

## A BUNCH OF VIOLETS.

(Continued.)

I meet Mr. Baxter there very often—in fact, I may say every day. I do not think he can be working very hard—unless he paints by lamplight—he is always with Jack Rolleston, smoking in his studio or chatting to us in the drawing-room. He even stays to dinner sometimes—I know it because they insist upon my dining there once or twice, and, when I dine there, he dines there too. They laugh at me about him—of course, girls laugh at each other for very little—and call him my handsome sweetheart. But I do not flirt with him, though he manages somehow to be always in my neighborhood, and I cannot help knowing that he is almost always looking at me.

I am going home on the second of April, to come up to town again for Poppy's wedding, unless it is postponed on account of Ellinor's illness. Olive, who writes to me almost every day, says they are going to Brighton as soon as Ellinor is strong enough to travel, and I should not be surprised if Poppy's wedding took place from there.

The prospect of seeing Woodhay so soon does not fill me with unmixed delight. Something has thrown a glamour over Mrs. Wauchope's shabby furnished lodgings, which my own beautiful Manor has never known—"a light that was on land or sea" illumines these dusty rooms, a "glory and a freshness and a dream," in which I walk like one who "on a mountain takes the dawn." I am so happy, and yet I cannot say what has made me happy.

One day the Rollestons take me to see the studio of an artist of whose pictures I have heard—a man who very often comes to Berkeley Street, and who, gaunt and gray and disheveled as he is, is one of the "hons" of the day. As we go up the stairs leading to the studio, we meet a girl coming down—a young girl, poorly dressed, but with a face of such extraordinary beauty that it absolutely dazzles me. I had never dreamed that a human face could be so lovely, and Mrs. Rolleston, who has also been struck by it, makes the same remark to the great painter himself.

"Oh, that," he says, laying down his palette and brushes, "is a poor child who sits to me as a model—her name is White! Her mother is a wretched woman, always begging—sometimes drunk. Here is her picture—yes, it is a lovely face."

He has turned a canvas which had been standing with its face to the wall, and we are looking again at the girl we met on the stairs. There are the pure Greek outlines which Phidias might have worshipped—the tangled red-gold hair tossed back from the white forehead, glittering like a halo round the angelic head, the dark-blue velvety eyes, the exquisite smiling lips. The great artist had painted her in rags, selling violets—she is holding out a bunch in one small slender hand, as she leans against the pillar of some great portico, looking out of the canvas with those innocent wistful eyes. I stand before the picture for a long time, studying that girl's face. I envy her, though she is in rags and I am wearing a dress of steel-gray velvet with a bonnet of the same, whose cost I scarcely care to remember. How happy she ought to be with a face like that! What matter about cold and hunger and rags, if one could smile on the beholder with those ethereal eyes, with those exquisite childish lips! So I think, looking down at the lifeless canvas. And as I look a shiver runs through my veins, as though a door had opened somewhere, letting in a breath of some cold outer air. It is a curious sensation—I have heard of people feeling the like when one walked over their grave that was to be. Yet why should this girl's face make me shiver? It is as beautiful as the face of an angel, and as innocent—it is not very likely that it should ever do me any harm.

This evening the Rollestons insist upon sending their carriage to take me back to Berkeley Street to dinner. I should have spent a lonely evening if I had not gone, and yet I go rather unwillingly, having had a pile of letters from Woodhay and Yattendon in the morning, which I have not yet had time to read. But the temptation to spend the evening in that pleasant house is too strong to resist—against my better judgment I allow myself to be persuaded, and seven o'clock finds me in the drawing-room at Berkeley Street; and, as usual, I find Mr. Baxter there before me.

"I don't think you are working very hard," I say to him in the course of the evening.

"I think we have both been rather idle lately," he retorts with a boyish smile.

"I have been here every day—I have no time to practice."

"And I have been here every day—I have no time to paint."

"But how are you to make this great name for yourself if you do not work?"

"And you?" he suggests, laughing.

"Oh, I am not in any great hurry to make a name for myself."

"I'm glad to hear it. I hope you will never make a name for yourself at all."

"Thank you."

"I mean that I hope you will never make that voice of yours public property."

"What then is to become of me?" I ask, with laudable gravity.

"Let some man work for you," he says hurriedly, his boyish face flushed like a girl's. "Give some man the chance of making a name for himself—for your sake."

I shake my head gravely, looking out into the twilight. We are standing at an open window at the upper end of the long music-room. All the rest of the party are clustered round the piano at the lower end, where some music-mad friend of Crawford's is playing Berlioz's "Symphonie

Fantastique." These are all in a warm glow of candle-light from the lights on the piano, but we, standing at this distant window, are illuminated only by the low glimmer from a faint clear apple-green sky against which the houses stand up picturesquely dark and indistinct, and in which, just above the shadowy chimney-tops, burns one great lovely star.

"Miss Scott, do you think the man you marry will ever allow you to sing on the stage?"

His voice startles me, low and quietly as the words are spoken. I look up at the tall dark figure, indistinct in the twilight; and suddenly this boy, with his beautiful eyes, his desperate poverty, his passionate pride, seems to take me by the hand and lead me into some "faery-land forlorn" of which I have never dreamed in all my life before.

"I do not think about it," I answer with truth.

"Miss Scott, will you marry me?"

This question takes me so entirely by surprise that it conveys no meaning to my mind.

"Allie, will you marry me, and give me the right to work for you?"

I look up into the eager dark eyes of the lad who is so eager to work for me, but who cannot or will not work for himself.

"You with a wife?" I exclaim, with a cruel smile. "It seems to me to be as much as you can compass."

"To live myself. You are very bitter; I think you take a pleasure in hurting me—I think you always did."

"Forgive me," I say, holding out my hand; it looks very white and slim in the half light, as I am sure I look myself in my faint white clinging gown. "It was kind of you to wish to help me in the only way you could."

"Kind?" he interrupts passionately, taking the hand I have offered to him and daring to press his warm young lips against it. "I am kind to you, Allie, if you call it kind to love you with all the strength of my heart and soul!"

"But you have only known me for so short a time," I say, drawing my hand away coldly. "You can know nothing about me."

"I know that I love you—I know that I have loved you since the very first evening I met you here. I believe I fell in love with your voice before I ever saw you, though Mr. Wauchope thought she nipped any danger of that kind so cleverly in the bud;" and he laughs a little—the old boyish laugh. I think of the violets and am silent, looking at that great solitary star, at the houses standing up black against the gold green sky. The quaint fantastic music of the *Symphonic* fills the room, the group about the piano listen to it eagerly, with the light full on their preoccupied faces; only we two are alone together in the twilight window, two tall shadows against the faint clear sadness of the sky.

"We should be poor, Allie; but, if we cared for each other, that would not matter. And I would work so hard for you—I would work day and night to become famous for your sake—nothing would be too hard for me with such a hope as that."

He looks as if he could "pile him a palace straight, to pleasure the princess he loved," as he stands there, so young and strong and full of life and hope.

"But what fools people would think us!" I say, smilingly, and wondering what he will say when he hears the truth about me.

"Should we care for that?" he exclaims, with scornful dark eyes. "If we were happy, we should care very little what other people said. We are both poor, and, if we choose to be poor together, it will be nobody's business but our own."

Perhaps my silence says "what I would never swear," for he comes nearer to me, bending his dark head to look into my eyes, as he did once before in this very room, when we quarreled about a bunch of withered violets.

"Allie, couldn't you care for me enough to 'lay your sweet hands in mine and trust to me?'"

Could I? Can I? He takes me in his arms, he kisses me passionately, and I, Allie Somers Scott of Woodhay, submit to it with an amazed docility which I could not have believed possible a fortnight ago. And so we start for "one vast moment" of intolerable happiness; and then, with a laugh which ends in a sigh, I push him away from me.

"Oh, this is folly!" I exclaim, with rather tardy wisdom, it must be confessed. "We are mad to think of such a thing for a minute. You have nothing, and yet you want to burden yourself with a wife whose only mode of earning her living you condemn!"

"My wife shall never sing for her board," the boy says, throwing up his head.

"Then how do you propose to live?"

"I shall live by my art."

"But you must practice your art before you can live by it."

"And I intend to practice it."

"And if you fail?"

"I shall not fail with such an incentive to work."

"You are very confident," I say, gazing into the eyes which look dark as night under their black lashes. "But suppose you should not succeed?"

"I shall succeed."

"But you seem to me to be more anxious to bewilder by audacious originality than to conquer by sober work," I say deliberately.

"I cannot be conventional," he exclaims, frowning a little. "I have my own ideas about choice of subject and manner of dealing with it, and I shall adopt the ideas of no other man living."

"But your idea may not please the public."

"If the public cannot understand me, it is their own loss."

"And, meanwhile, you and those belonging to you may starve."

He is silent, looking down at me—at the girl in the long pale gown