

with Lady Dunbar only a few minutes ago—unearthed her at last!—and told her something about you. She is quite curious to see you now."

"There's Miss Dunbar," said Sir George Seaforth, "with Captain Weyland."

A few seconds later a radiant being, a more beautiful development of yesterday's vision in pink muslin, was speaking to Lady Sophie in a soft, sweet voice.

For the moment a classical profile was turned toward me, and my fascinated eyes lingered upon its cameo-like outlines.

She was even lovelier than I thought her yesterday as she had leaned back by her mother's side in the victoria. And yet perhaps "lovely" was hardly the word to describe this Honorable Diana, who looked as if the earth were an old cake for her careless fingers to pick to pieces and find all the best plums.

She was tall as her fair, fabled namesake, and her perfect features were of the aquiline type, her conspicuously short upper lip thin and red as velvet coral. The eyes, which were absolutely of almond shape, and very large, were as black as eyes ever are, and had heavy white lids, darkly fringed above and below. The hair elaborately dressed, and wound with a string of pearls over the low forehead, was of an almost unnaturally bright chestnut, appearing all the more vivid because of the dead white of the beautiful face, smooth and colorless as the petals of a pond lily.

Miss Dunbar said something concerning nonplacet and agreeable to Lady Sophie and then turned to me. Lady Sophie had mentioned that she had a guest. It was so nice of me to have come. Miss Dunbar hoped that I had been dancing a great deal. Her mother had said that she wished to meet me. I was rather like some one she had once known—an old friend, I hadn't said. Would I mind being introduced, if there happened to be some dances I didn't fancy, so that I wouldn't feel that I was wasting time?

My heart gave a little thump. It seemed to me that a first conversation with Lady Dunbar could hardly fail to be interesting.

CHAPTER XIII.

Lady Dunbar and a Catechism.

The next dance was the "Washington Post," imported from the States long since the days when I had learned dancing from a skilled and loving teacher. I therefore did not know it, and did not wish to take a lesson in public, though Sir George Seaforth offered to give it, and argued the point for some time.

I would go instead to Lady Dunbar, I said, and Lady Sophie de Greston burst into a fit of giggles, her eyes sparkling with controlled curiosity in anticipation of the scene at which she would not be present.

"Let me take you to Lady Dunbar," exclaimed Sir George, who was, as usual, lavishly displayed shoulders with the pettiest air of a spoiled beauty.

"How horrid of you to have forgotten that you made me promise last week to dance the 'Washington Post' with you! It isn't at all the proper thing for me to remind you of it, but you know I'm not a particularly well-situated young person, and I hate sitting out. Miss Brand doesn't want to dance, and Captain Weyland loathes the 'Post.' Providence evidently intended that he should guide her to my mother."

"Of course I didn't forget; I only forgot that this was the 'Washington Post,'" asserted Sir George Seaforth. "Awfully good of you to keep it. Don't forget that the next is ours, Miss Brand."

He looked at me no more, as Captain Weyland said, and she, too, prepared to be my pilot between the Scylla and Charybdis of the crowd. But for all that, though Miss Dunbar had his eyes and his most courteous attention—and she was beautiful enough to hold both; probably far, far handsomer than I—I had a curiously peaceful, blissful feeling that I kept Sir George Seaforth's thoughts, and carried them away with me across the room.

"Pretty girl, Miss Dunbar, isn't she?" remarked Captain Weyland. "She is splendid form to look at. I've seen in 'She's handsomer than anyone I ever saw,'" I answered.

"So a lot of people think. She's been no end run after since she came out a year ago. She was quite the belle of last season, and has held first place this season, too, without any trouble; it's been a walkover for her till now—everybody ravin' about her, most of the best fellows dancin' on her line, and that sort of thing, you know. Wonder if she won't shy at a rival?"

"Has she one? That's pretty good, isn't it? I should rather think she has—after to-night. It's been a regular sensation."

"Dear me! Is the girl here, then? I'd like to see her. It seems almost impossible that anyone could be handsomer than Miss Dunbar."

"So she thought, I fancy. Look here, Miss Brand, you come from Devonshire, don't you?"

"I don't—er—I mean no. Why do you ask?"

"Well, there are some Brands there, and the girls are so awfully refreshingly innocent in Devonshire. Would you really like to see Miss Dunbar's rival attraction? I'll show her to you at the end of this room before we get to Lady Dunbar."

I thanked him. Now that I was sure my frock and hair were above reproach, it was rather fun to have people look at me as they did. I began to think that I must really present a quite a respectable appearance in a pretty frock.

"There she is!" said Captain Weyland, stopping suddenly and bringing me to a standstill too.

My eyes travelled inquiringly, but without rest except for my own reflection in a huge mirror that ran from floor to ceiling. I gave a little gasp, and comprehended.

"How unkind of you to make fun of me," I ejaculated.

"Make fun? For my honor, I was in dead earnest; thought I was putting in rather nicely, too. My word, Miss Brand, you're going to make havoc among us for weeks' left of the season! As you are strong, be merciful, I beg. And look in the society columns of all the newspapers to-morrow if you don't believe what I say."

Compliments are popularly supposed to be pleasant fare for a woman, but these, coming after nineteen years' fasting, choked me and sent the blood with such a rush to my head that tears were forced into my eyes.

"There's Lady Dunbar," I said hurriedly. "Oh, you know her, then?"

"Not to speak to, I—I've only seen her once before."

A moment after Captain Weyland was introducing me, in such a manner that I guessed he must be an old friend and favorite of Lady Dunbar's, and he did not neglect to mention, by way of making conversation, that this was not the first time I had seen my hostess.

"Indeed?" she repeated. "I could almost be certain that we had not met. Miss Brand, 'You're is not a face to forget, especially as it recalls the past.'"

"We didn't meet," I responded meekly. "I was in the States."

"Where?" with veiled eagerness.

For an instant I hesitated. If there were no other mystery in the events of the past two days, such a mystery, or at least her apparent interest in me, was no less, and if I wished to fathom it (as I naturally did) I must be wise as a serpent, harmless as a dove. I must begin well, for never afterwards, if I made a false start now, could I recover lost ground.

"It was in the park, yesterday afternoon. You and Miss Dunbar were driving together, I think, was my circumstance answer."

"Ah, was that all? How nice of you to remember our faces through twenty-four hours! But, then, of it is surely your first season. I should like to have a little talk with you, if you really don't mind missing this one dance."

"I can't dance it," I blunty replied. "Run away then, my dear, and perhaps Weyland—like a good boy, I want Miss Brand to myself."

"It's my mystery. What will it be like?" I asked myself.

"I hope you won't be torn quite to pieces here in this whirlpool. Tell me—you only saw me in the park yesterday."

I could not be guilty of a deliberate lie. "I—fancied I saw you afterwards, but wasn't sure."

"Where was that?"

"Oh, in Hamilton Place at first."

"And after—"

"It was going down to Peckham, and I thought—I couldn't be certain, of course."

Lady Dunbar smiled upon me; but though her smile was brilliant it was singularly cold—cold as moonlight on mountain snow.

"If I must have been, I," she pleasantly admitted. "My daughter and I work as hard as the rest of our friends at amusing ourselves, but we try to do a little something for others, too; and we occasionally make a few trifling presents."

Woman in Peckham. We went to see her yesterday. So you were going in that direction, too? Rather an odd coincidence."

"Not as odd as it seemed," I remarked to myself, considering I had lived there for five years. But aloud I said nothing. I merely smiled a noncommittal smile.

"So out of the way, isn't it?" murmured Lady Dunbar. "Though one doesn't grumble when it's for charity, of course. Do you often go to Peckham?"

"Rather often. But I don't expect to do so as frequently in future," I made demure reply.

"Ah, you will be with dear Lady Sophie for some time. I am glad of that. Diana would like to know you. You must get Lady Sophie to spare you to us sometimes. You know, you look remarkably like a friend of my youth—very days—a very beautiful woman, I may tell you. Her name was Margaret Sylvester. I wonder if, by any possibility, you are related to her?"

"No, Lady Dunbar, I never heard the name before."

"I am disappointed," she declared. But, in all contradiction to the statement, her face cleared.

"If she had been even a distant relative of yours, you could, of course, not have failed to hear of her."

I was tempted to say that I might easily have failed, since I knew absolutely nothing of my relatives save Cousin East, of whom I knew too much. But I remembered my meter, which was to learn all I could and betray nothing. It therefore only remarked that if I had heard so pretty a name as Margaret Sylvester, I should not have forgotten it.

"I am surprised that Sophie de Greston never spoke of you to me before," Lady Dunbar continued, with a weary note of irritation in her voice which she tried in vain to subdue. "I suppose your people and hers are old friends."

"I look like some one she used to know," I returned. "Perhaps she, too, takes an interest in me on account of Margaret Sylvester."

I had meant to be so prudent, but if I had deliberately worked up to this point, when I might disconcert the enemy by throwing a bombshell into his lines, I could not have succeeded more thoroughly.

Lady Dunbar was not a character in Adelphi melodrama, therefore she did not pant or start violently, or indeed, exhibit any other notable sign of discomposure. But she drew in her lips, and there was a flicker of the sharply curled nostrils, expanding and contracting like those of a vicious horse.

"Has she said anything to make you think that, Miss Brand?"

"No. It was merely my imagination. You have a vivid one. It must be a pleasure to you. But surely your people—"

"I am all my own people—at present."

What induced me to add those last two words I do not know, but for some reason they pricked Lady Dunbar as if I had stabbed at her with the tiny point of a penknife.

CHAPTER XIV.

A Surprise for Cousin Sarah.

In a day or two I will go to Peckham and take away mother's escotille from Cousin Sarah. She has promised myself among my pillows at three o'clock in the morning after Lady Dunbar's ball. But, needless to say, the intention be meant to lay her feathered stone in a place no well-brought-up young woman ever mentions, except in church.

Life was a kaleidoscope, with each fleeting turn of the rainbow wheel more brilliant than the last. I was a success.

It appeared, and every hour had its separate engagement. There was a good deal of hard work as well as pleasure; but on the whole it seemed an easier thing in a single day than a Peckham nursery governess into a butler of society than I could have supposed possible, though perhaps, by my patroness declared, that came of being a gentlewoman to begin with.

Lady Sophie's place at the breakfast table was heaped with invitations each of a hundred different people every day, and we accepted all that we could undertake without actually inducing immediate nervous prostration. I must have had to talk, an average, with a hundred different people every day, and I wondered at myself as I saw how easily I picked up the jargon of society.

I chatted about the book of the hour (which I had glanced at as Ascham had read my hair); I exhaustively criticized the De Reszkes and Madame Melba (whom I had heard twice, when Sir George Seaforth gave us his box at Covent Garden); I babbled of actors and actresses whom I had never seen, and did not hesitate to discuss the rival merits of horses for the not far distant Ascot.

I even ventured, by the end of a week, to risk-dropping my g's, that one combined touch of nature and affectation where the two extremes of society meet. In all this there was no time to think of Hapholme Villa, which seemed now to have belonged to a past incarnation.

In the morning we slept or shopped, and Lady Sophie's generosity to me was boundless. I dared not express a wish lest it should be instantly granted, and it appeared to me that her idea of poverty must be an elastic one. In the afternoon we went to "at home" in the Botanical Gardens, or toiled out to Ranelagh on Sir George Seaforth's coach, or amused ourselves in some other way, with large crowds of people.

"Oh, don't—don't, please!" I broke in, with a face that felt scarier.

"Well, I won't!" said Lady Sophie. "But there's one thing I'd better say, once for all, and have it done with. You have had the good sense I've tried to inculcate in you, you choose a rich man. It's just as easy to fall in love with a man who has money as with one who hasn't. People have got the impression that you are an heiress."

"I don't see why, except for the pretty dresses you have—"

"I have played our cards as judiciously as I knew how, my child. You are the daughter of a dear, dear school friend, and have five, and six, and seven life buried in the country with guardians who were very strict in their ideas. There's more or less truth in that; but I don't want to be a school girl. I've just as much as to ask direct questions, except Valencia Dunbar, who has certainly taken the most morbid interest. Why, I can't guess, unless she's jealous of my diamonds and the slight mystery that surrounds your antecedents has only heightened the attraction. I'm afraid that I don't often take up penniless girls, and I'm afraid that I don't often take up penniless girls, and I'm afraid that I don't often take up penniless girls."

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face, and preparing to meet it? Of course, I am more than happy with you, and I have never got over the idea of being in fairyland, as if I'd lived a stone under a hollow tree and gone down a thousand steps, like the children in the German story books. But they always had to go back to the real world after a while, and so must I. Hadn't I better see some agent for governesses, and ask—"

"I don't think it will be necessary," replied Lady Sophie dryly. "Look at great fancy to you when I first saw you, as I explained; and during these weeks that you have been with me I have grown very fond of you—even more fond than I supposed possible with such a selfish woman as I confess to being. Still, I can't keep you forever, as you remind me, and it is only right that you should look to the future. But as it is your child, that you will have many opportunities of remaining forever in the world to which I've introduced you."

"Fain as I had become, I had not yet got over my first blush."

"You mean—oh, of course, I know what you mean, though it seems horrid to talk of it."

You have had several proposals already, but I have not yet accepted any of them. I don't quite want to accept, perhaps; but they are not an earnest of what are sure to come. I can't say more."

"Oh, don't—don't, please!" I broke in, with a face that felt scarier.

"Well, I won't!" said Lady Sophie. "But there's one thing I'd better say, once for all, and have it done with. You have had the good sense I've tried to inculcate in you, you choose a rich man. It's just as easy to fall in love with a man who has money as with one who hasn't. People have got the impression that you are an heiress."

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