

once, not long ago, when he fell out upon nature—he had laid hands on a copy of *Endymion* belonging to me—I don't know how the devil he got it—I asked him whether he thought the devil made the world. You should have seen the white wrath he went into at the question! I told him it was generally believed one or the other did make the world. He told me God made the world, but sin had made it. I asked him if it was sin that made it so beautiful. He said it was sin that made it very ugly it must have looked when God had just finished it! He called me a blasphemous, and walked to the door. I stopped him for a moment by saying that I thought after all he must be right, for according to biologists the world must have been a horrible place and full of the most hideous creatures before sin came and made it lovely. When he saw my drift, he strode up to me and—well, very like his own God, I should think—and was going to strike me. I looked him in the eyes without moving, as if he had been a madman. He turned and left the room. I left the house, and went back to London the same night.

"Oh, Charley! Charley! that was too bad!"

"I knew it, Wilfrid, and yet I did it! But if your father had made a downright coward of you, afraid to speak the truth, or show what you were thinking, you also might find that when anger gave you a fictitious courage, you could not help breaking out. It's only another form of cowardice, I know; and I am as much ashamed of it as you could wish me to be."

"Have you made it up with him since?"

"I've never seen him since."

"Haven't you written then?"

"No. Where's the use? He never would understand me. He knows no more of the condition of my mind than he does of the other side of the moon. If I offered such, he would put a full apology for my behaviour to him—repudiating himself, and telling me it was the wrath of an offended God, not of an earthly parent I had to deprecate. If I told him I had only spoken against his false God—how far would that go to mend the matter, do you think?"

"Not far, I must allow. But I am very sorry."

"I wouldn't care if I could be sure of anything—or even sure that if I were sure, I shouldn't be mistaken."

"I'm afraid you are very morbid, Charley."

"Perhaps. But you cannot deny that my father is sure of things that you believe utterly false."

"I suspect, however, that if we were able to get a bird's-eye view of his mind and all its workings, we should discover that what he called assurance was not the condition you would call such. You would find it was not the certainty you covet."

"I have thought of that, and it is my only comfort. But I am sick of the whole subject. See that cloud? Isn't it like Death on the pale horse? What fun it must be for the cherubs on such a night as this, to go blowing the clouds into fantastic shapes with their trumpet, cheeks!"

Assurance was ever what Charley wanted, and unhappily the sense of intellectual insecurity weakened his moral action.

Once more I reveal a haunting uneasiness in the expression of a hope that the ordered character of the conversation I have just set down may not render it incredible to my reader. I record the result alone. The talk itself was far more desultory, and in consequence of questions, objections, and explanations, divaricated much from the comparatively direct line I have endeavoured to give it here. In the hope of making my reader understand both Charley and myself, I have sought to make the winding and rough path straight and smooth.

CHAPTER XXXVI

TAPESTRY.

HAVING heard what I was about at the Hall, Charley expressed a desire to take a share in my labours, especially as thereby he would be able to see more of his mother and sister. I took him straight to the book-rooms, and we were hard at work when Clara entered.

"Here is your old friend Charley Osborne," I said. "You remember Miss Coningham, Charley, I know."

He advanced in what seemed a strangely embarrassed—indeed rather sheepish manner, altogether unlike his usual bearing. I attributed it to a doubt whether Clara would acknowledge their old acquaintance. On her part, she met him with some frankness, but I thought also a rather embarrassed look, which was the more surprising as I had let her know he was coming. But they shook hands, and in a little while we were all chatting comfortably.

"Shall I go and tell Mrs. Osborne you are here?" she asked.

"Yes, if you please," said Charley, and she went.

In a few minutes Mrs. Osborne and Mary entered. The meeting was full of affection, but to my eye looked like a meeting of the

living and the dead in a dream—there was such an evident sadness in it, as if each was dimly aware that they met but in appearance and were in reality far asunder. I could not doubt that however much they loved him, and however little they sympathized with his father's treatment of him, his mother and sister yet regarded him as separated from them by a great gulf—that of culpable unbelief. But they seemed therefore only the more anxious to please and serve him—their anxiety revealing itself in an eagerness painfully like the service offered to one whom the doctors have given up, and who may now have any indulgence he happens to fancy.

"I say, mother," said Charley, who seemed to strive after an airier manner even than usual—"couldn't you come and help us? It would be so jolly!"

"No, my dear; I mustn't leave Lady Brotherton. That would be rude, you know. But I daresay Mary might."

"Oh, please, mamma! I should like it so much—especially if Clara would stop! But perhaps Mr. Cumberland—we ought to have asked him first."

"Yes—to be sure—he's the foreman," said Charley. "But he's not a bad fellow, and won't be disoblighing. Only you must do as he tells you, or it'll be the worse for us all. I know him."

"I shall be delighted," I said. "I can give both the ladies plenty to do. Indeed I regard Miss Coningham as one of my hands already. Won't Miss Brotherton honour us to-day, Miss Coningham?"

"I will go and ask her," said Clara.

They all withdrew. In a little while I had four assistants, and we got on famously. The carpenter had been hard at work, and the room next the armoury, the oak-paneelling of which had shown considerable signs of decay, had been repaired, and the shelves, which were in tolerable condition, were now ready to receive their burden, and reflect the first rays of a dawning order.

Plenty of talk went on during the dusting and arranging of the books by their size, which was the first step towards a cosmos. There was a certain playful naïveté about Charley's manner and speech when he was happy which gave him an instant advantage with women, and even made the impression of wit where there was only grace. Although he was perfectly capable, however, of engaging to any extent in the *bookings* which has ever been in place between young men and women since dawning humanity were first aware of a lovely difference, there was always a certain indescribable dignity about what he said which I now see could have come only from a believing heart. I use the word advisedly, but would rather my reader should find what I mean than require me to explain it fully. Belief, to my mind, lies chiefly in the practical recognition of the high and pure.

Miss Brotherton looked considerably puzzled sometimes, and indeed out of her element. But her dignity had no chance with so many young people, and was compelled to thaw visibly; and while growing more friendly with the others, she could not avoid unbending towards me also, notwithstanding I was a neighbour and the son of a dairy-farmer.

Mary Osborne took little part in the fun beyond a smile, or in the more solid conversation beyond an assent or an ordinary remark. I did not find her very interesting. An on-looker would probably have said she lacked expression. But the stillness upon her face bore to me the shadow of a reproach. Perhaps it was only a want of sympathy with what was going on around her. Perhaps her soul was either far withdrawn from its present circumstances, or not yet awake to the general interests of life. There was little in the form or hue of her countenance to move admiration, beyond a complexion without spot. It was very fair and delicate, with little more colour in it than in the white rose, which but the faintest warmth redeems from dead whiteness. Her features were good in form, but in no way remarkable; her eyes were of the so-called hazel, which consists of a mingling of brown and green; her figure was good, but seemed unelastic, and she had nothing of her brother's gaiety or grace of movement or expression. I do not mean that either her motions or her speech were clumsy—there was simply nothing to remark in them beyond the absence of anything special. In a word, I did not find her interesting, save as the sister of my delightful Charley, and the sharer of his mother's griefs concerning him.

"If I had as good help in the afternoon," I said, "we should have all the books on the shelves to-night, and be able to set about asserting them to-morrow."

"I am sorry I cannot come this afternoon," said Miss Brotherton. "I should have been most happy if I could. It is really very pleasant—notwithstanding the dust. But Mrs. Osborne and mamma want me to go with them to Minstercombe. You will lunch with us to-day, won't you?" she added, turning to Charley.

"Thank you, Miss Brotherton," he replied; "I should have been delighted, but I am not my own master—I am Cumberland's slave at present, and can eat and drink only when and where he chooses."

"You must stay with your mother, Charley,"

I said. "You cannot refuse Miss Brotherton."

She could thereupon scarcely avoid extending the invitation to me, but I declined it on some pretext or other, and I was again, thanks to Lilith, back from my dinner before they had finished luncheon. The carriage was at the door when I rode up, and the moment I heard it drive away, I went to the dining-room to find my coadjutors. The only person there was Miss Pease. A thought struck me.

"Won't you come and help us, Miss Pease?" I have lost one of my assistants, and I am very anxious to get the room we are at now so far finished to-night."

A smile found its way to her cold eyes, and set the blue sparkling for one briefest moment.

"It is very kind of you, Mr. Cumberland, but—"

"Kind!" I exclaimed—"I want your help, Miss Pease."

"I'm afraid—"

"Lady Brotherton can't want you now. Do oblige me. You will find it fun."

She smiled outright—evidently at the fancy of any relation between her and fun.

"Do go and put a cap on, and a cotton dress, and come," I persisted.

Without another word she left the room. I was still alone in the library when she came to me, and having shown her what I wanted, we were already busy when the rest arrived.

"Oh Peasey! Are you there?" said Clara, as she entered—not unkindly.

"I have got a substitute for Miss Brotherton, you see, Clara—Miss Coningham—I beg your pardon."

"There's no occasion to beg my pardon. Why shouldn't you call me Clara if you like? It is my name."

"Charley might be taking the same liberty," I returned, extemporizing a reason.

"And why shouldn't Charley take the same liberty?" she retorted.

"For no reason that I know," I answered, a trifle hurt, "if it be agreeable to the lady."

"And the gentleman," she amended.

"And the gentleman," I added.

"Very well. Then we are all good boys and girls. Now Peasey, I'm very glad you're come. Only mind you get back to your place before the ogress returns, or you'll have your head snapped off."

Was I right, or was it the result of the slight offence I had taken? Was the gracious, graceful, naïve, playful, daring woman—or could she be—or had she been just the least little bit vulgar? I am afraid I was then more sensitive to vulgarity in a woman, real or fancied, than even to wickedness—at least I thought I was. At all events, the first conviction of anything common or unrefined in a woman would at once have placed me beyond the sphere of her attraction. But I had no time to think the suggestion over now; and in a few minutes—whether she saw the cloud on my face I cannot tell—Clara had given me a look and a smile which banished the possibility of my thinking about it for the present.

Miss Pease worked more diligently than any of the party. She seldom spoke, and when she did, it was in a gentle, subdued, almost mournful tone; but the company of the young people without the restraint of her mistress, was evidently grateful to what of youth yet remained in her oppressed being.

Before it was dark we had got the books all upon the shelves, and leaving Charley with the ladies, I walked home.

I found Styles had got everything out of the lumber-room except a heavy oak chest in the corner, which, our united strength being insufficient to displace it, I concluded was fixed to the floor. I collected all the keys my aunt had left behind her, but sought the key of this chest in vain. For my uncle, I never saw a key in his possession. Even what little money he might have in the house, was only put away at the back of an open drawer. For the present, therefore, we had to leave it undisturbed.

When Charley came home, we went to look at it together. It was of oak, and somewhat elaborately carved.

I was very restless in bed that night. The air was close and hot, and as often as I dropped half asleep I woke again with a start. My thoughts kept stupidly running on the old chest. It had mechanically possessed me. I felt no disturbing curiosity concerning its contents: I was not annoyed at the want of the key; it was only that, like a nursery rhyme that keeps repeating itself over and over in the half-sleeping brain, this chest kept rising before me till I was out of patience with its intrusiveness. It brought me wide awake at last; and I thought, as I could not sleep, I would have a search for the key. I got out of bed, put on my dressing gown and slippers, lighted my chamber candle, and made an inroad upon the contents of the closet in my room, which had apparently remained undisturbed since the morning when I missed my watch. I believe I had never entered it since. Almost the first thing I came upon was the pendulum, which woke a strange sensation for which I could not account, until by slow degrees the twilight memory of the incidents connected with it half dawned upon me. I searched the whole place, but not a key could I find.

I started violently at the sound of something like a groan, and for the briefest imaginable moment forgot that my grannie was dead, and thought it must come from her room. It may be remembered that such a sound had led me to her in the middle of the night on which she died. Whether I really heard the sound, or only fancied I heard it—by some half-mechanical action of the brain, roused by the association of ideas—I do not even yet know. It may have been changed or expanded into a groan, from one of those innumerable sounds heard in every old house in the stillness of the night; for such, in the absence of the correction given by other sounds, assume place and proportion as it were at their pleasure. What lady has not at midnight mistaken the trail of her own dress on the carpet, in a silent house, for some tumult in a distant room? Curious to say, however, it now led to the same action as the groan I had heard so many years before; for I caught up my candle at once, and took my way down to the kitchen, and up the winding stair behind the chimney to grannie's room. Strange as it may seem, I had not been in it since my return; for my thoughts had been so entirely occupied with other things, that, although I now and then looked forward with considerable expectation to a thorough search of the place, especially of the bureau, I kept it up as a *bonne bouche*, the anticipation of which was consolation enough for the postponement.

I confess it was with no little quavering of the spirit that I sought this chamber in the middle of the night. For, by its association with one who had, from my earliest recollection, seemed like something forgotten and left behind in the onward rush of life, it was, far more than anything else in the house, like a piece of the past embedded in the present—a fragment that had been, by some eddy in the stream of time, prevented from gliding away down its course, and left to lie for ever in a cranny of the solid shore of un-moving space. But although subject to more than the ordinary tremor at the thought of unknown and invisible presences, I must say for myself that I had never yielded so far as to allow such tremor to govern my actions. Even in my dreams I have resisted ghostly terrors, and can recall one in which I so far conquered a lady-ghost who took every means of overcoming me with terror, that at length she fell in love with me, whereupon my fear vanished utterly—a conceited fancy, and as such let it fare.

I opened the door then with some trembling, half expecting to see first the white of my grannie's cap against the tall back of her dark chair. But my senses were sound, and no such illusion seized me. All was empty, cheerless, and musty. Grannie's bed, with its white curtains, looked as if it were mouldering away after her. The dust lay thick on the counterpane of patchwork silk. The bureau stood silent with all its secrets. In the fire-place was the same brushwood and coals which Nannie laid the morning of grannie's death; interrupted by the discovery of my presence, she had left it, and that fire had never been lighted. Half for the sake of companionship, half because the air felt sepulchral and I was thinly clad, I put my candle to it and it blazed up. My courage revived, and after a little more gazing about the room, I ventured to sit down in my grannie's chair and watch the growing fire, and my eyes went roving about the room. They fell upon a black dress which hung against the wall. At the same moment I remembered that when she gave me the watch, she took the keys of the bureau from her pocket. I went to the dress and found a pocket, not indeed in the dress, but hanging under it from the same peg. There her keys were! It would have been a marvel to me how my aunt came to leave them undisturbed all those years, but for the instant suggestion that my uncle must have expressed a wish to that effect. With eager hand I opened the bureau. Besides many trinkets in the drawers, some of them of exceedingly antique form, and, I fancied, of considerable value, I found in the pigeon-holes what I was far more pleased to discover—a good many letters, carefully tied in small bundles, with ribbon which had lost all determinable colour. These I resolved to take an early opportunity of reading, but replaced for the present, and, having come at last upon one hopeful-looking key, I made haste to return before my candle, which was already flickering in the socket, should go out altogether, and leave me darkling. When I reached the kitchen, however, I found the gray dawn already breaking. I retired once more to my chamber, and was soon fast asleep.

In the morning, my first care was to try the key. It fitted. I oiled it well, and then tried the lock. I had to use considerable force, but at last there came a great clang that echoed through the empty room. When I raised the lid, I knew by the weight it was of iron. In fact, the whole chest was iron with a casing of oak. The lock threw eight bolts, which laid hold of a rim that ran all round the lip of the chest. It was full of "very ancient and fish-like" papers and parchments. I do not know whether my father or grandfather had ever disturbed them, but I am certain my uncle never had, for as far back as I can re-

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