

"And, indeed, I don't care for it in the least, so you must permit me to decline your kindness, with thanks. I am going out presently—I shall smoke then."

"Do you not intend to see Mr. Ashton?"

"It is not necessary. We are indifferent acquaintances—nothing more."

"What do you think of him?" asks Kate, leaning her elbow on the table and supporting her cheek with her hand, while her eyes meet those of her companion with a steady, questioning regard. "Is he not very disagreeable, very worldly, and very selfish?"

"You seem to know him so well, that I think you hardly need to ask my opinion," Fenwick answers; thinking, as he speaks, what liquid wells of light are the eyes gazing into his own. "He is very much of a glacier. I am pretty sure that he has never cared, and never will care, for any one but himself."

"How odious such people are! I am certain I shall dislike him exceedingly. What do people without hearts care to live for, I wonder?"

"Have you never heard the recipe which some cynic gave for enjoying life—a hard heart and a good digestion?"

"Is it not strange that anybody could think such a thing? Why, even to love a dog is better than to love nothing—which reminds me" (remembering suddenly that the conversation is verging on dangerous ground) "that Filippo has not had his dessert. He is devoted to almonds, and he shall have some at once. But where is the scamp?"

The scamp in question is Miss Brooke's pet poodle, to whom Kate is very kind, and who returns this kindness with the adoring fondness in which the canine nature excels.

"We left him in the drawing-room, I think," Fenwick says. "Shall I ring for Oscar to bring him?"

"Perhaps Miss Brooke might not like to be interrupted."

"Oscar will only open the door and call the dog." He rises and rings the bell. "Why should you not have what you want, by it Filippo or anything else?"

"You spoil me dreadfully," she says. "It is not good for people always to have what they want."

"Is it not? Well, the most of us have nothing to complain of in that way. But you should want nothing, if I could order all things for you."

She lifts a swift, graceful glance to his face. "You are kindness itself," she says.

"And how often must I tell you that one deserves no credit for being kind to you?" he asks, with a caressing smile.

"Oh, I am not sure of that," she says, blushing quickly, "though it is true that I have always been one of the luckiest girls in the world in that respect. So many people—"

She breaks off abruptly as Oscar opens the door. And at this moment—while the handle is still in his hand—it chances that the drawing-room door, just opposite, opens, and the mysterious visitor comes out into the hall.

Kate gives one glance, and sees that it is a man, a young man, apparently. More than this she does not see; for Miss Brooke says sharply, "Oscar!" and Oscar, turning, closes the dining-room door before advancing to let the stranger out.

He is a young man, as Kate has perceived, and a very impetuous one in his movements; for, as he passes rapidly out of the house, he runs against and almost knocks down an elderly gentleman who is deliberately ascending the portico steps. Muttering a brief "Excuse me," he hurries on, leaving the other to recover breath at his leisure. Fast as he walks, however, he cannot leave behind the memory of the scene which the opening of the dining-room disclosed. It was like some beautiful, glowing picture—rich coloring, bright light, the festive-looking table, and above all, that radiant, glittering figure, round which all the rest were grouped as mere accessories, the lovely, sparkling face, the careless glance of the eyes—all seem photographed on his mind as if drawn in lines of fire.

Meanwhile, the gentleman who was nearly knocked down, having recovered himself somewhat, says irascibly to Oscar, "Who the devil is that person, and what does he mean by rushing out of a house in such a headlong way?"

"I don't know sir, who he is," Oscar answers. "I never saw him before."

"I hope I shall never see him again," says Mr. Ashton—for it is he—with a growl. "If I had had time, I should have knocked him down with my umbrella! An ill-bred—well, what are you staring at? Are the ladies in the drawing-room?"

"Miss Brooke is, sir," answers Oscar, recollecting himself. "It was enough to make a body stare," he afterwards confides to his associates below stairs, "to hear a shaky old chap like that talkin' about knockin' a man down."

The gentleman thus characterized enters the drawing-room in no amiable frame of mind. He is a person whom trifles readily upset—an egotist of the first water, an epicurean in all matters relating to personal comfort and luxury, one who, in the course of a life now entering its sixth decade, has consistently denied nothing to himself and given nothing to others.

He is sufficiently a man of the world, however, to preserve an outward suavity of manner, especially in approaching a person of so much importance as Miss Brooke.

"I am glad to find you alone," he says, after they have exchanged salutations, and he is established in a delightful easy-chair, near the

open grate filled with glowing coal. "I was nearly demolished by some impetuous visitor in the act of departure—and I am sincerely glad that it was departure."

"Ah, you met the—young man, then," says Miss Brooke. "Yes, he is very impetuous—unfortunately so, indeed. Oscar, let Miss Lawrence know that Mr. Ashton is here."

#### CHAPTER XXXIII.

"All that in woman is adored  
In thy fair self I find—  
For the whole sex can but afford  
The handsome and the kind."

Miss Lawrence makes no long tarrying before her appearance in the drawing-room. Mr. Ashton has not more than settled thoroughly in his chair, with a comfortable sense of pleasant surroundings, and prepared to render himself agreeable to Miss Brooke, with whom he has many acquaintances, and many recollections of places and people, in common, when the door opens, and he turns his head reluctantly. There is no one concerning whom he feels less curiosity—no one, in fact, whom he regards with more of a feeling of bored annoyance—than this unknown niece, whom he has of late been obliged to consider a little. From Florida Vaughn's account he expects to see a rather pretty but *gauche* rustic—and—heaven and earth! what is this?

Can this beautiful, stately creature, with the bearing and step of a young Diana, be the girl who, without any "advantages," has shot up like a wild-flower among fox-hunters and hounds? As she crosses the floor, her glittering, shining draperies seem a fit adornment for one so fair and graceful. Her face is like a flower in its vivid color, the beautiful eyes shine, the delicately-cut lips curve into a smile.

Involuntarily Mr. Ashton rises and makes his most courtly bow. "Is it possible that this is Kate?" he says—for Miss Brooke, who is enjoying the scene, will not disturb it by a word.

"Yes, it is Kate," the girl answers, in her sweet, fresh voice. "I am glad to make your acquaintance, Uncle Ashton. How do you do?"

She puts her slender hand into that of the uncle who has never seen her before, and looks at him with the same steady glance which gazed at Mr. Lawrence's frank, kind face four years ago.

The face at which she looks now is a very different one—as different from the other as two faces, both belonging to educated humanity, can possibly be imagined. It was handsome in youth, it is still well preserved, with hair and whiskers carefully dyed light brown, cold gray eyes that remind Kate of Mr. Vaughn's, and clearly defined features of the aquiline type. For the rest, Mr. Ashton has a spare, undersized figure, scrupulously well dressed, and the manners of a man of the world—as his next words testify:

"You must pardon my surprise. I expected to see a little girl, and I find a magnificent young lady. I am happy to make your acquaintance, my dear niece, and only regret that I am so late in making it."

"Thank you," says Kate, graciously. I will let him see that I am not quite a savage," she thinks. "It seems a test of civilization to be specially polite to people one dislikes."

"Miss Vaughn might have told you that Kate was not exactly a little girl," says Miss Brooke.

"Ah, yes, Miss Vaughn," says Mr. Ashton, seating himself again. "She spoke of Kate, certainly; but women rarely enter into details with regard to the attractions of other women. Ashton was more satisfactory, but not enthusiastic—which is easily accounted for, I suppose," he adds, with a slight smile of cynical amusement. "He was not fortunate enough to please you, Miss Kate?"

"No," answers Kate calmly, "he did not please me at all."

"Yet he has pleased a good many other women," says her uncle, regarding her with a surprise which, master of himself as he is, he cannot altogether conceal.

"But tastes differ, you know," says the girl. "I disliked him from the first, and I found afterward that my instinct was very well justified."

"Instincts of the kind generally find some means to justify themselves," says Mr. Ashton. "The wisest thing to do is to take people as you find them, and form no idea of their characters. Circumstances will reveal those."

"Circumstances did reveal Mr. Vaughn's character."

"I am aware that there is a discredit to story about respecting him," says Mr. Ashton. "Something about his tampering with a horse. Did your friends believe it?"

"One of my cousins did, the other did not, and I never heard my uncle express an opinion," answers Kate. "I know nothing of what others thought."

There is a moment's pause. Then Mr. Ashton drops the subject of Mr. Vaughn, and returns again to Kate.

"Will you allow me to inquire," he says, "where you have spent your life? I fancied that it was at—what is the name of your uncle's place?—but the country is not usually a good school for manner and deportment."

"If you had ever seen Fairfields and the dear people who live there," says Kate, "you would understand that no one could ask a better school for anything."

"No doubt it is a very delightful place, and

that the people who live there are very charming," says Mr. Ashton, with the faintest possible tinge of mockery underlying the suavity of his tone, "but still, a plantation is—a plantation; and you—I never flatter, pray understand—would be presentable anywhere."

While Kate laughs, Miss Brooke says:

"The child's manner is very good, and she would have had it under any circumstances, I think, for it is inherited from her father."

"Ah!" Mr. Ashton bends his head a little. "Very probably. She is like his family in personal appearance."

"Yes, I am a thorough Lawrence," remarks Kate, with an air that says, plainly as words, "I am very glad of it."

"You are like my family also, in some respects," says her uncle, who understands what she means to imply, and is amused by it. More and more is he pleased by the lovely, spirited creature who holds her own so well with him. "Good Heavens! how could I imagine she would be like this!" he thinks. "If I had claimed her, she might have been a credit to me anywhere."

"I don't see how that can be," answers Kate, glancing from his face to the reflection of her own in a mirror opposite. "But there is a decided family likeness between yourself and Mr. and Miss Vaughn," she adds.

At this point Miss Brooke, thinking that the conversation is becoming rather too personal, makes a diversion.

"I hope you mean to spend some time with us, and give Kate the opportunity to know you, Mr. Ashton," she says, with that fine sincerity which characterizes two-thirds of the pleasant speeches of society.

"I shall be here for a few days, not longer," answers Mr. Ashton. "Miss Vaughn, who has been kind enough to come with me," he goes on, addressing Kate, "desired me to present her regards to you and say that she will call to-morrow morning at any hour when you will be disengaged."

"Miss Vaughn!—is she with you?" cries Kate.

"She is with me—and her mother also. Both ladies desire very much to see you."

It being impossible for Kate to reciprocate this desire, she says nothing, until Miss Brooke suggests that she has not named an hour when she will be disengaged.

"Oh, any hour will do," she answers. "I have no engagement at all for to-morrow morning."

It is on the tip of Miss Brooke's tongue to say, "Still you had better name an hour," when luckily a second thought occurs to her, and she restrains the words. Anything will be welcome that keeps Kate in during the whole of the next morning—and an indefinite engagement must perforce do this. Just then a peal of the door-bell echoes sharply through the house, and Kate says to herself:

"Somebody is coming—what a relief!"

Two bodies appear—both young men, whom she receives with a cordiality which is almost effusive. "So charmed to see you!" she says, looking impartially at both, so that it is impossible for either to appropriate the compliment exclusively. "I began to fear that no one was coming to my rescue," she goes on with a low laugh, when they have seated themselves one on each side of her. "Did you ever make the acquaintance of an uncle whom you had never seen before? That is what I have been doing this evening—and naturally some diversion in the order of entertainment is not disagreeable."

"We are happy to come when you have need of us," answers one of the young men, "but it is possible that you have never seen your uncle before?"

"Never before, so we have necessarily a limited number of subjects upon which to converse—and those are by this time exhausted. Therefore, you can begin at once and tell me some nice bit of gossip."

The two young cavaliers, nowise loth, proceed at once to make themselves agreeable, and Mr. Ashton watches the scene with observant eyes, while talking to Miss Brooke. It is not from any special interest in Kate that he does so, but because it is the kind of scene that he likes to watch, just as he likes to see a well-set society comedy on the boards of a theatre. The prettily dressed girl with her two attendants is to him a picture, and he appreciates thoroughly the sparkling brightness of her smiles, the ready ease of her conversation.

"Really," he says to Miss Brooke, "you must allow me to congratulate you on having discovered and brought to light one of the flowers that are proverbially said to blush unseen on desert shores—and I fancy, despite my niece's indignant denial of a little while back, that it was very much of a desert in which you found her."

"On the contrary," says Miss Brooke, who is as ready as Kate to resent polite sneers at Fairfields, "it was one of the genial, old-fashioned Southern homes that are the most pleasant places I know. Kate was quite right in saying that she could find no better school of manner. Mr. Lawrence and his family make no pretension to fashion, but they have been gentlefolks for generations."

"No doubt," says Mr. Ashton, considering within himself that to make all questions personal is a besetting infirmity of women. "But having rescued Kate from this delightful place, may I beg to know what you mean to do with her?"

There is so much significance in his glance

and to e as he asks this question, that Miss Brooke is for a moment disconcerted. Then, recovering herself, she answers: "I have no intention of doing anything with her. She is spending the winter with me as my guest and companion—and I hope that our companionship will not end with this winter. I trust to take her abroad with me next spring."

"Still as guest and companion, I suppose?"

"That will depend entirely upon circumstances," she replies, a little haughtily—for it occurs to her that, having neglected his niece during all her life, Mr. Ashton has no right to make himself disagreeable at this late day.

"I should not like to interfere with your claims as a discoverer," says that gentleman, "but if you can agree to relinquish Kate for part of the winter, I shall be glad. Miss Vaughn is anxious for her to pay a visit to her."

"Kate must answer that for herself," says Miss Brooke.

"What is that I must answer?" asks Kate, looking across the room.

"We will let you know to-morrow, my dear," replies Mr. Ashton.

#### CHAPTER XXXIV.

"Unless you can think, when the song is done,  
No other is soft in the rhythm;  
Unless you can feel, when left by one,  
That all men else go with him;  
Unless you know, when unpraised by his breath,  
That your beauty itself wants proving;  
Unless you can swear, 'For life, for death'  
Oh, fear to call it loving."

Miss Brooke keeps her own counsel with regard to the mysterious visitor who preceded Mr. Ashton; which is easy to do, as Kate feels no curiosity on the subject. She was surprised for a moment when the opening door disclosed the figure in the hall, but when Fenwick said, carelessly, "Some applicant for charity, very likely," she dismissed the matter from her mind. Applicants for charity are numerous—for of her abundance Miss Brooke gives liberally—and it was not improbable that this should be one of them.

So completely has the affair vanished from her recollection, that it does not occur to her to connect Miss Brooke's singular nervousness, the next morning, with it. This nervousness is displayed to an uncommon degree, and puzzles Kate not a little. Miss Brooke seems unwilling to lose sight of her for a moment; and every time the door-bell sounds (and it sounds with unusual frequency this morning), she changes color like a girl expecting her lover.

"What is the matter? Are you looking for anybody?" Kate cannot help asking once or twice—but she receives no satisfactory reply.

"People often come when one is not looking for them, and not desiring to see them," Miss Brooke answers enigmatically.

"Yes—Uncle Ashton's appearance is a case in point to prove that," says Kate. "Nobody was looking for him, and nobody wanted to see him, I am sure. Do you know," she goes on, reflectively, "I was surprised to see how young he looks—for his age! Somehow, I had fancied him very ancient. I think he must have practised that recipe for enjoying life, of which Mr. Fenwick spoke last night—a hard heart and a good digestion."

"I don't think there is a doubt of it," says Miss Brooke, who is listening with a distracted mind to the conversation which Oscar is holding with the vendor of some patent furniture-polish at the front door.

"I wonder what has brought Miss Vaughn here with him?" pursues Kate, who is lying at ease on a lounge. "It is impossible to say how much I dislike to see her! Will it be inexcusably rude if I chance to be not at home when she comes?"

"It would be altogether inexcusable," replies Miss Brooke, with emphasis.

"At least I can go and take a walk. Nobody calls before twelve o'clock."

"No" (hastily), "you must not think of such a thing. She might come. Why are you so restless?"

Kate is on the point of saying, "I am not restless; it is you who are nervous," but she checks herself. After all, no doubt, Miss Brooke knows best, and it is a trifling matter to yield.

So she stays in-doors, and the morning wears away to noon. Not long after that hour, the much-rung bell sounds once more, and this time Oscar appears with the expected bit of paste-board.

"Only Miss Vaughn," says Kate, glancing at it. "Her mother has not come. Am I glad or sorry? I don't know. One member of the Vaughn family is enough at a time; but still—Miss Brooke, are you not coming in?"

Miss Brooke shakes her head. "Certainly not. Miss Vaughn does not wish to see me. She has a proposal to make to you, and, Kate, I want you to remember that you must do exactly as you please."

"I don't understand," says Kate. "What proposal can she have to make to me—or what proposal do you think I would possibly entertain from her?"

"You will learn soon enough. Go—and remember to be courteous. Ask if her mother and herself will drive with us this afternoon, and dine here."

"Oh!"

"Yes, there is no help for it. I invited Mr. Ashton last night, and he said his decision depended upon the ladies."

Kate sighs and leaves the room. She crosses the hall with a reluctance that makes her step