

THE PEACOCK SCREEN



BECAUSE Yvette was beautiful, men flattered her, and because men flattered her, Yvette was beautiful. Her dark eyes had the exquisite daring of the woman who knows she pleases. The blood came readily into her smooth, pale cheek because admiring glances called it there; and her red flower of a mouth shaped itself easiest to smiling acceptance of broken hearts. It is a gracious look and difficult of attainment

to the plainer sisters.

Yvette, withal, was not invincible.

Back in the earlier days of her reign there had been a man, and while the man went—as men do—the memory remained. I mention this merely to open the way to other facts. Yvette had, then, beauty, prestige—and a past, of a delicate hidden sort. It was but natural that thus endowed, she should come eventually to consider matrimony.

Her mother—have I said that Yvette's mother was none other than Mrs. Jacques de la Fuente nee Duprez—her mother, perhaps, stated the case well.

"In a year you will be twenty-four," she said, the beautiful limpid French softening and sweetening the words. "That is, almost an old maid. It is time, Yvette, you thought—I, myself, was married at fifteen."

Yvette touched her rosy nails with a chamois-skin, and sighed. She was standing at the moment before her dressing table, and the candles set in tall sconces on either side of that artistic bit of furniture afforded a mellow radiance to the mirror's depths.

"At fifteen," repeated the mother, a trifle insistently, "I was married."

"But from the cradle—to the grave!" said Yvette, and fastened a single string of pearls about her long white throat.

"What is it you say?" asked Mrs. de la Fuente, somewhat sharply. She was not infrequently to be found some distance in the rear of her daughter.

"How you must have been bored!" said Yvette.

"In my trousseau," continued the lady, "I had, as you know, great quantities of real lace. The veil of my grandmother, alone—"

"Eh!" said Yvette, "it does not matter." She shrugged her slender shoulders. "I am quite willing to marry—but the man?"

Then Mrs. de la Fuente flung out a crafty feeler. "He has been most attentive," she murmured, "and there is no slightest fault to be found with his position, his name—"

"His money," thrust in Yvette, almost vulgarly. "Say it, mama! You mean Tony Whiting." She added with a little yawn, "I had thought of that, myself."

"He has perhaps spoken," said Mrs. de la Fuente, rather eagerly.

"No!" said Yvette. "No!"—and finished superbly arrogant, "but he will speak to-night."

She drew on a pair of long white gloves, slipped into a long black velvet coat with a collar of fur, and extinguished the candles on the dressing table.

"What is it to-night?" she asked, languidly. "Faust? If you knew how tired I am of that opera with its tenor who is just a grocer's boy in doublet and hose, and its so mysterious devil and its so silly Marguerite. Mind the stair, mama!"

AND it came to pass, as they say in ancient chronicles, that Tony Whiting spoke that night. He had been wanting only the infinitesimal encouragement which Yvette allowed him during the "Jewel Song." The box was very dark, and he sat just behind her, where his eyes could rest without ostentation upon the little curl that touched her neck. It was in his sight, perhaps, the sweetest thing about her—that little wayward, kissing curl. Once she dropped her fan, and when he stooped for it, her fingers fumbled delicately over taking it back. It is just such things which derail the train of otherwise quite prudent events.

In any case, Whiting spoke, in a slow, careful whisper, while Marguerite upon the stage trilled brassily above some bits of coloured glass; she was a stout Marguerite, it may be hardly necessary to remark, with a vanishing waist line and three chins.

Tony Whiting's waist line was also being threatened, and the hair at his temples had yielded visibly

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Illustration by John Newton Howitt

to the persuasion of time, but he had still but one chin and that a good one.

"Yvette," he whispered—not even her mother heard him, though she had always an ear that way—"Yvette! You're very beautiful to-night."

Yvette just lowered her lashes. They were long and touched her cheek with a suggestion of shyness. A smile stirred the corner of her mouth. She did not speak. She knew how it went, that game.

"Suppose," said Whiting, very softly, "you put me out of my agony to-night—yes or no? Are you listening, Yvette?"

Yvette bent her head a very little to say that she was listening. The real old lace above her heart lifted and fell quite evenly. She did not flush.

"Will you?" said Whiting. At least in his throat the breath caught nervously. "Will you, Yvette?"

It was a queer question to ask while Marguerite bedizened her matronly self with ear-rings and necklaces. Whiting, perhaps, realized the queerness of it, for he leaned a little nearer and touched Yvette's scarf reverently with the tips of his fingers.

"It's been going on a long time—with me," he said. "Nothing new—as you know."

Yvette folded her hands in her lap. She looked at the stage—and she looked back over her shoulder into Whiting's eyes. If you had been reared with the end in view of some day entering upon a certain road, you would not, when that road unfolded itself before your feet, draw back. Neither did Yvette. She took her first step between its orderly hedges, naturally enough, without excitement.

"I know," she said, very softly in her turn.

"You will?" said Whiting, incredulous to the last adoring fibre of his being.

"Yes," said Yvette. She was not at all slow.

AND that was the great moment, come and gone, without any blare of trumpets, while Marguerite ogled herself before a mirror, and the devil loitered redly in the background coquetting with Dame Martha.

Mrs. de la Fuente received the news with radiance.

"Dear little one," she said, "I had hoped for it. He is most charming—in every way eligible—not a Creole, of course, but there are really many delightful people uptown. I am confident you will be happy. For the trousseau, of course, you will have Marie?"

"I had not thought of the trousseau," said Yvette.

"Ah youth! youth!" sighed Mrs. de la Fuente, sentimentally. "Colour of rose, and another colour—of the loved one's eyes."

"I had not thought of that, either," said Yvette.

When she stood once more before the mirror of her dressing table and lit the candles, she looked at herself with a vague interest. After a while she drew the back of one hand lightly across her lips. Whiting had kissed her in the discreet moment when Mrs. de la Fuente, mounting the stairs, had left them alone together.

The lips were softly crimson, much as usual, but Yvette, standing between the candles, stared at them curiously, somewhat as though she expected a scar.

She was not given to analysis of her emotions, Yvette. She only stared and sighed, and presently undressed herself, and went to bed with a queer little smile twisting one corner of her mouth. She did not sleep very much, it is true, but an engagement involves a certain amount of excitement not conducive of slumber, and Yvette had not expected to sleep.

Next day she was none the worse for wear, and went upon her way with considerable calm.

Also, when Whiting next kissed her, she neglected subsequently to erase it. She was nothing like so ardent as he, it is true, but then as she explained to him with a lovely indifference, ardour is not the woman's part.

"You care the most?" said Yvette. "Naturally. It should be like that."

"H'mph!" said Whiting. After those brief crucial moments at the opera, he had regained something of his usual poise—a delightfully humorous sophistication and untouched with cynicism. "I dare say—balance of power—eh?"

"There is an old French proverb," said Yvette, turning her winking solitaire about a cool white finger, "which says that there is always one who kisses and one who—how do you say?—one who

presents the cheek. It is true, I suppose. And it should be the man who kisses. Otherwise he might grow tired."

"H'mph!" said Whiting, again. "There's something in that, of course—for flirtations—and episodes. This thing of ours goes a bit deeper—eh? I can't seem to see myself getting tired in case you—well, in case you ever decided to take the initiative. Mind being kissed, Yvette?"

"But that is absurd!" said Yvette, smiling.

"YES—of course," said Whiting. He stroked his clean-shaven chin, which was as yet but one chin, and looked at Yvette out of keen, clear, grey eyes. His own smile had a winning kindliness, but it came slow. "Of course," he repeated. "By nature you're a trifle cold, I fancy—that's all."

Yvette looked at him swiftly and looked away. "Queer!" said Whiting, "your eyes, now—but you wouldn't have said you'd marry me unless you cared—Yvette?"

"Why should you suppose—" Yvette began.

"You're very beautiful," said Whiting, "and you're young. It's incredible that you shouldn't have stirred up a grand passion, somehow. I don't want to be insistent about it, but, my dear girl, don't for God's sake decide to marry me for any reason but the one I've mentioned! You'd do yourself injustice."

"You seem to think," said Yvette, "that it is impossible I should—care—for—you."

"Not impossible," said Whiting, quietly. "An exquisite miracle, if you like. Nothing's impossible. But I can't seem to believe in my own happiness—and I wish it might sometimes occur to you to touch me of your own accord." Then he asked a strange question. "Ever been anybody else, Yvette?"

And Yvette said what every woman says when she feels the wall at her back.

"I don't know what you mean."

"Any other man?" said Whiting, slowly. "At any stage of the game?"

Said Yvette: "I have known a great many men."

And said Whiting: "Yes, of course, that's what I was thinking. Any of 'em leave a scar?"

A scar, you will remember, was what Yvette had looked for on her lips. Not having found it, she probably felt justified now in smiling and shaking her head.

"Thank God!" said Whiting, rather suddenly.

Yvette turned pale.

Afterwards, when she remembered the conversation, she gave audience to a ghost by way of corollary; but nothing resulted, and the trousseau went forward triumphantly. Mrs. de la Fuente swam in satisfaction like a trout in a purling stream. She designed gowns and matched laces. She hobnobbed with dressmakers, and bullied seamstresses. The line of a hat was in her dreams by night, and the argot of the sewing room was on her tongue by day. All of this demanded money, and to obtain that money certain of Mrs. de la Fuente's diamonds found their way into the loan-shops. Yvette protested vainly.

"I do not wish, mama, that you should ruin yourself."

But Mrs. de la Fuente was obdurate.

"In my trousseau were two dozen of everything. Upon my petticoats even was real lace—and the veil of my grandmother—dear little one, will you have it draped back or falling before the face?"

WHEN Yvette had no definite desire to express upon this point, her mother reproached her tragically.

"Is it that you do not care? Unnatural child! I remember that I was mad with excitement for weeks before my wedding. I knew to a fold how I wished the veil to fall. I shed tears if a tuck too much was placed upon a skirt—and I had but fifteen years."

"Did you perhaps hide your doll beneath the steps of the altar?" inquired Yvette. Then she kissed her mother upon the cheek and smiled. She might have been the lovely elder sister of that other little girl in veil and orange blossoms.

"At least," said Mrs. de la Fuente, sighing before the hopelessness of Yvette's disinterest, "your papa approved. He found me wonderfully gowned. All men have eyes for chiffons upon a woman they love. Toney will know if your veil is badly draped."

"And will he punish me, do you think?" asked Yvette. "Will he perhaps beat me, mama?"