

"You are too smart," said Marguerita, with a shrug. Jarvis St. Gerald and she were old friends who took liberties with each other.

"I don't care to be any smarter than you wish me to be," he murmured.

They were all gone at last, and Marguerite and St. Gerald were left alone in the drawing-room.

St. Gerald himself was a handsome fellow—a gilded youth, with dark hair parted through the centre, with small feet and a wide expanse of embroidered shirt front. The St. Gerald had blue blood in their veins. They permitted themselves a great many liberties because of it, and no one took them to task; least of all Marguerita, for it was gossipped that it was through the influence of the St. Gerald that the Overtons had received this season invitations to all the balls—that crowning stamp and seal of good society.

"You looked very well," said the young man, rather patronizingly to our bud. "But your mother came near overdoing the decorations".

"One can't have too many flowers—at least, so I think," said Miss Overton, carelessly.

She sat on a divan, looking just the least bit weary. St. Gerald came and placed himself beside her. He looked slightly fast and slightly effeminate, but he was a handsome fellow all the same. They made a handsome pair. He laid his hand lightly over Marguerita's, from which she had drawn her gloves.

"If what I am going to say is abrupt you are to blame," he said.

"How am I to blame?" she asked, quickly. "You do nothing but find fault. You say mamma has too many roses——"

Could it be possible that Marguerita was out of humor? The question crossed St. Gerald's mind. Now Jarvis St. Gerald was by no means a model youth, but he had, after all, the superior masculine virtue of patience.

"Rita," he said, quietly, pretending to examine a simple pearl ring which the young girl wore on her pink tipped finger, "you know perfectly well that I couldn't find fault with you. In the first place, there is nothing about you with which any body could find fault. And—if there was—I shouldn't see it. To me you always have been, always will be——"

Marguerita had withdrawn the pink-tipped finger from St. Gerald's possession.

"Be a good boy, Jerry. I've had enough taffy for one day," she remarked, interrupting him.

"I'm in earnest, Rita. I've been waiting for you to 'come out,' to tell you that I want to marry you——"

"Mercy!" laughed Marguerita, nervously, retreating to the extreme end of the sofa, and turning still paler through the pallor of weariness.

St. Gerald stroked his moustache. He had settled with himself and even his mother, that he was to marry the Overton millions some months before. He liked Marguerita, and though, like Ferdinand, "for several virtues he had liked several women," he thought the compliment of his admiration ought to satisfy any girl. Moreover, St. Gerald needed money. Blue blood is not given either to earning or saving, and it was well understood that both St. Gerald and his sister must marry wealth in order to maintain their social position. He had imagined that Marguerita would be an easy conquest. Even when Miss Overton retreated the whole length of the sofa, he was not dismayed.

"Is there anything so dreadful in the idea of being married?" he asked, laughingly, following her in her retreat.

"Oh, yes, she gasped; it's the very last thing I'm thinking about—the very last."

St. Gerald looked at the young creature amorously, keeping a space of satin damask between them.

"Of course," he said, patronizingly, "you're only a bud. Buds ain't supposed to think about getting married. But don't you see how it works? I shall go about with you for a while—till after the season—and then our engagement will be announced and lots of people will make dinners for us, and afterwards we will be married, and everyone will say that a bud never had a more successful season."

"You are very much mistaken, Jarvis," said Marguerita very seriously. "I've never thought of such a thing as you talk about—never for one moment."

"He smiled confidently. He began to perceive that Marguerita was very, very innocent. "Don't you think your mamma has seen what was coming, when we were skating and dancing together, and all that?" he asked.

"Mamma!" she gasped.

"Why, of course. Ask her if she doesn't expect you to become engaged before the end of your first season. She would think that her bud was a failure if she didn't bloom out a bride. But, I say, Marguerita, don't you like me the least little bit?"

Marguerita held up her graceful head. Her face was very pale, her eyes looked unnaturally large and bright. She held her lips tight and shook her head ever so lightly.

(To be continued.)

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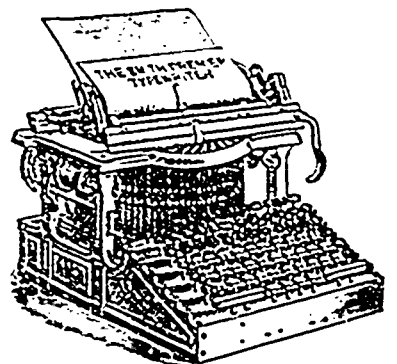
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