

Reed Myrtle

The Master's Violin



Myrtle Reed
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I

The Master Plays

The fire blazed newly from its embers and set strange shadows to dancing upon the polished floor. Now and then, there was a gleam from some dark mahogany surface and an answering flash from a bit of old silver in the cabinet. April, warm with May's promise, came in through the open window, laden with the wholesome fragrance of growing things, and yet, because an old lady loved it, there was a fire upon the hearth and no other light in the room.

She sat in her easy chair, sheltered from possible draughts, and watched it, seemingly unmindful of her three companions. Tints of amethyst and sapphire appeared in the haze from the backlog and were lost a moment later in the dominant flame. In that last hour of glorious life, the tree was giving back its memories – blue skies, grey days just tinged with gold, lost rainbows, and flashes of sun.

Friendly ghosts of times far past were conjured back in shadows – outspread wings, low-lying clouds, and long nights that ended in dawn. Swift flights of birds and wandering craft of thistledown were mirrored for an instant upon the shining floor, and then forgotten, because of falling leaves.

Lines of transfiguring light changed the snowy softness of Miss Field's hair to silver, and gave to her hands the delicacy of carved ivory. A tiny foot peeped out from beneath her gown, clad in its embroidered silk stocking and high-heeled slipper, so brave in its trappings of silver buckles that she might have been eighteen instead of seventy-five.

Upon her face the light lay longest; perhaps with an answering love. The years had been kind to her – had given her only enough bitterness to make her realise the sweetness, and from the threads that Life had placed in her hands at the beginning, had taught her how to weave the blessed fabric of Content.

"Aunt Peace," asked the girl, softly, "have you forgotten that we have company?"

Dispelled by the voice, the gracious phantoms of Memory vanished. There was a little silence, then the old lady smiled. "No, dearie," she said, "indeed I haven't. It is too rare a blessing for me to forget."

"Please don't call us 'company,'" put in the other woman, quickly, "because we're not."

"'Company,'" observed the young man on the opposite side of the hearth, "is extremely good under the circumstances. Somebody nearly breaks down your front door on a rainy afternoon, and when you rush out to save the place from ruin, you discover two dripping tramps on your steps. Stranded on an island in the road is a waggon containing their trunks, from which place of refuge they recently swam to your door. 'How do you do, Aunt Peace?' says mother; 'we've come to live with you from this time on to the finish.' On behalf of this committee, ladies, I thank you, from my heart, for calling us 'company.'"

Laughing, he rose and made an exaggerated courtesy. "Lynn! Lynn!" expostulated his mother. "Is it possible that after all my explanations you don't understand? Why, I wrote more than two weeks ago, asking her to let us know if she didn't want us. Silence always gives consent, and so we came."

"Yes, we came all right," continued the boy, cheerfully, "and, as everybody knows, we're here now, but isn't it just like a woman? Upon my word, I think they're queer – the whole tribe."

"Having thus spoken," remarked the girl, "you might tell us how a man would have managed it."

"Very easily. A man would have called in his stenographer – no, he wouldn't, either, because it was a personal letter. He would have made an excavation into his desk and found the proper stationery,

and would have put in a new pen. 'My dear Aunt Peace,' he would have said, 'you mustn't think I've forgotten you because I haven't written for such a long time. If I had written every time I had wanted to, or had thought of you, actually, you'd have been bored to death with me. I have a kid who thinks he is going to be a fiddler, and we have decided to come and live with you while he finds out, as we understand that Herr Franz Kaufmann, who is not unknown to fame, lives in your village. Will you please let us know? If you can't take us, or don't want to, here's a postage stamp, and no hard feelings on either side.'

"Just what I said," explained Mrs. Irving, "though my language wasn't quite like yours."

The old lady smiled again. "My dears," she began, "let us cease this unprofitable discussion. It is all because we are so far out of the beaten track that we seldom go to the post-office. I am sure the letter is there now."

"I will get it to-morrow," replied Lynn, "which is kind of me, considering that my remarks have just been alluded to as 'unprofitable.'"

"You can't expect everybody to think as much of what you say as you do," suggested Iris, with a trace of sarcasm.

"Score one for you, Miss Temple. I shall now retire into my shell." So saying, he turned to the fire, and his face became thoughtful again.

The three women looked at him from widely differing points of view. The girl, concealed in the shadow, took maidenly account of his tall, well-knit figure, his dark eyes, his sensitive mouth, and his firm, finely modelled chin. From a half-defined impulse of coquetry, she was glad of the mood which had led her to put on her most becoming gown early in the afternoon. The situation was interesting – there was a vague hint of a challenge of some kind.

Aunt Peace, so long accustomed to quiet ways, had at first felt the two an intrusion into her well-ordered home, though at the same time her hospitable instincts reproached her bitterly. He was of her blood and her line, yet in some way he seemed like an alien suddenly claiming kinship. A span of fifty years and more stretched between them, and across it, they contemplated each other, both wondering. For his part he regarded her as one might a cameo of fine workmanship or an old miniature. She was so passionless, so virginal, so far removed from all save the gentlest emotions, that he saw her only as one who stood apart.

The smile still lingered upon her lips and the firelight made shadows beneath her serene eyes. Had they asked her for her thoughts she could have phrased only one. Deep down in her heart she wondered whether anything on earth had ever been so joyously young as Lynn.

His mother, too, was watching him, as always when she thought herself unobserved. In spite of his stalwart manhood, to her he was still a child. Forgiving all things, dreaming all things, hoping all things with the boundless faith of maternity, she loved him, through the child that he was, for the man that he might be – loved him, through the man that he was, for the child that he had been.

The fire had died down, and Iris, leaning forward, laid a bit of pine upon the dull glow in the midst of the ashes. It caught quickly, and once again the magical light filled the room.

"Sing something, dear," said Aunt Peace, drowsily, and Iris made a little murmur of dissent.

"Do you sing, Miss Temple?" asked Irving, politely.

"No," she answered, "and what's more, I know I don't, but Aunt Peace likes to hear me."

"We'd like to hear you, too," said Mrs. Irving, so gently that no one could have refused.

Much embarrassed, she went to the piano, which stood in the next room, just beyond the arch, and struck a few chords. The instrument was old and worn, but still sweet, and, fearful at first, but gaining confidence as she went on, Iris sang an old-fashioned song.

Her voice was contralto; deep, vibrant, and full, but untrained. Still, there were evidences of study and of work along right lines. Before she had finished, Irving was beside her, resting his elbow upon the piano.

"Who taught you?" he asked, when the last note died away.

“Herr Kaufmann,” she replied, diffidently.

“I thought he was a violin teacher.”

“He is.”

“Then how can he teach singing?”

“He doesn’t.”

Irving went no farther, and Miss Temple, realising that she had been rude, hastened to atone. “I mean by that,” she explained, “that he doesn’t teach anyone but me. I had a few lessons a long time ago, from a lady who spent the Summer here, and he has been helping me ever since. That is all. He says it doesn’t matter whether people have voices or not – if they have hearts, he can make them sing.”

“You play, don’t you?”

“Yes – a little. I play accompaniments for him sometimes.”

“Then you’ll play with me, won’t you?”

“Perhaps.”

“When – to-morrow?”

“I’ll see,” laughed Iris. “You should be a lawyer instead of a violinist. You make me feel as if I were on the witness stand.”

“My father was a lawyer; I suppose I inherit it.” Iris had a question upon her lips, but checked it.

“He is dead,” the young man went on, as though in answer to it. “He died when I was about five years old, and I remember him scarcely at all.”

“I don’t remember either father or mother,” she said. “I had a very unhappy childhood, and things that happened then make me shudder even now. Just at the time it was hardest – when I couldn’t possibly have borne any more – Aunt Peace discovered me. She adopted me, and I’ve been happy ever since, except for all the misery I can’t forget.”

“She’s not really your aunt, then?”

“No. Legally, I am her daughter, but she wouldn’t want me to call her ‘mother,’ even if I could.”

The talk in the other room had become merely monosyllables, with bits of understanding silence between. Iris went back, and Mrs. Irving thanked her prettily for the song.

“Thank you for listening,” she returned.

“Come, Aunt Peace, you’re nodding.”

“So I was, dearie. Is it late?”

“It’s almost ten.”

In her stately fashion, Miss Field bade her guests good night. Iris lit a candle and followed her up the broad, winding stairway. It made a charming picture – the old lady in her trailing gown, the light throwing her white hair into bold relief, and the girl behind her, smiling back over the banister, and waving her hand in farewell.

In Lynn’s fond sight, his mother was very lovely as she sat there, with the firelight shining upon her face. He liked the way her dark hair grew about her low forehead, her fair, smooth skin, and the mysterious depths of her eyes. Ever since he could remember, she had worn a black gown, with soft folds of white at the throat and wrists.

“It’s time to go out for our walk now,” he said.

“Not to-night, son. I’m tired.”

“That doesn’t make any difference; you must have exercise.”

“I’ve had some, and besides, it’s wet.”

Lynn was already out of hearing, in search of her wraps. He put on her rubbers, paying no heed to her protests, and almost before she knew it, she was out in the April night, woman-like, finding a certain pleasure in his quiet mastery.

The storm was over and the hidden moon silvered the edges of the clouds. Here and there a timid planet looked out from behind its friendly curtain, but only the pole star kept its beacon steadily

burning. The air was sweet with the freshness of the rain, and belated drops, falling from the trees, made a faint patter upon the ground.

Down the long elm-bordered path they went, the boy eager to explore the unfamiliar place; the mother, harked back to her girlhood, thrilled with both pleasure and pain.

Happy are they who leave the scenes of early youth to the ministry of Time. Going back, one finds the river a little brook, the long stretch of woodland only a grove in the midst of a clearing, and the upland pastures, that once seemed mountains, are naught but stony, barren fields.

As they stood upon the bridge, looking down into the rushing waters, Margaret remembered the lost majesty of that narrow stream, and sighed. The child who had played so often upon its banks had grown to a woman, rich with Life's deepest experiences, but the brook was still the same. Through endless years it must be the same, drawing its waters from unseen sources, while generation after generation withered away, like the flowers that bloomed upon its grassy borders while the years were young.

Lynn broke rudely into her thoughts. "I wish I'd known you when you were a kid, mother," he said.

"Why?"

"Oh, I think I'd have liked to play with you. We could have made some jolly mud pies."

"We did, but you were three, and I was twenty-five. Much ashamed, too, I remember, when your father caught me doing it."

"Am I like him?"

He had asked the question many times and her answer was always the same. "Yes, very much like him. He was a good man, Lynn."

"Do I look like him?"

"Yes, all but your eyes."

"When you lived here, did you know Herr Kaufmann?"

"By sight, yes." He was looking straight at her, but she had turned her face away, forgetting the darkness. "We used to see him passing in the street," she went on, in a different tone. "He was a student and never seemed to know many people. He would not remember me."

"Then there's no use of my telling him who I am?"

"Not the least."

"Maybe he won't take me."

"Yes, he will," she answered, though her heart suddenly misgave her. "He must – there is no other way."

"Will you go with me?"

"No, indeed; you must go alone. I shall not appear at all."

"Why, mother?"

"Because." It was her woman's reason, which he had learned to accept as final. Beyond that there was no appeal.

East Lancaster lay on one side of the brook and West Lancaster on the other. The two settlements were quite distinct, though they had a common bond of interest in the post-office, which was harmoniously situated near the border line. East Lancaster was the home of the aristocracy. Here were old Colonial mansions in which, through their descendants, the builders still lived. The set traditions of a bygone century held full sway in the place, but, though circumscribed by conditions, the upper circle proudly considered itself complete.

West Lancaster was on a hill, and a steep one at that. Hardy German immigrants had settled there, much to the disgust of East Lancaster, holding itself sternly aloof year after year. It was not considered "good form" to allude to the dwellers upon the hill, save in low tones and with lifted brows, yet there were not wanting certain good Samaritans who sent warm clothing and discarded playthings, after nightfall and by stealth, to the little Teutons who lived so near them.

Hemmed in by the everlasting hills, estranged from its neighbour, and barely upon speaking terms with other towns, East Lancaster let the world go on by. Two trains a day rushed through the station, for the main line of the railroad, receiving no encouragement from East Lancaster, had laid its tracks elsewhere. It was still spoken of as “the time when, if you will remember, my dear, they endeavoured to ruin our property with dirt and noise.”

“Her clothes are like her name,” remarked Lynn.

“Whose clothes?” asked Mrs. Irving, taken out of her reverie.

“That girl’s. She had on a green dress, and some yellow velvet in her hair. Her eyes are purple.”

“Violet, you mean, dear. Did you notice that?”

“Of course – don’t I notice everything? Come, mother; I’ll race you to the top of the hill.”

Once again her objections were of no avail. Together they ran, laughing, up the winding road that led to the summit, stopping very soon, however, and going on at a more moderate pace.

The street was narrow, and the houses on either side were close together. Each had its tiny patch of ground in front, laid out in flower-beds bordered with whitewashed stones, in true German fashion. There were no street lamps, for West Lancaster also resented all modern innovations, but in the Spring night one could see dimly.

Lanterns flitted here and there, like fireflies starred against the dark. Margaret protested that she was tired, but Lynn put his arm around her and hurried her on. Never before had she set foot upon the soil of West Lancaster, but she had full knowledge of the way.

The brow of the hill was close at hand, and she caught her breath in sudden fear. Lynn, in the midst of a graphic recital of some boyish prank, took no note of her agitation. He did not even know that they had come to the end of their journey, until a man tiptoed toward them, his finger upon his lips.

“Hush!” he breathed. “The Master plays.”

At the very top of the hill, almost at the brink of the precipice, was a house so small that it seemed more like a box than a dwelling. In the street were a dozen people, both men and women, standing in stolid patience. The little house was dark, but a window was open, and from within, muted almost to a whisper, came the voice of a violin.

For an hour or more they stood there, listening. By insensible degrees the music grew in volume, filled with breadth and splendour, yet with a lyric undertone. Sounding chords, caught from distant silences, one by one were woven in. Songs that had an epic grasp; question, prayer, and heartbreak; all the pain and beauty of the world were part of it, and yet there was something more.

To Lynn’s trained ear, it was an improvisation by a master hand. He was lost in admiration of the superb technique, the delicate phrasing, and the wonderful quality of the tone. To the woman beside him, shaken from head to foot by unutterable emotion, it was Life itself, bare, exquisitely alive, tuned to the breaking point – a human thing, made of tears and laughter, of ecstasy, tenderness, and black despair, lying on the Master’s breast and answering to his touch.

The shallows touch the pebbles, and behold, there is a little song. The deeps are stirred to their foundations, and, long afterward, there is a single vast strophe, majestic and immortal, which takes its place by right in the symphony of pain. To Margaret, standing there with her senses swaying, all her possibilities of feeling were merged into one unspeakable hurt.

“Take me away;” she whispered, “I can bear no more!”

But Lynn did not hear. He was simply and solely the musician, his body tense, his head bent forward and a little to one side, nodding in emphasis or approval.

She slipped her arm through his and, trembling, waited as best she might for the end. It came at last and the little group near them took up its separate ways. Someone put down the window and closed the shutters. The Master knew quite well that some of his neighbours had been listening, but it pleased him to ignore the tribute. No one dared to speak to him about his playing.

“Mother! Mother!” said Lynn, tenderly, “I’ve been selfish, and I’ve kept you too long!”

“No,” she answered, but her lips were cold and her voice was not the same. They went downhill together, and she leaned heavily upon his supporting arm. He was humming, under his breath, bits of the improvisation, and did not speak again until they were at home.

The fire was out, but Iris had left two lighted candles on a table in the hall. “A fine violin,” he said; “by far the finest I have ever heard.”

“Yes,” she returned, “a Cremona – that is, I think it must be, from its tone.”

“Possibly. Good night, and pleasant dreams.”

They parted at the head of the stairs, and down on the landing the tall clock chimed twelve. Margaret lay for a long time with her eyes closed, but none the less awake. Toward dawn, the ghostly fingers of her dreams tapped questioningly at the Master’s door, but without disturbing his sleep.

II “Mine Cremona”

Lynn went up the hill with a long, swinging stride. The morning was in his heart and it seemed good to be alive. His blood fairly sang in his pulses, and his cheery whistle was as natural and unconscious as the call of the robin in the maple thicket beyond.

The German housewives left their work and came out to see him pass, for strangers in West Lancaster were so infrequent as to cause extended comment, and he left behind him a trail of sharp glances and nodding heads. The entire hill was instantly alive with gossip which buzzed back and forth like a hive of liberated bees. It was a sturdy dame near the summit who quelled it, for the time being.

“So,” she said to her next-door neighbour, “I was right. He will be going to the Master’s.”

The word went quickly down the line, and after various speculations regarding his possible errand, the neglected household tasks were taken up and the hill was quiet again, except for the rosy-cheeked children who played stolidly in their bits of dooryards.

Lynn easily recognised the house, though he had seen it but dimly the night before. It was two stories in height, but very small, and, in some occult way, reminded one of a bird-house. It was perched almost upon the ledge, and its western windows overlooked the valley, filled with tossing willow plumes, the winding river, half asleep in its mantle of grey and silver, and the range of blue hills beyond.

It was the only house upon the hill which boasted two front entrances. Through the shining windows of the lower story, on a level with the street, he saw violins in all stages of making, but otherwise, the room was empty. So he climbed the short flight of steps and rang the bell.

The wire was slack and rusty, but after two or three trials a mournful clang came from the depths of the interior. At last the door was opened, cautiously, by a woman whose flushed face and red, wrinkled fingers betrayed her recent occupation.

“I beg your pardon,” said Irving, making his best bow. “Is Herr Kaufmann at home?”

“Not yet,” she replied, “he will have gone for his walk. You will be coming in?”

She asked the question as though she feared an affirmative answer. “If I may, please,” he returned, carefully wiping his feet upon the mat. “Do you expect him soon?”

“Yes.” She ushered him into the front room and pointed to a chair. “You will please excuse me,” she said.

“Certainly! Do not let me detain you.”

Left to himself, he looked about the room with amused curiosity. The furnishings were a queer combination of primitive American ideas and modern German fancies, overlaid with a feminine love of superfluous ornament. The Teutonic fondness for colour ran riot in everything, and purples, reds, and yellows were closely intermingled. The exquisite neatness of the place was its redeeming feature.

Apparently, there were two other rooms on the same floor – a combined kitchen and dining-room was just back of the parlour, and a smaller room opened off of it. Lynn was meditating upon Herr Kaufmann’s household arrangements, when a wonderful object upon the table in the corner attracted his attention, and he went over to examine it.

Obviously, it had once been a section of clay drainage pipe, but in its sublimated estate it was far removed from common uses. It had been smeared with putty, and, while plastic, ornamented with hinges, nails, keys, clock wheels, curtain rings, and various other things not usually associated with drainage pipes. When dry, it had been given further distinction by two or three coats of gold paint.

A wire hair-pin, placed conspicuously near the top of it, was rendered so ridiculous by the gilding that Lynn laughed aloud. Then, influenced by the sound of the scrubbing-brush close at hand,

he endeavoured to cover it with a cough. He was too late, however, for, almost immediately, his hostess appeared in the doorway.

“Mine crazy jug,” she said, with gratified pride beaming from every feature.

“I was just looking at it,” responded Lynn. “It is marvellous. Did you make it yourself?”

“Yes, I make him mineself,” she said, and then retreated, blushing with innocent pleasure.

Not knowing what else to do, he went back to his chair and sat down again, carefully avoiding the purple tidy embroidered with pink roses. Outside, the street was deserted. He wondered what type of a man it was who could live in the same house with a “crazy jug” and play as Herr Kaufmann played, only last night. Then he reflected that the room had been dark, and smiled at his foolish fancy.

A square piano took up one whole side of the room, and there were two violins upon it. Unthinkingly, Lynn investigated. The first one was a good instrument of modern make, and the other – he caught his breath as he took it out of its case. The thin, fine shell was the beautiful body of a Cremona, enshrining a Cremona’s still more beautiful soul.

He touched it reverently, though his hands trembled and his face was aglow. He snapped a string with his finger and the violin answered with a deep, resonant tone, but before the sound had died away, there was an exclamation of horror in his ears and a firm grip upon his arm.

“Mine brudder’s Cremona!” cried the woman, her eyes flashing lightnings of anger. “You will at once put him down!”

“I beg a thousand pardons! I did not realise – I did not mean – I did not understand – ” He went on with confused explanations and apologies which availed him nothing. He stood before her, convicted and shamed, as one who had profaned the household god.

Wiping her hands upon her apron, she went to her work-box, took out her knitting, and sat down between Lynn and the piano. The chair was hard and uncompromising, with an upright back, but she disdained even that support and sat proudly erect.

There was no sound save the click of the needles, and she kept her eyes fixed upon her work. After an awkward silence, Lynn made one or two tentative efforts toward conversation, but each opening proved fruitless, and at length he seriously meditated flight.

The approach to the door was covered, but there were plenty of windows, and it would be an easy drop to the ground. He smiled as he saw himself, mentally, achieving escape in this manner and running all the way home.

“I wonder,” he mused, “where in the dickens ‘mine brudder’ is!”

The face of the woman before him was still flushed and the movement of the needles betrayed her excitement. He noted that she wore no wedding ring and surmised that she was a little older than his mother. Her features were hard, and her thin, straight hair was brushed tightly back and fastened in a little knot at the back of her head. It was not unlike a door knob, and he began to wonder what would happen if he should turn it.

His irrepressible spirits bubbled over and he coughed violently into his handkerchief, feeling himself closely scrutinised meanwhile. The situation was relieved by the sound of footsteps and the vigorous slam of the lower door.

Still keeping the piano, with its precious burden, within range of her vision, Fräulein Kaufmann moved toward the door. “Franz! Franz!” she called. “Come here!”

“One minute!” The voice was deep and musical and had a certain lyric quality. When he came up, there was a conversation in indignant German which was brief but sufficient.

“I can see,” said Lynn to himself, “that I am not to study with Herr Kaufmann.”

Just then he came in, gave Lynn a quick, suspicious glance, took up the Cremona, and strode out. He was gone so long that Lynn decided to retreat in good order. He picked up his hat and was half way out of his chair when he heard footsteps and waited.

“Now,” said the Master, “you would like to speak with me?”

He was of medium height, had keen, dark eyes, bushy brows, ruddy cheeks, and a mass of grey hair which he occasionally shook back like a mane. He had the typical hands of the violinist.

“Yes,” answered Lynn, “I want to study with you.”

“Study what?” Herr Kaufmann’s tone was somewhat brusque. “Manners?”

“The violin,” explained Irving, flushing.

“So? You make violins?”

“No – I want to play.”

“Oh,” said the other, looking at him sharply, “it is to play! Well, I can teach you nothing.”

He rose, as though to intimate that the interview was at an end, but Lynn was not so easily turned aside. “Herr Kaufmann,” he began, “I have come hundreds of miles to study with you. We have broken up our home and have come to live in East Lancaster for that one purpose.”

“I am flattered,” observed the Master, dryly. “May I ask how you have heard of me so far away as many hundred miles?”

“Why, everybody knows of you! When I was a little child, I can remember my mother telling me that some day I should study with the great Herr Kaufmann. It is the dream of her life and of mine.”

“A bad dream,” remarked the violinist, succinctly. “May I ask your mother’s name?”

“Mrs. Irving – Margaret Irving.”

“Margaret,” repeated the old man in a different tone. “Margaret.”

There was a long silence, then the boy began once more. “You’ll take me, won’t you?”

For an instant the Master seemed on the point of yielding, unconditionally, then he came to himself with a start. “One moment,” he said, clearing his throat. “Why did you lift up mine Cremona?”

The piercing eyes were upon him and Lynn’s colour mounted to his temples, but he met the gaze honestly. “I scarcely know why,” he answered. “I was here alone, I had been waiting a long time, and it has always been natural for me to look at violins. I think we all do things for which we can give no reason. I certainly had no intention of harming it, nor of offending anybody. I am very sorry.”

“Well,” sighed the Master, “I should not have left it out. Strangers seldom come here, but I, too, was to blame. Fredrika takes it to herself; she thinks that she should have left her scrubbing and sat with you, but of that I am not so sure. It is mine Cremona,” he went on, bitterly, “nobody touches it but mineself.”

His distress was very real, and, for the first time, Irving felt a throb of sympathy. However unreasonable it might be, however weak and childish, he saw that he had unwittingly touched a tender place. All the love of the hale old heart was centred upon the violin, wooden, inanimate – but no. Nothing can be inanimate, which is sweetheart and child in one.

“Herr Kaufmann,” said Lynn, “believe me, if any act of mine could wipe away my touch, I should do it here and now. As it is, I can only ask your pardon.”

“We will no longer speak of it,” returned the Master, with quiet dignity. “We will attempt to forget.”

He went to the window and stood with his back to Irving for a long time. “What could I have done?” thought Lynn. “I only picked it up and laid it down again – I surely did not harm it.”

He was too young to see that it was the significance, rather than the touch; that the old man felt as a lover might who saw his beloved in the arms of another. The bloom was gone from the fruit, the fragrance from the rose. For twenty-five years and more, the Cremona had been sacredly kept.

The Master’s thoughts had leaped that quarter-century at a single bound. Again he stood in the woods beyond East Lancaster, while the sky was dark with threatening clouds and the dead leaves scurried in fright before the north wind. Beside him stood a girl of twenty, her face white and her sweet mouth quivering.

“You must take it,” she was saying. “It is mine to do with as I please, and no one will ever know. If anyone asks, I can fix it someway. It is part of myself that I give you, so that in all the years, you will not forget me. When you touch it, it will be as though you took my hand in yours. When it sings to

you, it will be my voice saying: 'I love you!' And in it you will find all the sweetness of this one short year. All the pain will be blotted out and only the joy will be left – the joy that we can never know!"

Her voice broke in a sob, then the picture faded in a mist of blinding tears. Dull thunders boomed afar, and he felt her lips crushed for an instant against his own. When clear sight came back, the storm was raging, and he was alone.

Irving waited impatiently, for he was restless and longed to get away, but he dared not speak. At last the old man turned away from the window, his face haggard and grey.

"You will take me?" asked Lynn, with a note of pleading in his question.

"Yes," sighed the Master, "I take you. Tuesdays and Fridays at ten. Bring your violin and what music you have. We will see what you have done and what you can do. Good-bye."

He did not seem to see Lynn's offered hand, and the boy went out, sorely troubled by something which seemed just outside his comprehension. He walked for an hour in the woods before going home, and in answer to questions merely said that he had been obliged to wait for some time, but that everything was satisfactorily arranged.

"Isn't he an old dear?" asked Iris.

"I don't know," answered Lynn. "Is he?"

III

The Gift of Peace

The mistress of the mansion was giving her orders for the day. From the farthest nooks and corners of the attic, where fragrant herbs swayed back and forth in ghostly fashion, to the tiled kitchen, where burnished copper saucepans literally shone, Miss Field kept in daily touch with her housekeeping.

The old Colonial house was her pride and her delight. It was by far the oldest in that part of the country, and held an exalted position among its neighbours on that account, though the owner, not having spent her entire life in East Lancaster, was considered somewhat “new.” To be truly aristocratic, at least three generations of one’s forbears must have lived in the same dwelling.

In the hall hung the old family portraits. Gentlemen and gentlewomen, long since gathered to their fathers, had looked down from their gilded frames upon many a strange scene. Baby footsteps had faltered on the stairs, and wide childish eyes had looked up in awe to this stately company. Older children had wondered at the patches and the powdered hair, the velvet knickerbockers and ruffled sleeves. Awkward schoolboys had boasted to their mates that the jewelled sword, which hung at the side of a young officer in the uniform of the Colonies, had been presented by General Washington himself, in recognition of conspicuous bravery upon the field. Lovers had led their sweethearts along the hall at twilight, to whisper that their portraits, too, should some day hang there, side by side. Soldiers of Fortune who had found their leader fickle had taken fresh courage from the set lips of the gallant gentlemen in the great hall. Women whose hearts were breaking had looked up to the painted and powdered dames along the winding stairway, and learned, through some subtle freemasonry of sex, that only the lowborn cry out when hurt. Faint, wailing voices of new-born babes had reached the listening ears of the portraits by night and by day. Coffin after coffin had gone out of the wide door, flower-hidden, and step after step had died away forever, leaving only an echo behind. And yet the men and women of the line of Field looked out from their gilded frames, high-spirited, courageous, and serene, with here and there the hint of a smile.

Far up the stairs and beyond the turn hung the last portrait: Aunt Peace, in the bloom of her mature beauty, painted soon after she had taken possession of the house. The dark hair was parted over the low brow and puffed slightly over the tiny ears. The flowered gown was cut modestly away at the throat, showing a shoulder line that had been famous in three counties when she was the belle of the countryside. For the rest, she was much the same. Let the artist make the brown hair snowy white, change the girlish bloom to the tint of a faded pink rose, draw around the eyes and the mouth a few tiny time-tracks, which, after all, were but the footprints of smiles, sadden the trustful eyes a bit, and cover the frivolous gown with black brocade, – then the mistress of the mansion, who moved so gaily through the house, would inevitably startle you as you came upon her at the turn of the stairs, having believed, all the time, that she was somewhere else.

At the moment, she was in the garden, with Mrs. Irving and “the children,” as she called Iris and Lynn. “Now, my talented nephew-once-removed,” she was saying, in her high, sweet voice, “will you kindly take the spade and dig until you can dig no more? I am well aware that it is like hitching Pegasus to the plough, but I have grown tired of waiting for my intermittent gardener, and there is a new theory to the effect that all service is beautiful.”

“So it is,” laughed Lynn, turning the earth awkwardly. “I know what you’re thinking of, mother, but it isn’t going to hurt my hands.”

“You shall have a flower-bed for your reward,” Aunt Peace went on. “I will take the front yard myself, and the beds here shall be equally divided among you three. You may plant in them what you please and each shall attend to his own.”

“I speak for vegetables,” said Lynn.

“How characteristic,” murmured Iris, with a sidelong glance at him which sent the blood to his face. “What shall you plant, Mrs. Irving?”

“Roses, heartsease, and verbenas,” she replied, “and as many other things as I can get in without crowding. I may change my mind about the others, but I shall have those three. What are you going to have?”

“Violets and mignonette, nothing more. I love the sweet, modest ones the best.”

“Cucumbers, tomatoes, corn, melons, peas, asparagus,” put in Lynn, “and what else?”

“Nothing else, my son,” answered Margaret, “unless you rent a vacant acre or two. The seeds are small, but the plants have been known to spread.”

“I’ll have one plant of each kind, then, for I must assuredly have variety. It’s said to be ‘the spice of life’ and that’s what we’re all looking for. Besides, judging from the various scornful remarks which have been thought, if not actually made, the rest of you don’t care for vegetables. Anyhow, you sha’n’t have any – except Aunt Peace.”

“Over here now, please, Lynn,” said Miss Field. “When you get that done, I’ll tell you what to do next. Come, Margaret, it’s a little chilly here, and I don’t want you to take cold.”

For a few moments there was quiet in the garden. A flock of pigeons hovered about Iris, taking grain from her outstretched hand, and cooing soft murmurs of content. The white dove was perched upon her shoulder, not at all disturbed by her various excursions to the source of supply. Lynn worked steadily, seemingly unconscious of the girl’s scrutiny.

Finally, she spoke. “I don’t want any of your old vegetables,” she said.

“How fortunate!”

“You may not have any at all – I don’t believe the seeds will come up.”

“Perhaps not – it’s quite in the nature of things.”

The pouter pigeon, brave in his iridescent waistcoat, perched upon her other shoulder, and Lynn straightened himself to look at her. From the first evening she had puzzled him.

Her face was nearly always pale, but to-day she had a pretty colour in her cheeks and her deep, violet eyes were aglow with innocent mischief. There was a dewy sweetness about her red lips, and Lynn noted that the sheen on the pigeon’s breast was like the gleam from her blue-black hair, where the sun shone upon it. She had a great mass of it, which she wore coiled on top of her small, well-shaped head. It was perfectly smooth, its riotous waves kept well in check, except at the blue-veined temples, where little ringlets clustered, unrebuked.

“You should be practising,” said Iris, irrelevantly.

“So should you.”

“I don’t need to.”

“Why not?”

“Because I’m not going to play with you any more.”

“Why, Iris?”

“Oh,” she returned, with a little shrug of her shoulders, which frightened away both pigeons, “you didn’t like the way I played your last accompaniment, and so I’ve stopped for good.”

Lynn thought it only a repetition of what she had said when he criticised her, and passed it over in silence.

“I’ve already done an hour,” he said, “and I’ll have time for another before lunch. I can get in the other two before dark, and then I’m going for a walk. You’ll come with me, won’t you?”

“You haven’t asked me properly,” she objected.

Irving bowed and, in set, gallant phrases, asked Miss Temple for “the pleasure of her company.”

“I’m sorry,” she answered, “but I’m obliged to refuse. I’m going to make some little cakes for tea – the kind you like.”

“Bother the cakes!”

“Then,” laughed Iris, “if you want me as much as that, I’ll go. It’s my Christian duty.”

From the very beginning, Aunt Peace had taught Iris the principles of dainty housewifery. Cleanliness came first – an exquisite cleanliness which was not merely a lack of dust and dirt, but a positive quality. When the old lady’s keen eyes, reinforced by her strongest glasses, were unable to discern so much as a finger mark upon anything, Iris knew that it was clean, and not before.

At first, the little untrained child had bitterly rebelled, but Miss Field’s patience was without limit and at last Iris attained the required degree of proficiency. She had done her sampler, like the Colonial maids before her, made her white, sweet loaves, her fragrant brown ones, put up her countless pots of clear, rich preserves, made amber and crimson jellies, huge jars of spiced fruits, and brewed ten different kinds of home-made wine. Then, and not till then, Iris got the womanly idea which was beneath it all. Perception came slowly, but at length she found herself in a beautiful comradeship with Aunt Peace. For sheer love of the daintiness of it, Iris beat the yolks of eggs in a white bowl and the whites in a blue one. She took pleasure out of various fine textures and feathery masses, sang as she shaped small pats of unsalted butter, tying them up in clover blossoms, and laughed at the little packets of seeds Dame Nature sends with her parcels.

“See,” said Iris, one morning, as she cut a juicy muskmelon and took out the seeds, “this means that if you like it well enough to work and wait, you can have lots, lots more.”

Miss Field smiled, and a soft pink colour came into her fine, high-bred face. For one, at least, she had opened the way to the Fortunate Isles, where one’s daily work is one’s daily happiness, and nothing is so poor as to be without its own appealing beauty.

As time went on, Iris found deep and satisfying pleasure in the countless little things that were done each day. She piled the clean linen in orderly rows upon the shelves, delighting in the unnameable freshness made by wind and sun; sniffed appreciatively at the cedar chest which stood in a recess of the upper hall, and climbed many a chair to fasten bunches of fragrant herbs, gathered with her own hands, to the rafters in the attic.

She washed the fine old china, rubbed the mahogany till she could see her face in it, and kept the silver shining. “A gentlewoman,” Aunt Peace had said, “will always be independent of her servants, and there are certain things no gentlewoman will trust her servants to do.”

Upon this foundation, Aunt Peace had reared the beautiful superstructure of her life. Her hands were capable and strong, yet soft and white. As we learn to love the things we take care of, so every household possession became dear to her, and repaid her for her labours an hundred-fold.

To be sure of doing the very best for her adopted daughter, Miss Field had, for many years, kept house without a servant. Now, at seventy-five, she had grudgingly admitted one maid into her sanctum, but some of the work still fell to Iris, and no one ever doubted for an instant that the head of the household vigilantly guarded her own rights.

For a long time Iris had known how useless it was – that there had never been a moment when the old lady could not have had a retinue of servants at her command, but had it been useless after all? Remembering the child she had been, Iris could not but see the immeasurable advance the woman had made.

“Someday, my child,” Aunt Peace had said, “when your adopted mother is laid away with her ancestors in the churchyard, you will bless me for what I have done. You will see that wherever you happen to be, in whatever station of life God may be pleased to place you after I am gone, you have one thing which cannot be taken away from you – the power to make for yourself a home. You will be sure of your comfort independently, and you will never be at the mercy of the ignorant and the untrained. In more than one sense,” went on Miss Field, smiling, “you will have the gift of Peace.”

In the house, in her favourite chair by the fire, the old lady was saying much the same thing to Margaret Irving. It was apropos of a book written by a member of the shrieking sisterhood, which had sorely stirred East Lancaster, set as it was in quiet ways that were centuries old.

"I have no patience with such foolishness," Aunt Peace observed. "Since Adam and Eve were placed in the Garden of Eden, women have been home-makers and men have been home-builders. All the work in the world is directly and immediately undertaken for the maintenance and betterment of the home. A woman who has no love for it is unsexed. God probably knew how He wanted it – at least we may be pardoned for supposing that He did. It is absolutely – but I would better stop, my dear. I fear I shall soon be saying something unladylike."

Margaret laughed – a low, musical laugh with a girlish note in it. For a long time she had not been so happy as she was to-day.

"To quote a famous historian," she replied, "a book like that 'carries within itself the germs of its decay.' You need have no fear, Aunt Peace; the home will stand. This single house, this beautiful old home of yours, has lasted two centuries, hasn't it, just as it is?"

"Yes," sighed the other, after a pause, "they built well in those days."

The charm of the room was upon them both. Through the open door they could see the long line of portraits in the hall, and the house seemed peopled with friendly ghosts, whose memories and loves still lived. Because she had recently come from a city apartment, Margaret looked down the spacious vista, ending at a long mirror, with an ever-increasing sense of delight.

"My dear," said Miss Field, "I have always felt that this house should have come to you."

"I have never felt so," answered Margaret. "I have never for a moment begrudged it to you. You know my father died suddenly, and his will, made long before I was born, had not been changed. So what was more natural than for my mother to have the house during her lifetime, with the provision that it should revert to his favourite sister afterward, if she still lived?"

"I have cheated you by living, Margaret, and your mother was cut off in her prime. She was a hard woman."

"Yes," sighed Margaret, "she was. But I think she meant to be kind."

"I knew her very little; in fact, the only chance that I ever had to get acquainted with her was when I came here for a short visit just after you were married. The house had been closed for a long time. She took you away with her, and when she came back she was alone. Then she wrote to me, asking me to share her loneliness for a time, and I consented."

The way was open for confidences, but Margaret made none, and Aunt Peace respected her for it.

"We never knew each other very well, did we?" asked the old lady, in a tone that indicated no need of an answer. "I remember that when I was here I yearned over you just as I did over Iris several years later. I wanted to give to you out of my abundance; to make you happy and comfortable."

"Dear Aunt Peace," said Margaret, softly, "you are doing it now, when perhaps I need it even more than I did then. All your life you have been making people happy and comfortable."

"I hope so – it is what I have tried to do. By the way, when I am through with it, this house goes to you, then to Lynn and his children after him."

"Thank you." For an instant Margaret's pulses throbbed with the joy of possession, then the blood retreated from her heart in shame.

"I have made ample provision for Iris," Miss Field went on. "She is my own dear daughter, but she is not of our line."

At this moment, Iris came around the house, laughing and screaming, with Lynn in full pursuit. Mrs. Irving went to the window and came back with an amused light in her eyes.

"What is the matter?" asked Aunt Peace.

"Lynn is chasing her. He had something in his fingers that looked like an angle-worm."

"No doubt. Iris is afraid of worms."

"I'll go out and speak to him."

"No – let them fight it out. We are never young but once, and Youth asks no greater privilege than to fight its own battles. It is mistaken kindness to shield – it weakens one in the years to come."

“Youth,” repeated Margaret. “The most beautiful gift of the gods, which we never appreciate until it is gone forever.”

“I have kept mine,” said Aunt Peace. “I have deliberately forgotten all the unpleasant things and remembered the others. When a little pleasure has flashed for a moment against the dark, I have made that jewel mine. I have hundreds of them, from the time my baby fingers clasped my first rose, to the night you and Lynn came to bring more sunshine into my old life. I call it my Necklace of Perfect Joy. When the world goes wrong, I have only to close my eyes and remember all the links in my chain, set with gems, some large and some small, but all beautiful with the beauty which never fades. It is all I can take with me when I go. My material possessions must stay behind, but my Necklace of Perfect Joy will bring me happiness to the end, when I put it on, to be nevermore unclasped.”

“Aunt Peace,” asked Margaret, after an understanding silence, “why did you never marry?”

Miss Field leaned forward and methodically stirred the fire. “I may be wrong,” she said, “but I have always felt that it was indelicate to allow one’s self to care for a gentleman.”

IV Social Position

On Wednesday, the dullest person might have felt that there was something in the air. The old house, already exquisitely clean, received further polishing without protest. Savoury odours came from the kitchen, and Iris rubbed the tall silver candlesticks until they shone like new.

“What is it?” asked Lynn. “Are we going to have a party and am I invited?”

“It is Wednesday,” explained Iris.

“Well, what of it?”

“Doctor Brinkerhoff comes to see Aunt Peace every Wednesday evening.”

“Who is Doctor Brinkerhoff?”

“The family physician of East Lancaster.”

“He wasn’t here last Wednesday.”

“That was because you and your mother had just come. Aunt Peace sent him a note, saying that her attention was for the moment occupied by other guests from out of town. It was the first Wednesday evening he has missed for more than ten years.”

“Oh,” said Lynn. “Are they going to be married?”

“Aunt Peace wouldn’t marry anybody. She receives Doctor Brinkerhoff because she is sorry for him.

“He has no social position,” Iris continued, feeling the unspoken question. “He is not of our class and he used to live in West Lancaster, but Aunt Peace says that any gentleman who is received by a lady in her bedroom may also be received in her parlour. Another lady, who thinks as Aunt Peace does, entertains him on Saturday evenings.”

Iris sat there demurely, her rosy lips primly pursed, and vigorously rubbed the tall candlestick. Lynn fairly choked with laughter. “Oh,” he cried, “you funny little thing!”

“I am not a little thing and I am not funny. I consider you very impertinent.”

“What is ‘social position’?” asked Irving, instantly sobering. “How do we get it?”

“It is born with us,” answered Iris, dipping her flannel cloth in ammonia, “and we have to live up to it. If we have low tastes, we lose it, and it never comes back.”

“Wonder if I have it,” mused Lynn.

“Of course,” Iris assured him. “You are a grand-nephew of Aunt Peace, but not so nearly related as I, because I am her legal daughter. I was born of poor but honest parents,” she went on, having evidently absorbed the phrase from her school Reader, “so I was respectable, even at the beginning. When Aunt Peace took me, I got social position, and if I am always a lady, I will keep it. Otherwise not.”

The girl was very lovely as she leaned back in the quaint old chair to rest for a moment. She was still regarding the candlestick attentively and did not look at Lynn. “It is strange to me,” she said, “that coming from the city, as you do, you should not know about such things.” Here she sent him the quickest possible glance from a pair of inscrutable eyes, and he began to wonder if she were not merely amusing herself. He was tempted to kiss her, but wisely refrained.

“Iris,” called Aunt Peace, from the doorway, “will you wash the Royal Worcester plate? And Lynn, it is time you were practising.”

Lynn worked hard until the bell rang for luncheon. When he went down, he found the others already at the table. “We did not wait for you,” Aunt Peace explained, “because we were in a hurry. Immediately after luncheon, on Wednesdays, I take my nap. I sleep from two to three. Will you please see that the house is quiet?”

She spoke to Margaret, but she looked at Lynn. “Which means,” said he, “that those who are studying the violin will kindly not practise until after three o’clock, and that it would be considered a kindness if they would not walk much in the house, their feet being heavy.”

“Lynn,” said the old lady, irrelevantly, “you are extremely intelligent. I expect great things of you.”

That weekly hour of luxury was the only relaxation in Miss Field’s busy, happy life. Breakfast at seven and bed at ten – this was the ironclad rule of the house. Ever since she came to East Lancaster, Iris had kept solemn guard over the front door on Wednesdays, from two to three. Rash visitors never reached the bell, but were met, on the doorstep, by a little maid whose tiny finger rested upon her lip. “Hush,” she would say, “Aunt Peace is asleep!” Interruptions were infrequent, however, for East Lancaster knew Miss Field’s habits – and respected them.

“Good-bye, my dears,” she said, as she paused at the foot of the winding stairs, “I leave you for a far country, where, perhaps, I shall meet some of my old friends. I shall visit strange lands and have many new experiences, some of which will doubtless be impossible and grotesque. I shall be gone but one short hour, and when I return I shall have much to tell you.”

“She dreams,” explained Iris, in a low voice, as the mistress of the mansion smiled back at them over the railing, “and when she wakes she always tells me.”

Lynn went out for a long tramp, after vainly endeavouring to persuade his mother or Iris to accompany him. “I’m walked enough at night as it is,” said Mrs. Irving, and the girl excused herself on account of her household duties.

He clattered down the steps, banged the gate, and went whistling down the elm-bordered path. The mother listened, fondly, till the cheery notes died away in the distance. “Bless his heart,” she said to herself, “how fine and strong he is and how much I love him!”

The house seemed to wait while its guardian spirit slept. Left to herself, Margaret paced to and fro; down the long hall, then back, through the parlour and library, and so on, restlessly, until she reflected that she might possibly disturb Aunt Peace.

A love-lorn robin, in the overhanging boughs of the maple at the gate, was unsuccessfully courting a disdainful lady who sat on the topmost twig and paid no attention to him. From the distant orchard came the breath of apple blooms, and a single bluebird winged his solitary way across the fields, his colour gleaming brightly for an instant against the silvery clouds. Beautiful as it was, Margaret sighed, and her face lost its serenity.

A bit of verse sang itself through her memory again and again.

“Who wins his love shall lose her,

Who loses her shall gain,
For still the spirit woos her,
A soul without a stain,
And memory still pursues her
With longings not in vain.

“In dreams she grows not older
The lands of Dream among;
Though all the world wax colder,
Though all the songs be sung,
In dreams doth he behold her —
Still fair and kind and young.”

“Dreams,” she murmured, “empty dreams, while your soul starves.”

Iris tiptoed in with her sewing and sat down. Margaret felt her presence in the room, but did not turn away from the window. Iris was one of those rare people with whom one could be silent and not feel that the proprieties had been injured.

Deep down in her heart, Margaret had stored away all the bitterness of her life – that single drop which is well enough when left by itself, because it is of a different specific gravity. When the cup is stirred, the lees taint the whole, and it takes time for the readjustment. Were it not for the merciful readjustment, this grey old world of ours would be too dark to live in.

At length she turned and looked at the little seamstress, who sat bolt upright, as she had been taught, in the carved mahogany chair. She noted the long lashes that swept the tinted cheek, the masses of blue-black hair over the low, white brow, the tender wistfulness in the lines of the mouth, the dimpled hands, and the rounded arm – so evidently made for all the sweet uses of love that Margaret's heart contracted in sudden pain.

“Iris,” she said, in a tone that startled the girl, “when the right man comes, and you know absolutely in your own heart that he is the right man, go with him, whether he be prince or beggar. If unhappiness comes to you, take it bravely, as a gentlewoman should, but never, for your own sake, allow yourself to regret your faith in him. If you love him and he loves you, there are no barriers between you – they are nothing but cobwebs. Sweep them aside with a single stroke of magnificent daring, and go. Social position counts for nothing, other people's opinions count for nothing; it is between your heart and his, and in that sanctuary no one else has a right to intrude. If he has only a crust to give you, share it with him, but do not let anyone persuade you into a lifetime of heart-hunger – it is too hard to bear!”

The girl's deep eyes were fixed upon her, childish, appealing, and yet with evident understanding. Margaret's face was full of tender pity – was this butterfly, too, destined to be broken on the wheel?

Iris felt the sudden passion of the other, saw traces of suffering in the dark eyes, the set lips, and even in the slender hands that hovered whitely over the black gown. “Thank you, Mrs. Irving,” she said, quietly, “I understand.”

The minutes ticked by, and no other word was spoken. At half-past three, precisely, Aunt Peace came back. She had on her best gown – a soft, heavy black silk, simply made. At the neck and wrists were bits of rare old lace, and her one jewel, an emerald of great beauty and value, gleamed at her throat. She wore no rings except the worn band of gold that had been her mother's wedding ring.

“What did you dream?” asked Iris.

“Nothing, dearie,” she laughed. “I have never slept so soundly before. Our guests have put a charm upon the house.”

From the embroidered work-bag that dangled at her side, she took out the thread lace she was making, and began to count her stitches.

“I think I'll get my sewing, too,” said Margaret. “I feel like a drone in this hive of industry.”

“One, two, three, chain,” said Aunt Peace. “Iris, do you think the cakes are as good as they were last time?”

“I think they're even better.”

“Did you take out the oldest port?”

“Yes, the very oldest.”

“I trust he was not hurt,” Aunt Peace went on, “because last week I asked him not to come. The common people sometimes feel those things more keenly than aristocrats, who are accustomed to the disturbance of guests.”

“Of course, he would be disappointed,” said Iris, with a little smile, “but he would understand – I'm sure he would.”

When Margaret came back she had a white, fluffy garment over her arm. "Who would have thought," she cried, gaily, "that I should ever have the time to make myself a petticoat by hand! The atmosphere of East Lancaster has wrought a wondrous change in me."

"Iris," said Miss Field, "let me see your stitches."

The girl held up her petticoat – a dainty garment of finest cambric, lace-trimmed and exquisitely made, and the old lady examined it critically. "It is not what I could do at your age," she continued, "but it will answer very well."

Lynn came in noisily, remembering only at the threshold that one did not whistle in East Lancaster houses. "I had a fine tramp," he said, "all over West Lancaster and through the woods on both sides of it. I had some flowers for all of you, but I laid them down on a stone and forgot to go back after them. Aunt Peace, you're looking fine since you had your nap. Still working at that petticoat, mother?"

"We're all making petticoats," answered Margaret. "Even Aunt Peace is knitting lace for one and Iris has hers almost done."

"Let me see it," said Lynn. He reached over and took it out of the girl's lap while she was threading her needle. Much to his surprise, it was immediately snatched away from him. Iris paused only long enough to administer a sounding box to the offender's ear, then marched out of the room with her head high and her work under her arm.

"Well, of all things," said Lynn, ruefully. "Why wouldn't she let me look at her petticoat?"

"Because," answered Aunt Peace, severely, "Iris has been brought up like a lady! Gentlemen did not expect to see ladies' petticoats when I was young!"

"Oh," said Lynn, "I see." His mouth twitched and he glanced sideways at his mother. She was bending over her work, and her lips did not move, but he could see that her eyes smiled.

At exactly half-past seven, the expected guest was ushered into the parlour. "Good evening, Doctor," said Miss Field, in her stately way; "I assure you this is quite a pleasure." She presented him to Mrs. Irving and Lynn, and motioned him to an easy-chair.

He was tall, straight, and seventy; almost painfully neat, and evidently a gentleman of the old school.

"I trust you are well, madam?"

"I am always well," returned Aunt Peace. "If all the other old ladies in East Lancaster were as well as I, you would soon be obliged to take down your sign and seek another location."

The others took but small part in the conversation, which was never lively, and which, indeed, might have been stilted by the presence of strangers. It was the commonplace talk of little things, which distinguishes the country town, and it lasted for half an hour. As the clock chimed eight, Miss Field smiled at him significantly.

"Shall we play chess?" she asked.

"If the others will excuse us, I shall be charmed," he responded.

Soon they were deep in their game. Margaret went after a book she had been reading, and the young people went to the library, where they could talk undisturbed.

They played three games. Miss Field won the first and third, her antagonist contenting himself with the second. It had always been so, and for ten years she had taken a childish delight in her skill. "My dear Doctor," she often said, "it takes a woman of brains to play chess."

"It does, indeed," he invariably answered, with an air of gallantry. Once he had been indiscreet and had won all three games, but that was in the beginning and it had never happened since.

When the clock struck ten, he looked at his heavy, old-fashioned silver watch with apparent surprise. "I had no idea it was so late," he said. "I must be going!"

"Pray wait a moment, Doctor. Let me offer you some refreshment before you begin that long walk. Iris?"

“Yes, Aunt Peace.” The girl knew very well what was expected of her, and dimples came and went around the corners of her mouth.

“Those little cakes that we had for tea – perhaps there may be one or two left, and is there not a little wine?”

“I’ll see.”

Smiling at the pretty comedy, she went out into the kitchen, where Doctor Brinkerhoff’s favourite cakes, freshly made, had been carefully put away. Only one of them had been touched, and that merely to make sure of the quality.

With the Royal Worcester plate, generously piled with cakes, a tray of glasses, and a decanter of Miss Field’s famous port, she went back into the parlour.

“This is very charming,” said the Doctor. He had made the same speech once a week for ten years. Aunt Peace filled the glasses, and when all had been served, she looked at him with a rare smile upon her beautiful old face.

Then the brim of his glass touched hers with the clear ring of crystal. “To your good health, madam!”

“And to your prosperity,” she returned. The old toast still served.

“And now, my dear Miss Iris,” he said, “may we not hope for a song?”

“Which one?”

“‘Annie Laurie,’ if you please.”

She sang the old ballad with a wealth of feeling in her deep voice, and even Lynn, who was listening critically, was forced to admit that she did it well.

At eleven, the guest went away, his hostess cordially inviting him to come again.

“What a charming man,” said Margaret.

“An old brick,” added Lynn, with more force than elegance.

“Yes,” replied Aunt Peace, concealing a yawn behind her fan, “it is a thousand pities that he has no social position.”

V

The Light of Dreams

“How do you get on with the Master?” asked Iris.

“After a fashion,” answered Irving; “but I do not get on with Fräulein Fredrika at all. She despises me.”

“She does not like many people.”

“So it would seem. I have been unfortunate from the first, though I was careful to admire ‘mine crazy jug.’”

“It is the apple of her eye,” laughed Iris, “it means to her just what his Cremona means to him.”

“It is a wonderful creation, and I told her so, but where in the dickens did she get the idea?”

“Don’t ask me. Did you happen to notice anything else?”

“No – only the violin. Sometimes I take my lesson in the parlour, sometimes in the shop downstairs, or even in Herr Kaufmann’s bedroom, which opens off of it. When I come, he stops whatever he happens to be doing, sits down, and proceeds with my education.”

“On the floor,” said Iris reminiscently, “she has a gold jar which contains cat tails and grasses. It is Herr Kaufmann’s silk hat, which he used to have when he played in the famous orchestra, with the brim cut off and plenty of gold paint put on. The gilded potato-masher, with blue roses on it, which swings from the hanging lamp, was done by your humble servant. She has loved me ever since.”

“Iris!” exclaimed Lynn, reproachfully. “How could you!”

“How could I what?”

“Paint anything so outrageous as that?”

“My dear boy,” said Miss Temple, patronisingly, with her pretty head a little to one side, “you are young in the ways of the world. I was not achieving a work of art; I was merely giving pleasure to the Fräulein. Much trouble would be saved if people who undertake to give pleasure would consult the wishes of the recipient in preference to their own. Tastes differ, as even you may have observed. Personally, I have no use for a gilded potato-masher – I couldn’t even live in the same house with one, – but I was pleasing her, not myself.”

“I wonder what I could do that would please her,” said Lynn, half to himself.

“Make her something out of nothing,” suggested Iris. “She would like that better than anything else. She has a wall basket made of a fish broiler, a chair that was once a barrel, a dresser which has been evolved from a packing box, a sofa that was primarily a cot, and a match box made from a tin cup covered with silk and gilded on the inside, not to mention heaps of other things.”

“Then what is left for me? The desirable things seem to have been used up.”

“Wait,” said Iris, “and I’ll show you.” She ran off gaily, humming a little song under her breath, and came back presently with a clothes-pin, a sheet of orange-coloured tissue paper, an old black ostrich feather, and her paints.

“What in the world – ” began Lynn.

“Don’t be impatient, please. Make the clothes-pin gold, with a black head, and then I’ll show you what to do next.”

“Aren’t you going to help me?”

“Only with my valuable advice – it is your gift, you know.”

Awkwardly, Lynn gilded the clothes-pin and suspended it from the back of a chair to dry. “I hope she’ll like it,” he said. “She pointed to me once and said something in German to her brother. I didn’t understand, but I remembered the words, and when I got home I looked them up in my dictionary. As nearly as I could get it, she had characterised me as ‘a big, lumbering calf.’”

“Discerning woman,” commented Iris. “Now, take this sheet of tissue paper and squeeze it up into a little ball, then straighten it out and do it again. When it’s all soft and crinkly, I’ll tell you what to do next.”

“There,” exclaimed Lynn, finally, “if it’s squeezed up any more it will break.”

“Now paint the head of the clothes-pin and make some straight black lines on the middle of it, cross ways.”

“Will you please tell me what I’m making?”

“Wait and see!”

Obedying instructions, he fastened the paper tightly in the fork of the clothes-pin, and spread it out on either side. The corners were cut and pulled into the semblance of wings, and black circles were painted here and there. Iris herself added the finishing touch – two bits of the ostrich feather glued to the top of the head for antennæ.

“Oh,” cried Lynn, in pleased surprise, “a butterfly!”

“How hideous!” said Margaret, pausing in the doorway. “I trust it’s not meant for me.”

“It’s for the Fräulein,” answered Iris, gathering up her paints and sweeping aside the litter. “Lynn has made it all by himself.”

“I wonder how he stands it,” mused Irving, critically inspecting the butterfly.

“I asked him once,” said Iris, “if he liked all the queer things in his house, and he shrugged his shoulders. ‘What good is mine art to me,’ he asked, ‘if it makes me so I cannot live with mine sister? Fredrika likes the gay colours, such as one sees in the fields, but they hurt mine eyes. Still because the tidies and the crazy jug swear to me, it is no reason for me to hurt mine sister’s feelings. We have a large house. Fredrika has the upstairs and I have the downstairs. When I can no longer stand the bright lights, I can turn mine back and look out of the window, or I can go down in the shop with mine violins. Down there I see no colours and I can put mine feet on all chairs.’”

Lynn laughed, but Margaret, who was listening intently, only smiled sadly.

That afternoon, when the boy went up the hill, with the butterfly dangling from his hand by a string, he was greeted with childish cries of delight on either side. Hoping for equal success at the Master’s, he rang the bell, and the Fräulein came to the door. When she saw who it was, her face instantly became hard and forbidding.

“Mine brudder is not home,” she said, frostily.

“I know,” answered Lynn, with a winning smile, “but I came to see you. See, I made this for you.”

Wonder and delight were in her eyes as she took it from his outstretched hand. “For me?”

“Yes, all for you. I made it.”

“You make this for me by yourself alone?”

“No, Miss Temple helped me.”

“Miss Temple,” repeated the Fräulein, “she is most kind. And you likewise,” she hastened to add. “It will be of a niceness if Miss Temple and you shall come to mine house to tea to-morrow evening.”

“I’ll ask her,” he returned, “and thank you very much.” Thus Lynn made his peace with Fräulein Fredrika.

Laughing like two irresponsible children, they went up the hill together at the appointed time. Lynn’s arms were full of wild crab-apple blooms, which he had taken a long walk to find, and Iris had two little pots of preserves as her contribution to the feast.

Their host and hostess were waiting for them at the door. Fräulein Fredrika was very elegant in her best gown, and her sharp eyes were kind. The Master was clad in rusty black, which bore marks of frequent sponging and occasional pressing. “It is most kind,” he said, bowing gallantly to Iris; “and you, young man, I am glad to see you, as always.”

Iris found a stone jar for the apple blossoms and brought them in. The Master's fine old face beamed as he drew a long breath of pink and white sweetness. "It is like magic," he said. "I think inside of every tree there must be some beautiful young lady, such as we read about in the old books – a young lady something like Miss Iris. All Winter, when it is cold, she sleeps in her soft bed, made from the silk lining of the bark. Then one day the sun shines warm and the robin sings to her and wakes her. 'What,' says she, 'is it so soon Spring? I must get to work right away at mine apple blossoms.'

"Then she stoops down for some sand and some dirt. In her hands she moulds it – so – reaching out for some rain to keep it together. Then she says one charm. With a forked stick she packs it into every little place inside that apple tree and sprinkles some more of it over the outside.

"Now,' says she, 'we must wait, for I have done mine work well. It is for the sun and the wind and the rain to finish.' So the rain makes all very wet, and the wind blows and the sun shines, and presently the sand and dirt that she has put in is changed to sap that is so glad it runs like one squirrel all over the inside of the tree and tries to sing like one bird.

"So,' says this young lady, 'it is as I thought.' Then she says one more charm, and when the sun comes up in the morning, it sees that the branches are all covered with buds and leaves. The young lady and the moon work one little while at it in the evening, and the next morning, there is – this!"

The Master buried his face in the fragrant blooms. "It is a most wonderful sweetness," he went on. "It is wind and grass and sun, and the souls of all the apple blossoms that are dead."

"Franz," called Fräulein Fredrika, "you will bring them out to tea, yes?"

As the entertainment progressed, Lynn's admiration of Iris increased. She seemed equally at home in Miss Field's stately mansion and in the tiny bird-house on the brink of a precipice, where everything appeared to be made out of something else. She was in high spirits and kept them all laughing. Yet, in spite of her merry chatter, there was an undertone of tender wistfulness that set his heart to beating.

The Master, too, was at his best. Usually, he was reserved and quiet, but to-night the barriers were down. He told them stories of his student days in Germany, wonderful adventures by land and sea, and conjured up glimpses of the kings and queens of the Old World. "Life," he sighed, "is very strange. One begins within an hour's walk of the Imperial Palace, where sometimes one may see the Kaiser and the Kaiserin, and one ends – here!"

"Wherever one may be, that is the best place," said the Fräulein. "The dear God knows. Yet sometimes I, too, must think of mine Germany and wish for it."

"Fredrika!" cried the Master, "are you not happy here?"

"Indeed, yes, Franz, always." Her harsh voice was softened and her piercing eyes were misty. One saw that, however carefully hidden, there was great love between these two.

Iris helped the Fräulein with the dishes, in spite of her protests. "One does not ask one's guests to help with the work," she said.

"But just suppose," answered Iris, laughing, "that one's guests have washed dishes hundreds of times at home!"

In the parlour, meanwhile, the Master talked to Lynn. He told him of great violinists he had heard and of famous old violins he had seen – but there was never a word about the Cremona.

"Mine friend, the Doctor," said the Master, "do you perchance know him?"

"Yes," answered Lynn, "I have that pleasure. He's all right, isn't he?"

"So he thinks," returned the Master, missing the point of the phrase. "In an argument, one can never convince him. He thinks it is for me to go out on one grand tour and give many concerts and secure much fame, but why should I go, I ask him, when I am happy here? So many people know what should make one happy a thousand times better than the happy one knows. Life," he said again, "is very strange."

It was a long time before he spoke again. "I have had mine fame," he said. "I have played to great houses both here and abroad, and women have thrown red roses at me and mine violin. There

has been much in the papers, and I have had many large sums, which, of course, I have always given to the poor. One should use one's art to do good with and not to become rich. I have mine house, mine clothes, all that is good for me to eat, mine sister and mine – ” he hesitated for an instant, and Lynn knew he was thinking of the Cremona. “Mine violins,” he concluded, “mine little shop where I make them, and best of all, mine dreams.”

Iris came back and Fräulein Fredrika followed her. “If you will give me all the little shells,” she was saying, “I will stick them together with glue and make mineself one little house to sit on the parlour table. It will be most kind.” Her voice was caressing and her face fairly shone with joy.

“I will light the lamp,” she went on. “It is dark here now.” Suiting the action to the word, she pulled down the lamp that hung by heavy chains in the centre of the room, and the gilded potato-masher swung back and forth violently.

“No, no, Fredrika,” said the Master. “It is not a necessity to light the lamp.”

“Herr Irving,” she began, “would you not like the lamp to see by?”

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