expression, and was lost when she attempted to act a part. But the music is all important in Italy, and the middle course of concerts and oratorios did not there lie open to her. Her father hoped that her voice and her beauty would carry off her bad acting, and that perpetual scolding would cure her fears, since he gloried in her talent, and much needed her gains.

He was, as has been said, fairly well born and well educated, and had chosen music as his profession. When quite young he had gone to England, where he played the violin in London orchestras, and gave private lessons on the piano. In England he fell in with a young lady, the daughter of a clergyman, who was governess in the family of Mr Tollemache’s uncle, where Signor Mattei taught. Rose Grey was unmistakably a lady, a quiet fair-faced girl, with her share of talent and originality and a passion for music. She fell in love with the handsome enthusiastic Italian, and, having no prospects and no friends to object, she married him. They lived for some time in England, where Rosa was born, and finally returned to Italy. The world went fairly well with them, but they were not without debts and difficulties, and when Rosa grew up, and Madame Mattei’s brother, now a London solicitor, wrote to offer her a year or two’s schooling in England, the proposal was gladly accepted, since she had no voice and could not be made useful at home. Rosa went to England, went to school, taught Italian and music, and learnt the usual branches of education, spent her holidays with her uncle, and finally helped to educate her cousins, till, three years before our story opens, her mother died, and Rosa came home to take care of the little Violante, a girl of fourteen. Rosa was then twenty-two, entirely English in manner, accent, and appearance, with pretty brown hair, a sensible face, bright

hazel eyes, full of force and character, grave manners, a sweet smile, and a strong will of her own which she was not afraid to enforce if necessary. She had a warm heart, too, with nothing much just then to fill it. She almost idolised the little sister, who clung to her, sobbing out, "Oh Mamma mia!" and from that day forward guarded, petted, and, it must be confessed, spoiled her.

Violante was delicate and sensitive, with a certain Italian fervour of temperament beneath her timidity, which expended itself in the warmest affection for her sister. She was more Italian than Rosa in appearance, and though she spoke fluent English, and they used either language when together, her low sweet tones were unmistakably foreign. Her musical education was so pressed on her and took up so much of her time that she learnt little else, and at seventeen was sadly ignorant of much which she ought to have known.

The two sisters belonged to their mother's Church, which unfortunately had the practical effect of their belonging to none at all. When Rosa went to England she did as others did, but it was not her lot to come across anyone of sufficient depth to influence her practical self-reliant temper, and, though a very good and conscientious girl, her education had made her indifferent to the outward duties of religion. She thought that she did her duty by Violante when she prevented her from attending Roman Catholic services unless the music was very fine, and heard her read a chapter in the Bible on Sunday, while the rest of the day was spent as usual. Madame Mattei had never had health or opportunity to attend English services, and the two girls only went occasionally; though lately, under Mrs Tollemache's influence, they had been a little more conscious of their nationality and the duties involved in it. Rosa impressed Violante with a strong sense of the necessity of doing right, and believed that circumstances absolved her from attending to anything further. Violante was of a different mould, and when she saw beautiful ritual and devout worshippers she felt sad, she did not know why.

Rosa was well aware that she could not protect Violante from the approaching ordeal of her first appearance, and knew too of debts that rendered it necessary; but she interposed between her sister and many a reproof, and tried by her alternate coaxing, sympathy, and argument to diminish the girl's dread of the future that lay before her. Violante had made fewer complaints of late, and Rosa hoped that she was becoming more reconciled to the inevitable.

On the present occasion Rosa's pleasant cheerful voice was heard talking to Maddalena, who, besides doing all their housework, took Violante to her lessons and rehearsals when Rosa was busy, the latter retaining her English habit of walking alone. She reentered the room as her father quitted it, and began to divest it of its concert-room air, to put away music-stands and books, and to give once more a look of English comfort to the further end of it, where Violante had thrown herself into a big chintz-covered chair, turning her face towards the cushion, when Rosa said, —

"Well dear, you were very successful to-day. I never heard you in better voice."

"I wish – I wish I had no voice at all."

"Violante! That is really quite wrong. You should not despise such a glorious gift."

"It only makes me wretched. Oh, what shall I do!"

Now Rosa had resolved against weak-minded sympathy, and had made up her mind that her sister must not, at this last moment, be permitted to flinch, so, though the hidden face and despairing attitude went to her heart, she replied briskly, —

"Do? Win a dozen bouquets and bring the house down. What a silly child you are, Violante!"

Violante lifted her head, astonished at the shadow of a reproof from Rosa, who little guessed at the tumult of feeling that was making the poor child's heart beat so terribly.

"You angry, too, Rosa!" she said, for reproaches never made Violante angry, only miserable.

"Angry, my darling, no," exclaimed Rosa. "I only want you to take heart and courage. My child, don't cry so dreadfully. What is it, did father scold you?"

Violante crept into the warm comforting embrace, and, laying her head on Rosa's shoulder, wept so bitterly that her sister could only think how to soothe her; till Violante's sobs grew quieter

and she put up her quivering lips to be kissed, while Rosa smoothed back her hair and began to try the effect of argument.

“You see, darling, father is so anxious. When Tuesday is over and he sees how successful you are, he will be delighted. And you will feel quite differently. Just think of the pleasure of seeing everyone hanging on your voice, and of hearing the applause, and seeing the bouquets thrown at you!” (Violante shivered.) “Oh! it would be worth living for.”

“Oh, Rosa mia, if the voice was yours!”

“Ah, if – But, darling, I shall be as much pleased to see your triumph as if it were mine.”

“But if I fail – and my bad acting – ”

“You won’t fail. And as for the acting, you will act much better when you are less nervous. People will care for your voice and your beauty – they won’t be hard on you.”

“Rosa, you are so different, you cannot understand. I should not mind so much about failing if it did not vex father. It is doing it at all. When I stand up to sing it is as if all the eyes turned me cold and sick, and my own eyes get dizzy so that I cannot see, and if they applaud – even here at the class – it is like the waves of the sea, and I cannot sleep at night for thinking of it.”

“You don’t know how pleasant the real applause will be,” said Rosa, feeling as if she were telling a snowdrop to hold up its head, for the sun was so pleasant to stare at. What could she say to the child, who had no vanity and no ambition – nothing but a loving heart.

“You will like to please me and father?”

“Yes,” said Violante, “but if I should cry, father would – would – ”

“Oh, nonsense, you won’t cry.”

“If father would let me – I would rather teach singing all day!”

“But you know you could not make nearly so much money in that way. And father wants the money, Violante, indeed he does.”

“Oh yes – I know it must be done – I will not make a fuss.”

“That’s a good child. And you will not have to sing only to strangers. Think how kind the Tollemaches are to us, how pleased they will be with you.”

Violante flushed to her very finger tips, and Rosa felt her heart throb.

“They will not like me *then*,” she murmured.

“Not like you, what can you mean? Why should they not like you?”

“English people don’t like actresses.”

“Well, but you don’t suppose Mrs Tollemache has any prejudice of that sort?”

“She would not like Emily to do it.”

“Emily! Of course not. Young ladies like Emily don’t sing in public. She would not be a governess or do anything to get her living. But they would think it quite right for you. Why, you will have Mr Crichton and his brother to throw bouquets at you!”

“Yes!” exclaimed Violante, with sudden passion. “He will throw bouquets at *me*. He will ‘tell his friends I am pretty,’ and he will think – ”

“He? Mr Crichton? Violante, what can it matter to you what he thinks?”

Violante shrank away from her sister, and covered her face with her hands.

“Violante,” cried Rosa, too anxious to pick her words, “don’t tell me you have been so silly as to think about him – that you have let yourself care for him.”

“Oh – I do – I do, with all my heart,” cried Violante, with all the fervour of her Italian nature, speaking from her shining eyes and parted lips.

“What has he said to you – what has he done? He has not made love to you – child – surely.”

“I don’t know,” murmured Violante.

“Oh, I must have been mad – what have I been doing to let this go on?” cried Rosa, starting up and walking about in her agitation, while Violante cowered, frightened, into the great chair, but with a certain self-assertion in her heart, too.

“Now,” said Rosa, recovering prudence, and sitting down on the arm of the chair, “you see, I have not taken care of my pretty sister. Tell me all about it.”

“You are not angry with me, Rosa?”

“Angry, my little one,” said Rosa, while tears, rare in her eyes, fell on her cheeks – “no, only angry with myself. Now, tell me what it is; how long have you felt in this way? What has he said to you?”

“All, how can I tell? He looks at me – he gives me flowers – he speaks to my heart,” said Violante with downcast eyes, but lips that smiled and needed no sympathy in their satisfaction.

“Don’t be silly,” said poor Rosa, irritated both by the smile and the sentiment. “Is that all?”

“He told me of his home – he said we should be friends – he asked me for a rose, and kissed my hand for it – he said he thought it was Italian fashion.”

“Oh, Violante, why didn’t you tell me before?”

“Oh,” with a funny little air of superiority, “one does not think of telling.”

Rosa pressed Violante tight in her arms, and set her lips hard, and when she spoke it was very low and steadily.

“My child, you know how I love you, that I only think how to make you happy. Mr Crichton had no right to play with you so; but it was my fault for letting you be thrown in his way. Young men will do those things, just to amuse themselves.”

“Some will.”

“*Some?*” said Rosa bitterly. “You little foreign girl – he would think of you just as of a pretty flower, to please him for a time, and then he will go home and leave you to repent that you have ever known him!”

“Never – never,” cried Violante, clasping her hands. “Never – if my heart should break.”

Rosa stamped her foot, and hot, cruel tears, that burnt as they fell, half choked her.

“I dare say he has never thought that you would take what he said seriously. If he likes you, he could not marry you – he must marry some English girl of his own rank. You must put him out of your head, and I must take better care of you.”

Violante’s views of the future were scarcely so definite as these words implied, but she shivered, and a chill fell on her spirits.

“Now,” said Rosa, “I believe Signor Vasari does really care for you.”

“Signor Vasari! I hate him!” cried Violante. “Rosa, I will be good – I will act – I will sing – but I will not hear of Signor Vasari. If he kissed me, I would kill him!”

“For shame, Violante, that is a very improper way of speaking. Oh, my child, will you promise me to be good?”

Violante did not answer. Was there a secret rebellion in the heart that had always given Rosa back love for love?

“Violante mia – you don’t think me unkind to you?”

Violante looked up and smiled, and taking Rosa’s face between her two little hands, covered it with sweet, fond kisses.

“Rosa, carissima mia, shall you do anything?”

“No,” said Rosa, considering. “I think not. If you will be a good child, and steady – now father will be coming back.”

“Oh, you will not tell him?”

“No, no – certainly not; but you have not practised.”

“I could not sing a note!”

“No, not now,” said Rosa steadily. “You must drink some coffee, and go and lie down for a little. And then you must bathe your eyes, and put up your hair, and come and sing for as long as father wishes.”

Violante obeyed, and Rosa having administered the coffee, and seen that no more tears were likely to result from solitude, left her to rest, and came back to await her father and consider the situation. She did not like the look of it at all. Violante was a good, obedient child, who tried to do as she was told, and had no power to rebel against fate. But she knew nothing of self-conquest or of self-control, and when she was unhappy had no thought but to cling to Rosa, and cry till she was comforted; while under all her timidity lay the power of a certain fervour of feeling against which she had never dreamed of struggling. Sweet and humble, innocent and tender, yet with a most passionate nature, how could she contend with feelings which were more

“Than would bear
Of daily life the wear and tear,”

how endure the pangs of disappointment, added to the strain of an uncongenial life?

“I think she will break her heart,” thought Rosa to herself. But then arose the consolatory thought that a life which seemed attractive to herself could not be so painful to her sister, and the probability that Violante’s feeling for her lover had not gone beyond the region of sentimental fancy.

Rosa, being naturally of a sanguine temperament, inclined to the latter opinion, and rose up smiling as her father came in.

“Well, and where is Violante – has she practised yet?” demanded Signor Mattei.

“No, father; she was too tired, she will come directly and sing for as long as you like.”

“The child is possessed,” muttered Signor Mattei.

“Now, father,” said Rosa, in a tone rather too decided to be quite filial, “you must leave Violante to me. I will manage her, and take care that she sings her best on Tuesday. But if she is scolded and frightened, she will break down. I know she will.”

“Well, figlia mia,” said Signor Mattei, somewhat meekly, for Rosa was the domestic authority, and was at that moment chopping up an excellent salad for him, and pouring on abundance of oil with her own hands. “But it is hard that my daughter should be such a little fool.”

“So it is,” said Rosa laughing, “but she will be good now. Now then, Violante,” opening the bedroom door.

There lay Violante, her sweet round lips smiling, her soft eyes serene, her own fears and Rosa’s warnings driven into the back-ground by the excitement of her confession, and by the thought of how Hugh had thanked her for her song.

She threw her arms round Rosa with a hearty, girlish embrace, quite different from the despairing clinging of an hour before.

“Yes, I am coming. My hair? Oh, father likes it so,” brushing it out into its native ripples. “There, my red ribbon. Now I will be buona – buonissima figlia.” And she ran into the sitting-room and up to her father, pausing with a full, sweeping curtsey.

“Grazie – mille grazie – signore e signori,” she said. “Is that right, padre mio?”

And her father, seeing her with her floating hair, her eyes and cheeks bright with the excitement that was making her heart beat like a bird in its cage, might well exclaim – “Child, you might bring the house down if you would. Come and kiss me, and go and sing ‘Batti batti,’ before you have your supper.”

Part 1, Chapter VI

Il Don Giovanni

Oh, the lute,
For that wondrous song were mute,
And the bird would do her part,
Falter, fail and break her heart —
Break her heart and furl her wings,
On the inexpressive strings.

“My dearest Hugh, —

“I write at once to tell you our good news. The class lists are out, and Arthur has got a second. I am sure he deserves it, for he has worked splendidly, and I always thought he would do well. I hope his success will not alter his wishes with regard to the bank where your dear father so much wished to see him take a place; but the life may seem rather hum-drum, and Arthur is naturally much flattered at all the things that have been said to him at Oxford. The girls are delighted. I am so glad you are enjoying yourself, but how much time you have spent at Civita Bella! When do you think of returning? I am going to give some parties as a sort of introduction for Mysie. The Clintons are coming. I don't know if *you* admire Katie Clinton; she is a *very* nice girl, and she is thought a beauty. That fence by the oak copse is in a sad state; do you think James Jennings ought to mend it? We have a very good hay crop. I have had a rapturous letter from Jem, but you say less about your delights. I wish you would choose a present for me for each of the girls from Italy, and I should like to give Arthur something on his success, but I dare say he would rather choose some books for himself.

“Ever my dearest boy, —

“Your loving mother, —

“L. Spencer Crichton.”

Redhurst House, Oxley.

This letter was brought to Hugh Crichton as he was dressing for the performance of “Don Giovanni,” at which “Mademoiselle Mattei” was to make her first appearance before the public of Civita Bella. The Tollemaches were full of interest in her success; and Hugh and James had selected the bouquets which were to be thrown to her, with both the ladies to help them, and Hugh's choice of white and scented flowers was declared by Emily to be remarkably appropriate to Violante.

The pleasant commonplace letter came like a breath of fresh, sharp wind from Oxley into the midst of the soft Italian air, good in itself, may be, but incongruous. Arthur's success? Hugh was gratified; but not immoderately so, and it crossed his mind to think “What a fuss every one will make! But he shall have his way about the bank; it is not fair to tie any one down to other men's wishes. Katie Clinton! If the mother only knew!” If his mother had only known how his heart beat and his face burnt with excitement at the crisis in one little foreign girl's life, if she knew how far Redhurst seemed away to him! If she knew that he had fallen entirely in love with Violante Mattei! Would she ever know? And Hugh, perhaps for the first time, saw that question and all it implied looming in the distance. Was it to be “all for love and the world well lost?” Would the world be lost? What did he mean to do? Hugh knew quite well what he would have advised Jem to do under similar

circumstances. It was a foolish, unsuitable thing, likely to make every one unhappy, it – . “I must sing, but I am frightened, Signor Hugo.”

“Will she be so frightened to-night? She said she liked stephanotis. I wonder if they can see on the stage where a bouquet comes from! I have not seen her for days. We should all be at sixes and sevens. Well, there’s no time now for consideration; but this letter has given me a shake, and I’ll play neither with her nor myself,” and Hugh took up his bouquet, and resolved for the moment to do the one thing possible to him – look at and think of Violante.

The house was full, but the Tollemaches had taken care to secure good places. Emily was full of excitement, proud of having a private interest in the public singer, and eagerly wondering how Violante felt then. Jem discoursed to her on the various great stars whom he had seen fulfilling Zerlina’s part, nothing loth to show his acquaintance with little scraps of their history, and with some of the technicalities of their profession, for Jem was great in private and semi-public theatricals and concerts, and was much amused and interested by what he had seen and heard of Mademoiselle Mattei.

Hugh sat leaning forward on the front of the box, and during the two first scenes he kept his eyes fixed on the stage as if he had never seen an opera before, and though he was not continuously attending, he never all his life long heard a note of the music without recalling that little Italian opera-house, with its dim lights and imperfect scenery, its true sweet singers, and the throb of excitement and expectation as the third scene in which Zerlina makes her first appearance opened.

“There she is!” cried Emily, and there was nothing more in the theatre for Hugh but one little terrified face. Ah, so terrified, so white, he knew, under all its rouge, with eyes that saw nothing and looked through the carefully practised smiles as if longing and appealing for the help no one could give her. Hugh felt a wild desire to jump down and snatch her in his arms, stop the music, drive away all those fantastic figures – anything, rather than that she should suffer such fear. What right had anyone to applaud her, to look at her – ah! she was going to sing!

She sang; and after a few faint notes the exquisite quality of her voice asserted itself, and, with her look of extreme youth and shyness, excited an interest that made the audience lenient to the stiffness of her gestures and the gravity and formality of what should have been coquettish dalliance between the peasant and the noble lover.

The notes were true and pure as those of a bird; but in their beautiful inflexions was no human passion, no varieties of meaning. Her face was lovely; but it did not image Zerlina’s affectionateness, vanity, triumph, and hesitation, her mischievous delight in the new admirer, and her lingering concern for the old one; it spoke nothing to the audience, and to Hugh only Violante’s fear and pain. But the music was perfect, and Violante, with her gay dress and mournful eyes, was a sweet sight to look on; so she was well received enough, and Hugh, as he saw her mouth quiver, thought that the noisy plaudits would make her cry.

“Oh, doesn’t she look just as sweet as ever?” cried Emily.

“She looks just the same as ever; she has no notion of her part,” said Mr Tollemache, “but the voice is first-rate.”

“She would be a study for a picture, ‘The Unwilling Actress,’” said Jem. “What say you, Hugh?”

“Oh; it is a great success – it is very good,” said Hugh vaguely; but his face was crimson, and he felt as if he could scarcely breathe.

The piece went on, and when the famous songs were heard in those perfect tones, when it was only necessary for her to stand and sing instead of to act, her voice and her youth and her beauty gained the day, there was a storm of applause, and a shower of bouquets fell at her feet. Hugh flung his white one, and Don Giovanni took it up and put it in her hand. Then suddenly the eyes lit up, the face was radiant, and the real passion which she had no power to assume or to mimic seemed to change her being.

“By Jove, she *is* lovely!” cried Jem. The next moment she had hidden her face in the flowers, and her next notes were so faltering that they were hardly heard. Hugh felt a fury of impatience as the public interest turned to the other heroines of the piece, and yet he had time to watch Violante as she stood motionless and weary, forgetting the bye-play that should have kept her in view while she remained silent. Hugh did not think that she saw him; he could not catch her eye, and felt angrily jealous of the stage lovers.

“Now’s the trial,” said Mr Tollemache. “Let us see how she will make a fool of Masetto.” Masetto was a fine actor as well as a good singer, and the part of Don Giovanni was played by Signor Vasari, the manager of the company himself. Even Hugh, preoccupied as he was, could not but perceive that Zerlina gave them few chances of making a point.

“I feel just as if it was Violante herself who was unhappy,” said Emily. “She looks as if Signor Mattei had been scolding her.”

Hugh, at any rate, felt as if it were Violante whom Don Giovanni was persecuting, and was utterly carried away by the excitement of the scene, till, just as the wild dance came to a climax, and Zerlina’s screams for help were heard, his brother touched his arm. Hugh started, and came suddenly to himself. James was gazing decorously at the stage. Hugh was conscious of having been so entirely absorbed as not to know how he might have betrayed his excitement. Of course he was in a rage with Jem for noticing it, but he sat back in his place and became aware that his hand trembled as he tried to put up his opera glasses, and that he had been biting his lip hard. He saw very little of the concluding scenes, and could not have told afterwards whether Don Giovanni died repentant or met the reward of his deeds. Even when the curtain dropped and Mademoiselle Mattei was led forward, to receive perhaps more bouquets and more “bravas” than she deserved, he felt a dull cold sense of disenchantment, though he clapped and shouted with the rest.

“It is all very well,” said Mr Tollemache, as he cloaked his mother; “her extreme youth and her voice attract for the present, but she is too bad an actress for permanent success.”

“She hasn’t the physical strength for it,” said Jem; “her voice will go.”

“It is to be hoped Vasari will marry her,” said Mr Tollemache.

“It is a very pretty opera,” said Hugh; “and I thought Donna Elvira had a fine voice.”

“The theatre was very hot,” said Mr Tollemache, when they reached home; “has it made your head ache, Mr Crichton?”

“No, thank you, but I’ll go to bed, I think. I don’t care for a smoke, Jem, to-night.”

“Jem,” said Mr Tollemache, as they parted after a desultory discussion of Violante, the opera, the Matteis, and the chances of Violante’s voice being profitable to Signor Vasari, “if you and Hugh care to go on and see a bit more of Italy, to push on to Rome, for instance, for the few days you have left, you mustn’t stand on ceremony with me.”

“Thank you,” said James. “I’ll see what Hugh says; I should like to see the – the Vatican, immensely.”

Part 1, Chapter VII

Brotherly Counsel

“They were dangerous guides, the feelings – ”

James Crichton had a certain taste for peculiarity, and anything unexpected and eccentric attracted him as much as it repels many other people. He piqued himself on his liberality, and had friends and acquaintances in many grades of society, to whom he behaved with perfectly genuine freedom and equality. He also loved everything that the word “Bohemian” implies to those classes who use it entirely *ab extra*. His mother’s vision of Jem’s daily life was a confused mixture of shabby velveteen, ale in queer mugs, colours which she was told to admire but thought hideous, mingled with musical instruments of all descriptions. He teased her to ask the Oxley photographer to dinner, and perpetually shocked her by revealing the social standing of acquaintances, whom he spoke of in terms of the greatest enthusiasm, till her dread was that he would marry some of “the sweet girls and perfect ladies” who supported their families by their own exertions in ways, which, though doubtless genteel, were not exactly aristocratic. She would have expected him to fall a victim to Violante at once.

But people do not always act in the way that is expected of them, and Mrs Crichton would have been saved much uneasiness had she known that Jem’s affections, so far as they were developed, were placed on the daughter of an Archdeacon, who dressed at once fashionably and quietly, did her hair in accordance with custom and not art, was such a lady that no one ever called her lady-like, and so exactly what she ought to have been that no one would have ventured to say she was dull. Jem had a great many flirtations, but if ever a vision of the wife that years hence might reward his devotion to his work at the Foreign Office, crossed his mind that vision bore the form of Miss Helen Hayward. It takes a great deal of theory and very strong opinions to contend in practice with the instincts to which people are born; but instincts have less chance where feeling and passion rise up to do battle with them.

James looked into Hugh’s dazzled absent eyes as they stood at his room door on their return from the opera, and felt that it was a bad moment for trying to bring him to reason; but the awkwardness of taking his elder brother to task in cold blood on the following morning made him seek for a conversation at once. So he followed him into his room and began: —

“Did you hear what Tollemache said about going to Rome?”

“Rome? No; do you want to go there?”

“Why, yes! Of course. Who doesn’t?”

“I don’t,” said Hugh quietly.

“No; but isn’t it a pity to miss the opportunity? In short, Hugh, – I say, – you know, aren’t you coming it rather strong in that quarter?” said Jem, who was so astonished at the novel position in which he found himself that he plunged into his task of Mentor at once. “In short, suppose it was Arthur, you know, what should you say?”

“I should say exactly what you want to say to me,” said Hugh, and made a little pause. “If I do this thing,” he went on, looking straight before him, “it will, I know, cause a great deal of vexation for the moment.”

“It’s not that; but it could not possibly answer, Hugh, you can’t be such a fool. Go away and take time to reflect; no one is more reasonable than you.”

Hugh roused himself as if with an effort, and, sitting down on the edge of his bed, looked up at his brother and prepared for the contest. “I will tell you all you are going to say,” he said. “This young lady – for she *is* a lady, Jem, and the daughter of a lady – is half a foreigner; she is only seventeen, she has no money, she has hardly any education, she has sung in public, on compulsion, and much against her will. If I marry her – ”

“You will break mamma’s heart,” said Jem, going back in his vexation to his childish mode of speech.

“No, I shall not. She won’t like it, of course, but she’ll come round to it. Of course some women would not, but she would never make the worst of a thing. There’s an end of her plans for me, what else is there to matter?”

“No one would visit her,” muttered Jem, who had often inveighed at the folly of social prejudice.

“Oh, yes, they would, if my mother received her. It would be a bad match, of course, but not so bad as that when all the circumstances were explained.”

“You seem to have considered it all.”

“Did you suppose I should do it without considering? I’m not the man, James, not to see all these difficulties; I am not going to take a leap in the dark.”

“It’s just as bad if you leap over a precipice in the light!”

Hugh was silent. It was perhaps owing to his clear sense of what was due to everyone, and to his power of seeing both sides of a question, that he was not offended by his brother’s displeasure. What else could James say? He himself, as he had told him, could say it all, had said it, did say it still. And what could he answer? That, though a broken heart was a form of speech, his would in future be a broken life without Violante was a statement that he could not bring himself to make, and which James would not have believed. “Of course I can give her up,” he thought; “but if I do shall I ever live my life whole and perfect again? Is it not in me to be to her what I never have been, never could be, to anyone else?”

Hugh was a self-conscious person, as well as a conscientious one; he was not very young, and thus it will be perceived that he knew well what he was about. He was enough himself to wonder at himself; but in these sweet holiday weeks something had possessed him beyond his own control. He could fly from it, but he could not conquer it.

“Well,” he said, as James continued his arguments, “grant that I should forget her, what should I be worth then? how much of myself should I have lost!”

“Anyone might say that about any temptation of the sort,” said Jem.

“And truly. But – ‘halt or maimed,’ you know, Jem. There are times when we must pay the price. You can’t say this is a case in point.”

“But how about the girl?” said Jem. “Have you involved yourself with her?”

“No,” said Hugh, and then added: “Not intentionally.”

“Ah!” said Jem, with a whistle. He was surprised to perceive that the argument of Violante’s probable disappointment had not been the first to be put forward by Hugh. His brother had argued out the question of right and wrong for himself first, though now he eagerly took up this point.

“I think she *does* like me,” he said, in a much more lover-like manner; “and her father tyrannises over her, poor child: she hates her profession; she would never want to hear of it again.”

“Well, and how did it all come about?” To this question James did not obtain a direct answer; but after about half-an-hour of explanation, description, and rapture, he said:

“Well, Hugh, you *are* in for it, and no mistake. I’m sorry for you. And, pray, what do you intend to do?”

“I wish to act as considerately as possible to everyone,” said Hugh. “I shall go home and tell my mother myself – ”

“Without engaging yourself to Violante?”

“I shall do nothing in a hurry; but you cannot suppose that it needs spoken words to bind me now.”

“But I say,” said James suddenly, “did not some one say she was engaged to the manager?”

“That is not true,” said Hugh, colouring up; “she cannot endure him.”

“Oh!” said James, dryly. “All things considered, I wonder you did not speak before to-night.”

“I should not have expected *you* to take that view,” returned his brother.

“Well, she’s none the worse for it, of course; but, still, when it comes to one’s wife, you see, Hugh, there are advantages in plain sailing.”

“Look here, James,” cried Hugh, starting up, “we have talked long enough; I’ll take care of my mother, but I love Violante, and I believe she loves me, and our lives shall not be spoilt for anyone’s scruples. Do you suppose *I* don’t know my own mind? do you think *I* should act in a hurry, and repent of it afterwards? I would give her up now if I thought it right. It might be right in some cases, but this stands apart from ordinary rules – ”

“I *think* I’ve heard that remark before,” James could not resist interposing.

“Very likely. In my case it is true. Not answer? It *shall* answer! Do you think I shall ever be afraid of the consequences of my actions?”

Hugh had the advantage of definite purpose and strong feeling. He spoke low, but his whole face lighted up as he, usually scrupulously self-distrustful in his speech, uttered this mighty boast. James, fluent and enthusiastic as he was, had for the moment nothing to say. He meant well; but his objections were vague and inconsistent with much of his own conduct. Hugh had the better of him, and reduced him to looking dissatisfied and cross.

“Well, if you will make a fool of yourself,” he muttered, “I’ll say good night.”

“Good night!” said Hugh, coming out of the clouds. “You were quite right to say your say, Jem.”

James was a very good-tempered person, but this was a little more than he could stand.

“Some day you may wish you had listened to it,” he said. “If you had seen as much of girls as I have, you would know there was nothing extraordinary in being extra silly and sentimental. Good heavens! I might have been married a dozen times over if I’d been so heroic over every little flirtation.”

Not being a woman, Hugh left the last word to his brother. He had no particular respect for Jem’s opinion, and did not care at all whether he approved of his choice or not. He believed that he could make his mother content with it; and his mother’s contentment would silence all active opposition of the outer world. His boy and girl cousins had no right to a remark: he supposed he could put up with Arthur’s nonsense. Here he took the flower out of his coat, and thought that the scent of stephanotis would always remind him of Violante. And then he went and leaned out of his window in the soft starlit southern night, and wondered if Violante was dreaming of her success or of him.

How strange it was that to him, of all people, should have come this wonderful and poetical experience! Hugh was not aware that the beauty of the scene, the clearness of the sky, the delicate shadowy spires and pinnacles that stood out soft and clear against it, the light of the stars, the breath of the south, in any way influenced him; he would have laughed even then at a description of a lover looking at the stars and thinking of his lady. It never occurred to him to call to mind any song or poem that put into words such commonplace romance. For the place, the circumstances, Violante herself, the flower in his hand, the notes yet ringing in his ears, appealed to a simplicity of sentiment any school-girl might have shared with him. Yet real honest feeling might give for once reality to these hackneyed images, just as it could as easily have dispensed with them altogether.

Part 1, Chapter VIII

White Flowers

“True love
Lives among the false loves, knowing
Just their peace and strife;
Bears the self-same look, but always
Has an inner life.

“Tell me, then, do you dare offer
This true love to me?
Neither you nor I can answer:
We must – wait and see!”

The fearful ordeal was over; the first night had come and gone, and the earth had not opened to swallow Violante up; the disgraceful tears had been successfully controlled; and through all the fear and confusion, the dread of the audience and of her fellow-actors, the physical discomfort of the noise and the heat, had penetrated a little thrill of pleasure; and for one moment, when all the “Bravas” seemed to ring with Hugh’s voice, and his sweet white bouquet fell at her feet, the excitement was not all pain. But, painful or joyful, it was far too intense for so delicate a creature to bear; and tears, sleeplessness, and excessive exhaustion, were its natural result. Both Rosa and her father were so much relieved that no break-down had taken place that, though both were fully capable of criticising her performance, they rejoiced as if it had been an absolute success; and even the tender sister could not believe but that the pleasure must have predominated over the pain. So poor Violante dried her tears as fast as she could, conscious of being too silly a child even for Rosa’s sympathy, and not daring to say that the worst terror of all was Signor Vasari’s commendation. She had no need to suffer from Masetto’s, who declared with indignation that it was impossible to execute scenes of passion and sentiment with so irresponsive a soprano. On the Wednesday another opera was to be given; on the Thursday “Don Giovanni” would be repeated, and then there loomed before Violante the dreadful impossible archness of the playful heroine of “Il Barbiere.” Surely, when she came back from the rehearsal on Wednesday, some one would come to hear how she had fared! There was no one. Even Emily Tollemache neither came nor wrote. So he only wanted to throw bouquets at her!

“Oh, I hate the flowers! I hate their very smell,” sobbed poor Violante to herself; but she did not throw them away; and when, on Thursday night, as the opera proceeded, no white bouquet fell, her spirit died utterly within her, and then rose in passionate despair. She could not bear her troubles – this poor child – for one day; but, weak and soft as she was, it was no mere tender sentiment that gave her face a sort of power and thrilled her voice with a new energy.

When the curtain rose on the performers after the opera was over, a great white bridal-looking bouquet fell at Violante’s feet. Don Giovanni, impelled perhaps by various jealousies of the favour shown to the little débutante, picked it up and gave it to Donna Elvira, who graciously curtsyed thanks. Zerlina started; she could see no one; and the curtain fell.

“Mademoiselle, I think those are my flowers.”

Donna Elvira burst out laughing and pointed the bouquet scornfully at Zerlina.

“Eccola – Brava, brava! Mademoiselle learns quickly. She wants other ladies’ bouquets, not content with her own!”

“Mademoiselle’s thoughts are elsewhere than on the stage,” sneered Masetto.

“All – it is a love token! Is it il Signor Inglese? Ah, ha, ha!”

Violante, in an agony of shame at her own folly, with burning cheeks and beating heart, shrank away without a word; but when she reached home and could hide her face on Rosa's shoulder, her first words were —

“Oh, my flowers, my flowers!” and when Rosa understood the story she could give no adequate consolation.

“Oh, child – child!” she cried at last, “do not sob and cry in this way. Who ever cured their troubles so? Now I will not have it. Perhaps he did not throw the flowers after all! Lie down and go to sleep.”

Violante endeavoured to obey; she put the damp tumbled hair off her face, and lay down and closed her eyes. “But he did throw them,” she thought to herself; but she did not say so to Rosa, for her sorrow was beginning to give the child a stand-point of her own.

Hugh, meanwhile, was the victim of circumstances. Mrs Tollemache had planned an excursion, which carried them off early on the morning after the first opera, and from which they did not return till late in the evening of the second day. Hugh was annoyed; but he knew that he should have other opportunities of seeing Violante, and he could not escape without more commotion than was expedient. So he went and enjoyed himself all the more, because the excitement of his whole nature made him more than usually open to enjoyment. Hugh had never thought scenery so beautiful or sights so interesting; he was ready to be amused by every trifling incident of their trip. *He* knew that Violante would be there when he came back; while *she*, poor child, knew nothing. But he managed to look in at the end of the opera and throw his bouquet; and on the next day he thought no one could have objected to his making a visit of enquiry, particularly as most likely Violante would not be at home. James's remarks had not been without their effect, in so far as they increased his desire to act with the greatest possible tact and caution; and he much wished to secure his mother's consent, certainly before any public disturbance took place, and even, if possible, before actually engaging himself to Violante, and this for her sake. He had no dreams of hiding himself from the world with her: he could do no other than follow his profession, and live with his wife in the midst of his friends. In short, Hugh wished to eat his cake and have it – to do a wild, foolish, utterly romantic thing, and yet sacrifice no conventional or real advantage. And he had quite sense enough to know that conventional advantages *were* real in this case, and quite confidence enough in himself to believe that, he, in his wisdom, could succeed in doing what most other men had failed in attempting.

“There shall be no secrecy and no quarrelling,” he thought; “and yet I will judge for myself.”

However, this evening, politeness would have prompted a call on Signor Mattei had Violante never existed; and as Jem had promised to take some drive with the Tollemaches it was not worth while to ask for his company; so he asked if Signor Mattei was at home. “No – il signor was out.”

“La signorina Rosa?”

“Out too, she was giving a lesson – ah, it was only English people who went out in such a sun. What a pity! Even Mademoiselle Mattei (Maddalena proudly gave Violante the French title by which she was known to the public) was not there; she was tired with the rehearsals; she was lying down. Would il signor wait? They would be in soon.” Hugh thought that he would wait. This was not the first time that he had seen Maddalena.

Hugh came into the great shady room, where the Venetian blinds were down and the light was green and cool. Only one window was open – a little one at the end facing east – and on its ledge stood a great bowl of flaming flowers, the blue sky and a distant marble pinnacle, fretted and pierced, behind them; a girl in an old white dress on the low cushioned bench beneath – Violante's delicate face and floating hair clear against the sky. There were red flowers and blue flowers in the great china bowl, but white ones in Violante's little hands; and as Hugh's foot fell on the old scratched inlaid work of the floor she held them to her lips. Then the foot-fall sounded, and she turned her head and sprang up with such a start that down fell flowers, red, white, and blue, with the china bowl in one common

ruin. In another moment Hugh and Violante, both laughing and exclaiming, were picking them up, and Hugh was pursuing the bowl as it rolled along the polished floor.

“No harm done,” he said, as he brought it back, “it is not broken.”

“Oh, I am so glad! Father is so fond of it. Oh, how wet the cushion is!”

“Hang it out of window,” said Hugh, as he pulled it off the seat. “I don’t want it. And there,” taking it from the chair, “is another one for you.”

And Hugh sat down on the vacant half of the window-seat; and, replacing the bowl on the ledge, began to arrange the wet flowers in it. Violante sat down also; and, shaking the drops from the roses and oleanders, held them to him one by one.

She felt quite happy; past and future had floated away from her. She did not think of saying anything; the flowers were enough.

“I don’t think I understand much about arranging flowers,” said Hugh.

“They were dying, or I should not have taken them to pieces,” said she, with a glance at the white bouquet.

“You had a *white* bouquet?”

“Oh – I had so many – this beautiful one – all roses,” said Violante, trying, in her heightened spirits, this elementary piece of coquetting.

“Too many to count?”

“Oh, yes – quite too many. There were three red ones and this – all colours – and *one* white.”

She looked at Hugh, seized with a sudden fear. Perhaps he had not thrown the white one, after all!

“Your trophies, Mademoiselle Mattei. Were you very proud of them as you were counting the spoils?” said the equally foolish Hugh, as he thought: “Of course, she *does* care for it, after all.”

Violante blushed intensely and her lips quivered.

“I like the *flowers*,” she said.

“And the applause?” said Hugh, jealously. “Don’t you know you had a great triumph? We shall all boast of your acquaintance.” Violante bent her head low, her lashes heavy and wet.

“Still, you don’t like it,” cried Hugh; and suddenly the tones were tender. “Does it still frighten you so much, Violante?”

“Oh yes – so much!”

“Ah, I saw you were frightened. It was Violante, not Zerlina, that I was looking at.”

“Yes, that’s the worst of it.”

“The worst of it?”

“I never act enough, they say. I can only sing.”

“Well, what more would anyone have? You sing like an angel. And Violante is much better worth looking at than Zerlina, any day.”

“Ah,” said Violante, more brightly, “but you would not think so if you were Signor Rubini.”

“What – Masetto – shouldn’t I?”

“He said,” continued Violante, with penitence, “that he would rather act with a wax-doll, and – and that I show off my own voice and do not think of his. But I cannot help it, indeed.”

“What an insolent scoundrel! You shall – why do you ever act with him again?”

“Oh, but it is a great honour! I ought to please him if I could. But I don’t know how.”

The sorrowful, contrite tones, and the droop of her lip were almost more than Hugh could bear. James had told him that it would be cruel to make this poor little child unhappy by the uncertainties of an engagement that could not be immediately-fulfilled. Would she be any happier if he left her to cry over her bad acting, and to be criticised by Italian singers? He was coming to a resolution, but for a moment he held it back.

“Give yourself airs,” he said. “Say you’ll never sing again if they find fault with you! See what they will say then.”

“I?” said Violante, opening round eyes of amazement. “How could I?”

“All,” said Hugh, with growing excitement, “but one of these days you will say, ‘I will not act with Signor Rubini!’ We are going home, you know, when I come back – ”

He paused, and Violante turned cold and sick, as when the eyes of the whole theatre were fixed upon her. He was going away! Hugh started up and walked away from her for a moment; then he came back and stood before her, and spoke.

“No, you cannot say that. I will tell you what to say. Say you have promised to be my wife, my darling; and it does not matter if you act well or ill. Listen to me one moment. Signorina, I love you; though I cannot tell you so in persuasive words. If you will trust me for a little while, I will come back and bring my mother, who will welcome you and love you. Can you care for me, Violante?”

Hugh, scrupulous and self-conscious, wasted many words. He had said within himself that he would show more deference to Violante than he would have thought necessary to a princess; that with his first words he would make it plain, both that there were difficulties, and that he would overcome them. There was a suppressed fire in the eyes generally so quiet, and a sort of courtliness in the manners that were sometimes so stiff, a deference that would soon be tender, an earnestness just held back from passionate force.

Violante heard but three words: “I love you.” Shy as she was, she was utterly trustful, and was too innocent and too fervent for any pretence of coyness.

“Do you love me, Violante?”

“Oh, yes!” and she let him take her in his arms, while her tears fell with the soft relief of having found a comforter. She was won, this little southern Juliet, won – ah, how easily! – and Hugh vowed to himself that he would justify her innocent trust, and give her all she knew not how to demand.

“You are not frightened now, my child?”

“Oh, no!”

“Let me look and see;” and, as Hugh drew away the veiling fingers, she did not shrink from the kiss that came in their stead.

“What will father say?” murmured she presently.

Now, it would have suited Hugh better could he have left Signor Mattei in ignorance until he had settled the affair with his own people; but he was too generous to involve Violante in the toils of a secret. Never should she be tempted by him to one doubtful action. So he answered —

“That I will soon find out; and to do so, my darling, I must go.”

And so, with many tender words, and with a wonderful delight in his own love as well as in the sweet child who had awakened it, Hugh took his leave for the present; and she, who was conscious of no delight but ill him, watched him for a moment, then came and turned the old lock of the door, which he suddenly found so perplexing; so that, as he went away, he saw her standing in the dim, lofty corridor, with the sunlight shining halo-wise behind her hair, and the still brighter aureole of his passionate fancy glorifying her innocent face.

Part 2, Chapter IX

Contrasts

“There’s none so sure to pay his debt.
As wet to dry, and dry to wet.”

Part 2, Chapter X

The Time of Roses

“When all the world was young, lad,
And all the trees were green.”

While the bright southern sunshine was filling the old palace with its rays; and while, beneath the blue Italian sky, Hugh Crichton was arranging Violante's flowers; the same fair summer weather was making life enchanting in the English county where Oxley lay. Instead of deep, unbroken azure, see a paler tint, with fleecy, snowy clouds; and, for the fretwork and the imagery, the marble, and the alabaster of Civita Bella, broad, green, low-lying meadows, where dog-roses tossed in the hedges, and dog-daisies and buttercups were falling beneath the scythe; a slow, sleepy canal, with here and there a bright-painted boat; and, on the low hill side, the clustering white villas and modern streets, surmounted, not by innumerable pinnacles and domes, but by one tall, grey spire.

Oxley was a large, flourishing town, some forty miles from London – next to the county town in dignity, and before it in size and enterprise. It could boast no architecture and no antiquities, save a handsome church – neither very old nor very new – and some tumble-down, red-tiled, dirty streets, sloping down from the back of the town to the canal – unless, indeed, like some of its townsmen, you counted the Corinthian façade of the railway station, the Gothic gables of the new Town-Hall, or the sober eighteenth-century squareness of the Oxley Bank. These two latter public buildings opened on to a broad, sunny market-place; from which started a clean, white, sunny road, which led past villas, nursery gardens, meadows, and bits of furzy, heathery waste, all the way to Redhurst, and was the old coach-road from the county town to London.

Along this road were the prettiest residences, the gayest little conservatories, the most flowery lilacs, laburnums, and acacias of suburban Oxley. Here was the “best neighbourhood,” and here, on the clean, gravelled footway, the nursery-maids and children went to walk on fine mornings; ladies and little dogs paid calls of an afternoon; and groups of slim, long-haired girls came out to attend classes at Oxley Manor, the famous Young Ladies' School. The Manor House lay back from the road behind high, substantial, red-brick walls, with mossy crevices, and bushy ivy peeping over the top; showing beyond, garden trees, walnuts, acacias, and horse-chestnuts, surrounding the big, substantial house, where, from the small-paned windows, peeped now and then a girl's face.

There was no better school in the country than the Miss Vennings' at Oxley Manor; and it was considered a great privilege for the girls of Oxley that certain classes there were opened to them; and a still greater that Miss Spencer and Miss Crofton were allowed to attend regularly as day scholars. But these young ladies did not come from Redhurst by the road. There was a pretty, quiet path through the meadows – half-way between the public road and the towing-path by the canal – that led here through a bit of copsewood famous for primroses, there across a sunny, open meadow; now over a low, wooden stile, then between high hedges, full of brambles, honey-suckles, and roses; till the hedges grew neater and closer, and terminated in the high red wall of the Manor kitchen-garden, from which opened a little green gate. On the other side of the road was a paddock, with a shallow pond where ducks flourished, and where, on the opposite bank, an old pollard willow threw its slender branches across the muddy water.

On that sunny afternoon a sunnier spot could hardly have been found than the narrow path under the wall; and yet here lingered two figures: a girl, who had poised herself on the end of a great garden-roller, and a young man who leaned against the white railing of the pond beside her. She was a graceful little lady, small and soft-faced; with brown hair, shining and neat, round rosy lips, and clear,

steady eyes of a hazel tint. Her white dress was elaborately trimmed with handsome embroidery, and all her blue ribbons were fresh and smart, as if they had no need to see sunny days enough to dim their brightness. There was a bag of books at her feet, and her pretty eyes were cast down towards them; and her pink cheeks were flushed with considerable, yet not excessive, embarrassment.

“But, Arthur,” she said, with a clear, distinct, and yet soft utterance, “but, Arthur, I think we ought to consider about it a great deal.”

“I have never considered it at all,” said Arthur Spencer.

He was a tall young man, slight and graceful; with – spite of his second class and his cultivated expression – a sort of happy-go-lucky air, that seemed hardly to have outgrown the right to his old appellation of a “very pretty boy,” earned by his bright colour, dark hair, with a picturesque wave in it, and black-lashed eyes, of that distinct shade of grey which cannot be mistaken for blue or hazel. He was an elegant, rather handsome young man at three-and-twenty, with a light-hearted, self-reliant manner that might have been careless and even conceited had a less earnest and genuine affection looked out from his bright eyes at the pretty creature beside him. Arthur thought himself clever, good-looking, rather a fine fellow in his way; but what did he not think of Mysie Crofton?

“There’s nothing *new* in it; is there, Mysie?” he continued, as he took her prettily-gloved hand, with the freedom of old intercourse, just touched with something sweeter. “Nothing new. We were always the friends of the family, and it *must* have come to this soon.”

“Yes,” said Mysie, simply; “but I thought – I thought – those things never *did* come to anything.”

“You thought? Ah, Mysie, I have my answer now: You thought, you little worldly-minded thing, that first love was all humbug, eh? Well, we’ll be an instance to the contrary.”

Mysie blushed.

“I’m sure,” she said, “you were always telling me about young ladies.”

“But I always told you about them, Mysie! And now I could not go on any longer without having it out. *I* knew it; and *you* knew it – oh, yes, you did; and Aunt Lily was beginning to find out.”

“But there’s Hugh?”

“Ah, Hugh. I daresay he won’t quite like it; those things are not in his line. But he is too good to make foolish objections. To be sure, there is one he may fairly make.”

“What’s that?” said Mysie, frightened.

“Your fortune, Mysie; and when I think of it, it half frightens me.”

“I don’t think it is so very much,” said Mysie.

“It is enough to give you a right to all this,” said Arthur, touching her pretty dress; “and if I thought I could not give it you, I would be silent. But, Mysie, I have not much of my own; but I think I have earned the right to say I have a good chance of success in any career I might choose; and there is always the Bank. I know I cannot marry you now, Mysie, my darling,” he continued, with a sort of frank, eager deference; “and if anyone you like better comes by I will never hold you to your promise. But in the meantime are we the worse for acknowledging that which has existed so long – so long? Oh, Mysie, I don’t know how to make love to you. I think it’s all made, but you are part of myself. I could have no life without you. I cannot imagine myself *not* loving you, not looking to have you one day for my own.”

If Mysie was a little slow to answer, it was not because she could imagine her life without Arthur. All this was only the right name for that which had always been. They *were* Arthur and Mysie; and they would be Arthur and Mysie to the end of the chapter.

“Yes,” she said, “that’s quite true. It just is. But I’ll try and be a great deal better to you than ever I have been. It ought to be like ‘John Anderson.’”

Mysie had ideas, and was not afraid to express them. She used nice, pretty language, and when a thought struck her she would say it out in a way sometimes formal, but always genuine and sweet.

“John Anderson?” said Arthur – not that he did not know.

And Mysie repeated the sweetest of all sweet love-songs, the one fulfilment in the midst of so much longing desire.

As Arthur heard her gentle, fearless voice, and saw her clear eyes raised to his own, as she repeated, without fear or falter:

“And sleep together at the foot,
John Anderson, my jo,”

a great awe came over him.

“Oh, Mysie, my love, my darling, may God grant it! For nothing in life could ever come between us.”

And with this hope, that in its intensity was almost fear, he drew her towards him, and gave her his first *lover's* kiss. She was silent; and then, recovering herself, said, in a different tone:

“And I don't think it will be inconvenient to have a little money!”

The revulsion of ideas made Arthur laugh.

“Worldly wisdom!” he exclaimed; then suddenly sprang up from the other end of the roller as a tall handsome lady, in a garden hat, came out of the green gate.

“Miss Crofton!”

“I – I was only taking Mysie to school, Miss Venning,” said Arthur; while Mysie, pink and fluttered, picked up her books and hurried off up the path.

Miss Venning was a stately, blue-eyed woman of forty or thereabouts; with a fair, fresh complexion, and a manner that twenty-years of school-keeping had rendered somewhat condescending, as if the world consisted of pupils to be at once governed and encouraged; while her blue eyes had a certain look of enquiry in them, as if she was in the habit of passing judgment on those who came before her. But, that the judgment would be just and kind, the handsome face gave every promise; and, perhaps, the scales might even drop a little in favour of a kind of culprit that did not often come before her. Besides, if Arthur Spencer had brought the girls to school once within her recollection, he had done so fifty times.

But Arthur did not give time for this awful monosyllable to frame itself into an objection.

“Miss Venning,” he said, persuasively, “I'm doing no harm. I daresay you have often thought of it before; it couldn't be helped, you see, any longer.”

“Arthur,” said Miss Venning, in a deep, full voice, somewhat appalling to hear, “if you had anything particular to say to Miss Crofton, you have ample opportunities without following her here.”

Arthur did not look much discomfited. Perhaps there was the slightest turn in the formidable voice that showed that the humour of the situation was not quite lost on the speaker.

He blushed, and then said, with a straightforwardness that few ladies would have resisted:

“Miss Venning, I want to have Mysie for my wife, if my aunt and Hugh will consent to our engagement. I don't know when we began to think of it, but I suppose to-day it – well – came to a head.”

“And what does Mysie say?” said Miss Venning, still judicial, but interested. She considered Arthur Spencer a very promising young man.

“Mysie sees no objection, Miss Venning. I didn't mean to take a liberty, I'm sure, with the sacred precincts of the Manor House; but, since it has happened so, I do wish you would let me consult you.”

Whether this appeal was the result of a delicate tact, or of the overflowing happiness that longed for sympathy, it caused Miss Venning to walk along the path beside him, saying:

“Well?”

“Well,” said Arthur, “you see how it is with us; and we have our lives before us, and there is time for me to make myself worthy of Mysie's money – I'll not say of herself,” he added, with a little softening of his confident voice.

“Well?” said Miss Venning again, with a yet deeper intonation.

“I have not hitherto made up my mind as to my profession,” said Arthur. “I hardly looked beyond the examination; but the Bank has always been my destination, and you know my uncle’s kindness marked out my career there long ago.”

“And haven’t you any further ambition?” said Miss Venning, who thought young men ought to push themselves.

“Why,” said Arthur, “I don’t like teaching, in which career my degree would be of most use to me; and the bar is very slow work. Hugh really wants help; and, in short, Miss Venning, when life is so crowded and the world so over-full I think if a man has the good luck to have a line marked out for him he ought to stick to it, unless his tastes point very decidedly the other way. Besides, I like Oxley. And I think,” he added, laughing and colouring, “I should say this under *any* circumstances. But if not, one must take life as a whole, you know.”

Miss Venning thought Oxley Bank rather a flat ending to so creditable a career as Arthur’s had been; but then, on the other hand, it was eminently safe and respectable, and, with this early marriage, would effectually “keep him out of mischief.”

“But what will your cousin say?” she asked.

“Why, I’m afraid he’ll think it his duty to object a little. But Hugh is such a good fellow, and has always been so thoroughly kind to me, and is so fair in judgment, that I am sure he will own I have as good a right to try for the prize as anyone else. It’s very odd that he has never looked out for himself. But, dear me! he would be so awfully particular!”

“Well, Arthur,” said Miss Venning, “I approve of young men marrying. It’s far more necessary for them than for girls.”

“One couldn’t well manage it without a girl,” murmured Arthur.

“So that,” said Miss Venning, “it’s well young women have different opinions on the subject. Go home, and take the responsibility off my shoulders by telling your aunt at once.”

“I’ll never do it in your garden again, Miss Venning,” cried Arthur, as he left her with a very hearty shake of the hand.

Certainly life lay fair before and behind Arthur Spencer. He was clever, with the technical skill needed for the attainment of his scholastic honours more developed than the general power behind it. That is to say, all his brains – and they were good ones – had been given to the composition of Greek and Latin, and to the acquirement of the knowledge necessary to the attainment of a good degree. He was naturally active, and industrious; and ambition and conscience had both urged him to do well the work that nature had made easy to him. He had won plenty of praise, which he liked exceedingly; and plenty of popularity, which came so naturally that he was hardly conscious of it. But he had hitherto taken life outside the schools very much for granted; thought Hugh infallible on matters of business, and James an oracle in matters of art. Indeed, Arthur’s power of appreciation was one of his best points. Unlike many of her sons, he loved and believed in Oxford – perhaps because he had given her his best and she had well repaid him; and, while there, his time and thoughts had been fully occupied with the work before him. At once affectionate and self-reliant, he took readily to the independence that circumstances indicated, and at a very early age took good care of himself. And, though there was no one in his boyhood to bestow on him exclusive affection, his warm heart gave out enough to all to make his kindly home a happy and sunny one. For Arthur liked most people. It had been said with some truth that one person was much the same as another to him, he “got on” so well with all. It would be praising the gay untried boy far too highly to say that he had a spirit of universal charity; but he did possess a sort of loving-kindness, a gift in whose soil the greatest of all graces might grow; an entire absence of depreciating ill-nature.

But Arthur himself had long known that for him the human race was divided into two parts – Mysie and other people.

Part 2, Chapter XI

Oxley Manor

“Oh, so many, many, many maidens!”

Under the great walnut-tree on the lawn the three Miss Vennings were assembled in consultation. The Manor House possessed one of the most enchanting gardens that the past has ever handed down to the present. High walls shutting it in safe, on which grew jessamine and wisteria and sweet old-fashioned roses; a narrow path running round the lawn, and leading away into vistas of shrubbery; while on the soft turf grew beautiful trees, and, in especial, an immense walnut. Miss Venning sat on a garden-bench communicating to her sisters the important event that had just electrified her maidenly precincts.

“It *was* very inconsiderate of Arthur to select our garden-roller for the purpose,” said Miss Clarissa, the second of the trio.

“Why, Clarissa? You don’t suppose people settle the exact spot beforehand!” said Miss Florence, the third.

Miss Florence, as she now aspired to be called, had been little Flossy not many years back; and the thick bright hair of fairest flaxen – “Flossy’s tow,” as her sisters called it – now twisted round her head, had not so very long ago hung down her back in all its native lustre. She was a tall girl of twenty, with a fine open face, handsome in form, and coloured with a pink – “as pink as pink ribbon,” Clarissa said – bright enough to allow for a little fading as the years went by; and her blue eyes were full of thought and energy. Young as she was, everyone knew that she was a much greater power in the house than Miss Clarissa, and was hardly second to Miss Venning herself. All the girls obeyed her; she was full of life and force to the very tips of her strong, slender fingers; could learn better than the girls, teach better than the governesses, thought school-keeping a vocation and not a drudgery, and spent her half-holidays in the parish; was never ill, never tired, and never unhappy; and possessed such a store of spirits and energy that – to quote again from Clarissa – if Flossy was not marked out for misfortune Nature had wasted a great deal of good stuff in the making of her.

Flossy was Miss Venning’s darling, and need never have corrected an exercise nor set a sum if she had not been so minded; but she had replied to the offer of freedom with scorn and contempt: “Did sister think she should be happier for being idle?” and set to work with all her might and main to “enlarge the minds and improve the tone” of her sister’s pupils, introducing new studies, new authors, and new ideas; talking over Miss Venning – or sometimes, perhaps, talking her down – with an equal amount of self-confidence and self-devotion.

In Miss Clarissa’s girlish days no such possibility of freedom had been offered to her. Nine or ten years ago, during the long illness of their mother, and while the brothers who filled up the wide gaps between the three sisters had been yet unsettled in life, the circumstances of the school had required more personal exertion; and when Clarissa was at the end of her teens she had been too busy – teaching all the English, that the resident governess might be French – to consider if it was desirable for the pupils to read Thackeray or to learn Latin and Euclid. Clarissa was a good girl and did her duty; but now, at eight and twenty, she felt as if life might have offered her something more than school-keeping. She told Flossy that she should like to marry a Duke and drink chocolate out of Sèvres china – and the scandalised Flossy perceived neither the twinkle of the sleepy blue eyes nor the wistful fall of the well-curved mouth, the delicate prettiness of which gave to the small curly-haired Clarissa a look of youth which neither the absence of Sèvres china nor the presence of young ladies had hitherto impaired. Flossy’s eyes were always wide open and rarely twinkled, though they often laughed.

They brightened into a laugh now, as she repeated her remark —

“You don’t suppose, Clarissa, that people settle the exact spot beforehand!”

“Really, Flossy, my experience is limited; but, as Mary says, as Arthur lives in the house with Mysie, I think he might have managed matters at home.”

“Oh, but,” said Flossy, “now he has sister on his side, you see.”

“Yes, Mary; you’re in the scrape,” said Clarissa.

“Really, my dear, I don’t see that at all. I am not responsible for Miss Crofton now, beyond her German and music lessons.”

“I suppose she might do much better,” said Clarissa.

“She couldn’t do better,” said Florence, decidedly, in her full rich voice. Will it quite detract from Flossy’s character for feminine softness if it be owned that she spoke rather loud? “Arthur has very good prospects, and is the very nicest young man I know.”

“Dear me! Flossy,” said Clarissa. “I thought you considered matrimony a mistake.”

“By no means,” emphatically returned Flossy; “when everything is suitable and people are fond of each other. I don’t think I shall ever wish to marry anyone myself; and how anyone can say life is wanting in interest I can’t conceive; but I should never be so absurd as to lay down general principles. That is where people fall into error. And besides,” she concluded heartily, “anyone could see dear little Mysie was fond of Arthur, and I am so glad she will be happy!”

“Well, there are more words than hers and Arthur’s to that,” said Clarissa.

“Mrs Crichton never objects to anything,” said Flossy; “and as for Mr Crichton, surely he won’t be so horrid.”

“Well, *I* could not help it,” said Miss Venning.

“No,” returned Flossy; “and as Mysie is not exactly a girl it doesn’t signify.”

Mysie was eighteen and a week; but Flossy used the term “girl” in a strictly technical sense.

“Dear me!” she continued, “my class will be waiting for me.” And as she ran into the house Miss Venning looked after her.

“I think young men have very strange tastes,” she said.

“Because *Flossy* has no lovers?” said Clarissa, with a slight emphasis.

“Well, I am sure I do not want her to have any,” returned Miss Venning, with a smile at her sisterly partiality.

“Dear me, no, Mary! Flossy won’t be fit for a lover for five years at least. She has all the world to reform first!”

Miss Venning laughed as she went to tend her beautiful roses, and Clarissa, left alone, wandered on till she sat down under an acacia tree. She threw herself back on the soft turf, and gazed up at the sky through its veil of delicate dancing foliage, while she caught the fast-falling white blossoms in her hand. It was a childish attitude and a childish action; but it may have been absently done, for she was still smiling at the joke of the surprised lovers. At last the smile trembled and ceased, and she hid her face on the mossy turf. Lying there on the grass, with her little slim figure and curly head, she looked like a girl escaped from school, fretting over her tasks or dreaming of fairy princes. But Miss Clarissa was twenty-eight, and a schoolmistress; and had tasks to set instead of to learn, and no lovers to dream of, past, present, or future. So she soon sat upright, brushed off the acacia blossoms, and went into the house to get ready for tea.

Meanwhile, Flossy had taken her way to the long sunny school-room, where sat some twelve or fifteen girls reading *Wilhelm Tell* with the German governess – all, save one or two, evincing in tone, look, or manner a conviction that German and hot afternoons were incompatible elements. There was a little brightening as Miss Florence paused on her way to the dining-room, where her own class of younger ones were preparing their lessons. Mysie sat with her clear eyes fixed on her book, her soft round face pinker than usual, her little figure very still, her pencil in her hand. Was she taking notes of the lesson?

“Have you written out your translation, Mysie?” said Flossy, mischievously.

“No, Miss Florence,” said Mysie, in formal school-girl fashion; but she could hardly restrain her little quivering smile.

“These young ladies are idle, Miss Florence,” said their teacher.

“That is very wrong of them,” returned Flossy. “There is only one excuse for being idle – ” then, as Mysie looked up with a start, she added, “the hot weather.”

Neither romance nor hot weather interfered with Miss Florence’s energy over her German lesson, and the sleepy little schoolgirls had small chance with their brisk young teacher. A bell rang, Flossy fired a concluding question at the sleepest and stupidest, extracted an entirely wrong answer, and, but slightly disconcerted – for was not she used to it? – ran off to her room, arranged her dress, stuck a great red rose in her hair, and came down to tea.

Miss Florence was much admired by her pupils, and had a sort of half-sympathetic, half-genial pleasure in their admiration. Besides, her rose was as a flag to celebrate the festal occurrence of the afternoon. “I always like to wear pretty things when I feel jolly,” she would say; “and if ever you see me going about in a drab dress and a brown veil you may be quite sure I’ve had a disappointment!”

“Then,” said Clarissa, “if you buy that very pink silk I shall think you have had an offer.”

“Oh, no; think I don’t want one.”

Flossy crushed her rose under a big straw hat, when she was set free after tea, and took her way merrily along the fields to Redhurst. The way was very pretty, and the evening lights very charming; but Flossy scurried along, much too full of human nature to care for any other. She had been half playfellow and half teacher to Mysie for years, and had grown up in familiar intercourse with all the household, and was on terms with Arthur of mutual lecturing and teasing.

Redhurst was a square, red house, with white facings; and stood in the midst of pretty, park-like meadows, through which ran the shallow, sedge-grown river, which, nearer Oxley, merged in the sleepy canal. The garden came down to the river’s brim, and great white fierce swans and little furry black ducks swam up and down under the willows. The field-path led to an old white stone bridge, looking like a small model of one of those over the Thames, and across it Flossy came into the garden which led up to a terrace and steps in front of the house. So far the garden was rather stiff and old-fashioned, but croquet hoops profaned the soft turf, garden chairs and a tea-table enlivened the terrace; a girl of fifteen, with a mane of dark rusty hair, stood on the step, and a lady was sitting in the most comfortable of the chairs above her.

Mrs Spencer Crichton was as like her son Hugh as a stout, cheerful-looking lady of eight-and-forty can be to a grave young man of eight-and-twenty. She was pale and handsome and fair, and hardly looked her age, so smooth was her brow, so contented her mouth, so ready the smiles that came with equal kindness for all the young ones who had grown up under her easy sway. It was said that the young people at Redhurst were sadly spoiled – spoiled, that is to say, not by being the objects of devoted affection or too partial admiration, but by being allowed their own way to an extent incredible to more idealistic mothers. Whether from the absence of any very marked individual affections, or from something of the same cast of mind that produced in her eldest son such even-handed justice, she not only treated all her young kinsfolk with the same kindness, but, so far as they knew, felt for them much the same amount of interest. She did not think it incredible that Arthur should surpass James; or that, in the few contentions that crossed their sunshiny life, Hugh should sometimes be mistaken. All were sure of a kind judgment, and often of a sense of the rights of their story: none of them made a demand for an exclusive or individual tenderness; for their bringing-up had made them independent. Mrs Crichton did not trouble herself much as to whether their idiosyncrasies were suitable or desirable or likely to lead to any one result. It was all right that Hugh should keep to his business; she did not wish that James was as fond of books as Arthur, since he preferred Art and a great deal of conversation. George preferred rats and rabbits to either. “Well, poor George did not like his lessons.” Mysie liked needlework, and flowers, and Sunday schools – “so good of little Mysie.” Frederica thought happiness consisted in a day’s hunting. “She was growing up quite a different sort

of girl.” But Mrs Crichton was not at all surprised when George got flogged at school for not knowing the lessons, observing “that George was so stupid he was always in scrapes;” and when Frederica pouted, sobbed, and scowled when some special friend called her a Tom-boy she only heard: “But you are a Tom-boy, my dear,” as consolation. And when in young enthusiasm, anyone brought his or her special hobby into notice, he or she well knew that, though that hobby might prance unrebuked through the family circle, it was regarded as nothing but “so-and-so’s hobby,” whether it concerned the destinies of the human race or the best way of laying-out flower-beds. There are two sides to everything. It is very pleasant never to be scolded; but when Hugh had laid down some law in a way that bore heavily on his juniors, it was not always quite pleasant to hear his mother placidly say: “My dear, don’t resist, it’s Hugh’s way to be particular” – as if Hugh’s way, and not the thing itself, were all that mattered. Still, light hearts and good tempers had resulted from the kindly, peaceable rule, and the young Spencers lived their own lives and took each other for granted. Hugh might hope that his little Italian song-bird might be accepted as “Hugh’s way,” and Arthur and Mysie need fear no opposition, either tyrannical or conscientious, little as the necessity of each to the other’s life might be realised.

“Ah, Flossy,” said Mrs Crichton, “I thought we should see you to-night. I suppose Miss Venning told you of what she saw?”

“Yes,” returned Flossy, rather shyly; “so I came to see Mysie.”

“Mysie is somewhere. I have told them they must wait in secrecy and silence till Hugh comes home, or he will never forgive us.”

“Then you don’t object, Mrs Crichton?” said Flossy, eagerly.

“No. Mysie might do better, perhaps, but there is no use in making her miserable if she does not think so herself. Surely people *must* choose for themselves in these matters,” said Mrs Crichton, uttering this sentiment – so often practically ignored – as if it were such a truism that Flossy felt as if life was really so easy as to be quite flat.

“I am sure Arthur will get on,” she said.

“Oh, yes; and I don’t know a nicer fellow anywhere. Dear children, how surprised Hugh will be! I wish he would follow their example. But, dear me! I cannot expect him to see with my eyes. There is Arthur!”

Arthur came up and exchanged a hearty squeeze of the hand and delighted smile with Flossy.

“Mysie is in the garden,” he said; “do come and find her.”

“Oh, Arthur, I am so glad,” cried Flossy, impulsively, as she walked away with him. “I am so glad that Mrs Crichton – ”

“Aunt Lily? I prepared several irresistible arguments, and felt as if – well, as if I might have kept them for Hugh. How kind she is! But, now, Flossy, you are unprejudiced; don’t you think I shall make Mysie as happy as that swell in the air who is supposed to loom in the future?”

“Now, how angry you would be if I did not say yes! How can you expect me to sacrifice your friendship to a disinterested regard for truth?”

“I want somebody to convince! I feel as if I had been reading hard and the examiners had asked me to decline ‘Dominus.’”

“Oh, Arthur, anyone may see where you have been lately. How ungrateful you are!”

“No, I am not, Flossy,” said Arthur; “but I really feel as if I ought to object to myself as a duty to the family.”

“Do wait for your cousin,” said Flossy; “he will do that duty for you, no doubt. No, I am *very* glad.”

“Thank you – thank you,” said Arthur, pleased at the hearty sympathy in her voice. “Ah, there’s Mysie, picking roses.”

“Now, Arthur, do stay away for five minutes. How can we talk with you there to listen?”

“Well – make haste.”

Flossy ran away from him and seized Mysie in a warm, and – considering their respective sizes – somewhat overwhelming embrace.

“My little darling, it’s delightful. I always meant you to have a fairy prince, and to think it should be Arthur!”

“I am very glad he is not a fairy prince,” said Mysie, smiling.

“What is he, then?” cried Flossy.

“Why, Flossy,” said Mysie, “I think he’s only what old Miss Rogers used to call ‘Mr Right.’”

Part 2, Chapter XII

Pros and Cons

“Go back, my lord, across the moor!”

Signor Mattei was coming out from a rehearsal. He often told Violante that her work was nothing to his; and, indeed, his violin was always in its place in the orchestra. His work was his life, he would have been miserable without it; and yet, with a not uncommon inconsistency, he liked to pity himself for having got it to do. He was a man with an ideal, with a dream that was very difficult of fulfilment; and, perhaps, did not need sympathy less than the girl who suffered so much and disappointed him so sorely. Whatever may have been Signor Mattei's youthful hopes, in the days when he had thrown away the chance of a more eligible profession to follow the art he so loved, he had long been forced to limit them to making a fair livelihood by it. Aspirations are not always capabilities; and, spite of self-devotion and enthusiasm and much technical skill, he was not destined to rise to the top of the tree. He was not, indeed, great enough to do as he liked; and his temper and touchiness often brought good engagements to a premature end; and, though he had never hitherto failed in obtaining fresh ones, there was an element of uncertainty in his fortunes. However different things might be with him from what he had once desired, Signor Mattei had not been a discontented man. Small successes which he would once have despised were much pleasanter than small failures; and he had grown to limit his desires to such as were possible of fulfilment; when ambition, desire of gain, and burning enthusiasm were all reawakened by the discovery of Violante's wonderful voice. Here was his chance again. His daughter's name should be heard in every capital in Europe: the fortunes of the whole family should be assured. What sacrifices were too great, what toil too arduous by which the possessor of this glorious gift could turn it to account! If such a voice had belonged to Violante's father how he would have gloried and rejoiced, how he would have worked early and late, how intoxicating would have been the success that crowned his efforts! People bear much harder on each other by the inevitable workings of their alien natures than by wilful selfishness or cruelty. Violante and her father made each other miserable; yet he was anxious to give her what would have been to himself the greatest good, and she wore herself out in trying to obey and to please him. It is not easy for a bystander to judge between distaste and incapacity; it is difficult to say which is the most provoking. No amount of idleness on Violante's part would have so provoked her father as did her unenthusiastic performance of the amount of study required of her, her tears and terror when she achieved a success. Such folly *must* be curable by a sufficient amount of scolding and argument. A person *must* enjoy what is enjoyable when the advantage is pointed out to them with sufficient strength. And Violante had been just successful enough to make her father believe that it entirely depended on herself to succeed better still. Violante thought this belief cruel; and Rosa, standing between both, while she prevented either from feeling the very sharpest edge of the other's opinion, if she pitied her little sister the most, to a certain extent sympathised with Signor Mattei.

So much for sentiment. Violante was unworthy of her gift, but she possessed it, and it brought substantial gains, much needed; for in a life with so many ups and downs Signor Mattei had not held himself free from debt. Besides, no engagement had ever suited him so well as his present one, and was not that confirmed to him by Signor Vasari's interest in his young *prima donna*? If Violante married the manager *her* success was certain, and the fortunes of the whole family were assured; but if Vasari were offended there was an end of everything.

Her gains for her present engagement would belong to her father; and he felt, though he would not own, that there was enough uncertainty about her future to make the solid good of her marriage most desirable. And Signor Vasari had just made the flattering suggestion that Mdlle. Mattei's timidity and reluctance might be in part owing to a maidenly coyness and consciousness towards himself.

Once acknowledged as his *promessa sposa* she would gain courage and self-confidence. Signor Mattei joyously pledged himself to do everything in his power to favour the manager's views. Art, fame, and fortune all smiled upon him; and no experience could make Signor Mattei believe that Violante was so unlike other girls as not to view such a proposal with rapture. Full of this pleasing prospect he was walking hastily home from the theatre to his own dwelling, when he was accosted by Hugh Crichton, who begged the favour of a few words with him.

Hugh was courteous and deferential, but he had no expectation that his proposal would not be received with pleasure; and was desirous, since he must speak to Signor Mattei, to have so far committed himself before he again encountered his brother, whose co-operation when he reached home he felt that he could not altogether afford to despise. Spite, however, of his not unnatural confidence in the result, he felt very hot and shy; blundered through a few unintelligible sentences; tried Italian, with a view of being polite; forgot the Italian for "daughter," "proposal," for every thing; and finally, with startling abruptness, hoped in plain English that Signor Mattei would consent to his engagement to his daughter. Signor Mattei stopped short in the street, struck an attitude of astonishment, and loudly exclaimed:

"Signor Hugo! Do my ears deceive me?"

"No, sir, assuredly not," said Hugh, much discomposed at the sudden standstill. "I have long admired la signorina Violante, and to-day I have ventured to tell her so."

"Tell her so! tell her so!" ejaculated Signor Mattei. "Tell her so, in her father's absence! Signor, is this the conduct I could expect?"

"If I have acted in ignorance of Italian customs," said Hugh, "your long residence in England must have informed you that in coming to you at once I have done all that is required by our own. If you will walk on, sir," for Signor Mattei was still figuring about on the pavement in a way that worried all the sense out of Hugh's head, "I will explain myself further."

Signor Mattei, who had really been taken utterly by surprise by Hugh's application, and was not undesirous to gain a little time for consideration, bowed profoundly and walked on by Hugh's side; while the latter, who, with all his desire to make a good impression, felt irritated by his companion's way, began stiffly:

"I should tell you, Signor Mattei, that I am in all respects my own master, and quite independent of everyone. I am not afraid that my mother will not give Mdlle. Mattei a welcome; and of my own feelings, I assure you, sir, they are most – most strong. I love her, and I hope I shall make her happy – happier than she can be in a profession to which she is so unsuited."

Hugh was a good speaker, and generally said what he had to say on all public and private occasions with perfect fluency and distinctness; but his eloquence foiled him now, and he coloured up and looked entreatingly at Signor Mattei as he made this false step.

"Unsuited to her profession, signor! unsuited to her profession! Do you mean to insult my daughter?"

"I mean that the profession is unsuited to her," said Hugh, not mending matters.

"Signor, she has been dedicated to my beloved art from her earliest years. Music is her vocation, as in a lesser – I am proud to say in a lesser – degree it is mine."

Hugh was not naturally conciliatory; and to listen patiently to what he considered such nonsense, uttered with a flash of the eyes that proved its sincerity, jarred upon him so much that there was as much annoyance as entreaty in his voice as he answered:

"I venture to set myself up as a rival to your art, and I ask you for – Violante. Indeed, I don't think she will regret the fame she gives up."

Hugh was so sure that it was better for Violante to marry him, an English gentleman, than to sing at all the operas in Europe, he felt that he was making so good an offer, and yet he wanted her so much, that the humility born of passionate desire conquered his sense of his own merits, and he finished pleadingly:

“If I can help it she never shall.”

“Signor, my daughter is already promised, and the arrangements for her marriage will shortly be begun.”

“That is impossible,” exclaimed Hugh; “she has given her promise to me.”

“Her promise?” cried Signor Mattei; “the promise of a little, foolish, most foolish, girl! No, sir, she knows what my views are, and she is Signor Vasari’s promised wife.”

“She knows!” She – the loving, trustful child whom he had seen kiss his white flowers, who had given herself to him without one word of misgiving. Impossible, indeed.

“She shall not be sacrificed,” cried Hugh, in his turn stopping short. “She has told me that she loves me. Whatever you may have intended her to do is without her will or knowledge.”

Now, in thus asserting Violante’s individuality Hugh made a great mistake. The Italian father did not think that it made much difference if Violante had told Hugh that she loved him twenty times. It was his part to arrange a marriage for her; and her little wishes, her foolish tongue, went for nothing.

“I do not believe Mademoiselle Mattei is aware of your wishes,” said Hugh again, hotly.

Now this was an assertion which Signor Mattei could fairly face. Violante *was* well aware of her father’s wishes. That she was involved in any positive promise she could not know, insomuch as the promise had been made for her at the very time when she had been making a far different one for herself. Nor had she fully known her danger, since Rosa, for the sake of peace and composure, had carefully kept the subject out of sight.

“Nevertheless, she is aware of them,” said Signor Mattei; and while Hugh paused, silenced for the moment, he went on, not without dignity:

“Signor, I thank you. Your proposal honours my little girl, and honours you, since you mean to sacrifice much to win her. But I know your country and your manners, and I will not give up my daughter. Your noble ladies will not receive her well.”

“There is nothing of the sort – we have no rank at all,” interposed Hugh, “and I will answer for my mother.”

“My daughter, sir, has a great future before her; she shall not sacrifice it. She shall not marry out of her class and away from her country and give up what Fortune has laid at her feet. Your fancy, Signor, will pass as it came, and hers – pshaw – she has nothing strong in her but her voice, her voice of an angel.”

Signor Mattei was a single-minded man, though he had not dealt singly with Hugh. The good match for his daughter shrank to nothing compared to the career from which it would shut her out. That underneath lurked some consciousness of the advantage to himself is true; but never would he have dreamed of claiming any like advantages from this other suitor.

Hugh walked on by his side pale and bewildered, a horrible doubt of Violante weakening his arguments and chilling his entreaties. At last he said, desperately, “Signor Mattei, after what has passed I cannot take my answer from you. She told me nothing of a former promise. She must tell me that she has made none, and then I swear to you her life shall have none of the trials you dread. I will either go home and bring you my mother’s words of welcome – my mother herself,” he continued, rashly, “or I will seek no consent at all – none is needed. I would marry her to-morrow if you care for such a test.”

“You in England, Signor, may marry spite of a parent’s curse.”

“Curse! nonsense,” said Hugh, impatiently.

“But here a father’s word is enough. She *can* give you no answer but mine.”

“I will have an answer from her,” said Hugh; “and if she can tell me she is not promised to that fellow I will never give her up till – till I have persuaded you to take a different view of this.”

“But she is promised, sir, and I refuse to entertain your proposals for her.”

“She never told me so!”

“She is timid,” said Signor Mattei, with a shrug, “timid, and, like all girls, a fool. Enough; I can say no more, Signor. I have the honour to wish you good evening.” And, with a rapidity for which Hugh was unprepared, Signor Mattei darted down a side street, and left him to himself.

Baffled as he was, Hugh did not mean to rest satisfied with his answer. He could not believe that the opposition would hold out after he had proved himself to be thoroughly in earnest. If only the horrible doubt of Violante’s own fair dealing could be removed! – and removed it should be the first time he had the chance of a word with her. For Hugh was not a suspicious person, and it would have been hard indeed to doubt the shy yet passionate tenderness of Violante’s voice and face. He did not understand the entanglement, but he was not going to convict her without a trial. Still, this later interview had effectually brought him down to earth; and he went back to the Consulate with the arguments which were to bring James over to his side by no means in such order as he had hoped. He found the ladies drinking coffee and James discoursing on the delights of his afternoon ramble.

“I assure you, Miss Tollemache, she had eyes like a gazelle, and her smile – there was intelligence and intellect in it; you could see by the way that she smiled that she had a mind, you know.”

“But flower-girls always do smile, Mr Crichton.”

“Ah, but how different this was from the made-up smiles you see in England – such a sense of art, too, in her white handkerchief – no hats and feathers. She only said, ‘Grazie, signor!’ but there was a sort of recognition, you know, of one’s interest in her.”

“I shall go and look at her,” said Emily.

“Now, if one lived in a simpler state of society,” pursued Jem, “what curious intercourse one might have with such a being – how much she might add to one’s knowledge of existence! How one can imagine the great men of old – Raphael in search of the Beautiful – dancing in the evening! Oh, Hugh, I didn’t see you! Where have you been?”

“Where have *you* been would be more to the point,” retorted Hugh. “In one of Bulwer’s novels?”

“He has fallen in love with a flower-girl,” said Emily.

“Emily, my dear,” said her mother, “Mr Crichton was only describing an artistic effect. It is very desirable to cultivate a love of nature.”

“Very,” said Jem. His enthusiasm had been perfectly genuine, though he had not been without a desire to interest his audience; and he could not resist a side glance at Hugh, who looked hot and cross.

“Have you seen any flower-girls, Mr Crichton?” said Emily, wickedly.

“No, Miss Tollemache, nothing so interesting;” and then a sudden sense of the extreme falsity of his words came over him; and he blushed in a violent, foolish way, which completed his annoyance with things in general.

James saw the blush and knew that something had happened. He did not, however, quite like to question his brother; and when the ladies left them they went out on the balcony and for some time smoked in silence.

At last Hugh knocked the ashes out of his pipe, and said, in a formal, uncomfortable tone:

“James, I have made a proposal to Mdlle. Mattei.”

“The deuce you have!” ejaculated Jem.

“And what did she say?”

“She accepted it. But, Jem, you may entirely disabuse your mind of the idea that there has been any attempt to – to catch me; for her father has just given me to understand that he will not consent to it.”

“What! he prefers the manager!”

“So he says.”

“And she doesn’t?”

“No,” very shortly. “But I cannot suppose that if he was fully aware of the genuineness of my intentions and knew that my mother would receive her – In short, Jem, another person’s words – ”

“Another person? Do you mean me? Answer for mamma? I declare, Hugh, that’s a little too much. You’re going to raise such a row at home as was never heard of, and you want me to help you!”

Hugh said nothing, and James’s momentary perturbation subsided.

“This is good!” he said. “*You* wanting help! Did you ever live in Oxley, Hugh, or is it all a mistake? ‘Jones at the opera abroad’ *is* so *very* unlike ‘Jones at the opera at home.’”

“I am in earnest, Jem,” said Hugh, as James did all the laughing at his own joke.

“It’s a great mistake being in earnest,” said Jem. “Here have you spoilt all your fun by it.”

“I don’t understand you.”

“Why,” said Jem, mischievously. “Of course, Violante was intended to amuse you during your holiday. A little sentiment – study of life.”

“I have asked Mdlle. Mattei to be my wife,” interrupted Hugh, in a tone of high offence.

“I beg your pardon,” said Jem, after a moment’s pause. “I’ll be serious. So Signor Mattei is the difficulty? H’m! How far do you suppose he is involved with this dangerous rival?”

“That is what I cannot make out. He says that she, Violante, is engaged to him but she never mentioned his name.”

“Told you nothing about him?”

“No. So the question is,” said Hugh, in a voice that he tried hard to keep at an even level, “the question is, who is deceiving me?”

“Both and neither,” returned Jem. “What?”

“I dare say she likes you best, and thinks she will try to get out of her previous entanglement.”

“She should have spoken the truth,” said Hugh, frowning.

“Come, Hugh, that’s expecting a great deal of a poor little frightened thing like that, and an Italian, too. What would you have?”

“You did not see her?” said Hugh.

James looked at him, and saw that his hand shook as he put his pipe back into its case while he kept his face turned away.

“What shall you do?” he said.

“Find out,” returned Hugh, “and act accordingly.”

He walked away as he spoke. James did not suppose it likely that Violante would come out of the ordeal with such flying colours as to satisfy his brother; and, though he was very little inclined to judge the poor child harshly, he could not help hoping that here was a way of escape for Hugh from a most unlucky prepossession, though, as he was forced to acknowledge, at the cost of considerable pain.

Part 2, Chapter XIII

Contrary Winds

“Oh, well for him whose will is strong!”

“Rosa! you were mistaken! He loves me – he says so. Oh, I am so happy – he is so good!” cried Violante, as she ran to meet her sister and threw herself into her arms. Timid as the southern maiden might be she had none of the proud, reticent “shamefastness” that would have led an English girl to conceal her joy even from herself. It was all right and natural; and as Rosa, aghast, dropped into a chair she knelt beside her, her sweet, pathetic eyes and lips transfigured as a flower by the sun.

“What did he say to you?” exclaimed Rosa.

“He loves me – he is coming back again. He does not mind about my singing – Ah, I cannot tell you,” and the bright face drooped with sudden bashfulness.

“Oh!” cried Rosa, passionately, as she pulled off her hat and fanned herself with it; “what a foolish world this is! What has he said? what has he done?” she repeated, almost fiercely.

“He asked me to marry him,” said Violante, with a sort of dignity.

“Oh, dear! he is a very foolish young man. What is to come of it? – what *can* come of it? Nothing but trouble.”

Violante gazed at her, mute and frightened; then her face brightened with an incredulous smile.

“Oh, if you had never seen him!”

“Rosa!” cried Violante, springing to her feet, “rather than that, I would be miserable for ever – rather than *that*, I would die.”

“Because you are as silly as the rest! Oh, you unlucky child! don’t you see that it is impossible? Either he will go back to his own people and they will talk him out of it, or he will marry you in spite of them. But no, he shall never do that!”

“But he said it would be right,” said Violante; then, as Rosa laughed bitterly, she went on, pleadingly: “Oh, Rosa mia, it is you who are silly. *He* will make it right. Indeed, I am happy; but I cannot bear to see you cry. I will act, I shall not care now, and you must keep father from being vexed.” There was much in Violante’s speech of the unconscious selfishness of one to whom the part of comforter was a strange reversion of ordinary life; but her caresses were very sweet to Rosa, who, recovering herself with an effort, said:

“Well, Violante, you can’t expect me to believe in him as you do! I never thought it would come to this!”

“But, Rosa, you will not try to stop it?” Rosa hesitated. Even supposing Hugh entirely faithful, what doubtful happiness lay before her sister; and, if not, what a blank of disappointment, what hopeless injury, what misery how unendurable to the girl who shrank and trembled at a harsh word!

Rosa sat upright and gazed straight before her, while Violante watched, unable to understand her face.

“No!” at length she exclaimed, “you must take your chance with the rest of us. How can I or anyone help it? But – but – I’ll never stop anyone’s love – oh, my little darling, my little darling!” and Rosa broke down into tears, hiding her face in the girl’s soft hair.

“Rosa, you think I could not bear any trouble; but I could – for him.”

There was a new fervour in her voice, and Rosa yielded to it. “Oh, I hope you will be happy,” she said.

“Why, you see I am happy!” said Violante, with a childish laugh. “Father is late; let us have some coffee – you are so hot and tired, I will get it. There is no terrible opera to-night. Maddalena! Maddalena!”

“Ah! signorina, I know who nearly broke the china bowl.”

“Why, *I* did, Maddalena! *I* threw it down,” said Violante, as she tripped about after the old woman, whose gold hair-pins were quivering with sly triumph. “But it is quite safe – not a crack in it.”

The coffee was finished; the bright, hot sun went down; and the sisters sat long by the open window in the warm, pleasant twilight. Violante fell into dreamy silence; Rosa also. But there was a great gulf between their meditations, though they were thinking of the same subject and, partly, of the same person.

“There’s father!” cried Violante, as a step sounded. “Oh, I will run away, and you shall tell him.”

“No, no, you little coward; he will be sure to ask for you – stay a minute.”

Violante leant back against the window-sill, her eyes drooping, her breast heaving, and yet her face flushing and dimpling, – the new confidence almost conquering the old fear. Rosa looked far the more frightened of the two. Signor Mattei’s step came up the great staircase quick as a boy’s; he seemed almost to skate across the polished floor, so instantaneously did he bear down on his daughters. In a moment his roll of music was cast aside in one direction, his great white umbrella in another; and, with accents rising every moment into higher indignation, he exclaimed: “Violante, what folly is this that I hear? Is this what all your idleness and obstinacy mean? I’ll not hear a word of it. A lover, indeed! Never let me hear of it again!”

Violante stood breathless, but Rosa interposed:

“Has Mr Crichton been talking to you, father?”

“Ay, and a fine story he brought me. Talking of promises, indeed! How dare she dream of making promises? And you – what have you been doing? Taking care of your sister? No! No! Encouraging her in disobedience and deceit!”

Now Signor Mattei was wont, on all occasions of domestic disturbance, to relieve his feelings by the most voluble scoldings that the Italian temperament could suggest and the Italian tongue express. Had Violante broken the china bowl she would probably have heard nearly as many reproaches; but no amount of experience ever accustomed her to these outbreaks; and, though practically she had never been ill-treated, she feared her father far more than: he guessed; while Rosa usually answered him back more promptly than respectfully, and, loving him better than Violante did, often ended by having her own way. Now she said:

“Why are you angry with Violante, father? She has done nothing wrong. Is it her fault if Mr Crichton loves her and has asked her to marry him?”

“Asked her – asked *her*! How dared he ask *her*? Now, most undutiful, most ungrateful child, how long has this conspiracy lasted?”

“He came to-day,” stammered Violante.

“To-day? You tell me this folly has begun to-day! You, who have been secretly sighing for this stranger, sighing for him instead of singing! Ah – shame on you! – tell me – tell me —*tell me!*” in a rapid *crescendo*, as he seized her wrist and pulled her towards him.

Violante burst into tears.

“Father! how can you speak to her so?” cried Rosa. “Let her go – and I will tell you. Mr Crichton never said a word to her till to-day. Why will you not consent to their encasement?”

“Because I know my duty as a father better. But it is all over. Do you hear, Violante? I have ended it for ever!”

“Oh, father,” cried Violante, holding out her hands imploringly, “I will not neglect my singing, I will practise all day long; but you would break my heart – oh, dear father, I love him;” and the poor child, with unwonted courage, went up to her father and put her arms round his neck with a look and gesture that, could she have called them up at will, would have settled her stage difficulties for ever.

“No, Violante!” Signor Mattei said. “You know what my wish has been. You were not free to promise yourself; and to-day I have made my arrangements with Signor Vasari and have promised you to him.”

“Father, father, I would kill myself first!” cried Violante, dropping on her knees and hiding her face. “Oh, Rosa – Rosa – help me!”

“Hugh, hush, my child. Stand up and control yourself,” said Rosa, with English dislike to a scene – a kind of self-consciousness shared by neither father nor sister. “Go away – go into our room. I will talk to father first.”

Violante rushed away with her hands over her face, and then the other two prepared for war.

Signor Mattei divested himself of his neck-tie, rubbed his hands through his hair, marched up and down the room, and said:

“Now, Rosa, be reasonable, be dutiful, and hear what I have to say.”

Rosa sat down by the table, with a red spot on each cheek, and took up her knitting.

“Yes, father, that is just what I wish. I want to know what has happened.”

“Am I a cruel father? Do I beat or starve you, or do I work all day for my ungrateful children?”

“I think you were cruel to Violante, father, when you called her deceitful.”

“Violante is a little fool. Now, once for all, Rosa, I will have no disputes. This very day I have promised her to Vasari.”

“Father!” cried Rosa, in high indignation. “It is one thing to forbid her engagement to Mr Crichton, and quite another to insist on her marrying Vasari. *I would not stand it.*”

“But you, *figlia mia*, have the sense to decide for yourself,” said Signor Mattei, with a little flattery inexpressibly provoking to the downright Rosa. “Your sister is a child, and cannot judge. Consider. This young Englishman goes home. The proud ladies of his house would see him mouldering in his grave before they blessed his betrothal.”

“I don’t believe they would be so ridiculous! And he is quite independent. But I agree with you, father, that it would be a very unfortunate thing if he married her without his friends’ consent, and what we could not agree to. But he speaks confidently of being able to gain it.”

“He speaks!” echoed Signor Mattei, with scorn. “He speaks! He goes home – he sees his folly. Flattered by the flowers of his own aristocracy will he remember Violante?”

“I don’t believe he has anything to do with the aristocracy! Of course, father, I see *all* the risks – they are fearful ones; but the other way is such certain misery,” said Rosa, faltering. “How will she bear it!”

“Rosa, I am surprised at you. Can you not see the benefits of this marriage?”

“Yes, I know all that,” said Rosa, sturdily. “I know, *if* she could make up her mind to it, it would be a very good thing for her and for all of us. But, father, married or single, she will never make an actress, it will kill her; and she *hates* Vasari.”

Then Signor Mattei’s patience fairly gave way.

“Hates him! Don’t tell me of anything so absurd. How many girls, do you think, have hated their suitors and been happy enough! *That* is no reason.”

In spite of Rosa’s English breeding she had seen instances enough of the truth of this remark not to have an instant contradiction ready. It *might* turn out well; which was all that could be said in favour of Hugh Crichton; and yet Rosa felt that, had she been Violante, she would have willingly risked her all in favour of that one glorious possibility. “But it doesn’t always pay,” she thought, and while she hesitated, thinking how such a risk had once been run and run in vain, her father spoke again.

“Now, Rosa, listen. Mild as a lamb in daily life, in emergencies I am a lion; and my will is law, you cannot change it. Violante shall be Vasari’s wife. I have promised, I will perform.” Here Signor Mattei struck his hand on the table in a highly effective manner. “She will be raised above all the uncertainties of our profession, need not work beyond her strength, and we shall share in her success. To this she must agree, and if you will not promise to see that she does so I shall send her to Madame Cellini’s.”

Madame Cellini was a fine old opera-singer who had married and settled in Civita Bella. She had shown much kindness to the motherless girls and had not been an injudicious friend to them; but

her contempt for Violante's fears and her strenuous efforts to rouse her to a sense of her privileges had rendered her instructions and herself an object of dread; and Rosa answered, after a pause:

"I will promise to remain neutral. If Violante can be happy without Hugh Crichton I had far rather she did not marry him. But if she is sent away or too much coerced she will be utterly unable to act. Let her alone, and I don't suppose she will hold out very long."

"You will send no letters or messages?"

"No," said Rosa; "I promise that I will not. I shall leave her to herself."

To herself! To her weak will and her cowardly spirit! How long would they hold out?

Rosa went in search of her; and, as Violante sprang towards her exclaiming, —

"Oh, Rosa, you will help me!" she held her back.

"No, Violante, I cannot help and I will not hinder you. Father is determined, and you must do it, if do it you will, all yourself. If I move a finger, you will be sent away from me; but I will not try to persuade you either way."

Violante stood still, with despair in her face. How could she resist her father for an hour? She crept away to bed, at Rosa's suggestion; received her kisses with passive absence of offence; and, as she hid her face on her pillow, thought not of self-support but of the only help left to her. "*He* will come again to-morrow – they will listen to *him*."

Part 2, Chapter XIV

Left to Herself

“As we have met, we shall not meet again
For ever, child, for ever!”

Left to herself! In the early morning Violante's senses awoke from the confusion of disturbed and dreamy sleep; and, with burning eyes and throbbing temples, she sat upright and tried to think “for herself.”

“*He* will come and persuade father.” She repeated this watchword over and over again to herself; but the new confidence could hardly combat the old experience, and she could not realise that “father” would be over-persuaded – even by her lover. Childish as Violante was she had grown up too much in the constant discussion of ways and means not to be quite aware of the worldly advantages of Signor Vasari's offer. Those attaching to Hugh Crichton's were like a dim and distant dream, scarcely to be realised; nor had she, in the abstract, any sense that she would be unfairly treated by being deprived of her right of choice. Perhaps no creature ever entered on a conflict with less hope of success. She felt so sure that neither prayers nor tears would move her father that she never thought of trying their effect; while Signor Vasari seemed still more inexorable. If Hugh did not somehow set it right for her what remained but submission? “I had rather die; but I shall be so frightened, I shall say yes,” she thought. “They have always made me do what they wish. I could not help it! There's no one to help me – no one!” Her cowardice and weakness had been so often cast in the poor child's teeth that she had lost every scrap of confidence in her own powers. Her father said, “You *shall* give in,” Rosa said, “You cannot hold out;” and Violante knew nothing of a Strength not her own, of a Hand that would hold hers more firmly than sister's or lover's. Her love was the strongest thing about her: would it hold her up? She thought with a kind of ardour of resisting and refusing, of holding out and dying rather than yielding. But all the time she knew that she should yield; that she could not act and sing between the two fires of father and suitor; that the long days of conflict would not kill her all at once, but would each one be very miserable and hard to endure, and would each one wear out a little of her strength. For Violante had some experience of troublous times, and knew very well what it meant to be unhappy and in disgrace.

“He will come; he will help me.” She pushed aside the thought of what was to follow and resolved to please her father as much as possible, in the hope of protracting matters till Hugh should have time to interfere. So, to Rosa's surprise, she appeared in a clean muslin dress and a pink ribbon and sat down to sing her scales, instead of lying in bed and crying, as inclination would have prompted. Nay, she carried her father his cup of chocolate, and kept her hand from trembling as he took it from her. Signor Mattei viewed all this as betokening intended submission: Rosa was puzzled. For the first time she could not understand Violante.

The morning hours wore away; there was, fortunately, no rehearsal. Violante sat in the window with some knitting in her lap. She did not say one word to Rosa of her fears or her intentions. Steps came up the stairs and across the corridor, and Signor Mattei ushered in the great Vasari himself. Rosa started up and came forward to receive him. Violante shrank into her corner; she grew white and cold, but she set her mouth, and under her long eyelashes her eyes looked hard and strange.

“Signor,” said Signor Mattei, “here is my daughter. I give her to you with profound pleasure, and assure you that she is sensible of the honour of your choice.”

Violante spoke not a word. She rose up, obedient to her father's eye, and, perhaps, somewhat urged by the long habit of obedience to the manager. She dared not utter the refusal on her lips. What

would they do to her; what would they say? It was better to submit – to submit till *he* came. Signor Vasari took her by the hand, bowed profoundly, and offered to her a handsome diamond cross and chain of pearls.

“Permit me, Signorina; they were the jewels of a princess.”

He fastened it on her neck, and then, putting his arm around her, drew her towards him as he had done before now – on the stage. Violante started and lifted her eyes. There stood Hugh Crichton within the door, his eyes fixed on her, his face as pale as hers.

“Signor Mattei, you were right, and I thank you,” he said in English, and in a hard, fierce voice. Then he turned and was gone, before anyone spoke a word.

Suddenly Violante wrenched herself out of Vasari’s grasp. She pulled the cross off her neck, scattering the pearls far and wide as she threw it on the floor.

“I hate you!” she said, “I hate you! And if you marry me I will kill you.”

“Signorina!” ejaculated the astonished manager.

“Violante, Violante!” cried Rosa.

“I hate, you!” she repeated, and then she threw herself on her knees.

“Father, father, father, kill me, kill me first.”

“Ungrateful, wicked child, you are driving a dagger into my breast!” cried Signor Mattei.

“I am deceived, I am deceived, but I will have my rival’s blood!” exclaimed Vasari.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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