

amused laugh. "And what an objectionable 'again'! I don't believe I ever tried anything with Fancy Charteris, and I know she never cared in the very least for me."

"In that case I wish you luck with Miss Tremaine," says Arthur, slowly. "She is beyond doubt charming, and is almost the prettiest girl I ever saw,—except, perhaps, her sister Gretchen."

"You are enthusiastic," says Sir John. "What a pity it is they cannot hear you! They would never forget it to you. Yes, Gretchen is very pretty,—a sort of being one would compare to a flower, or a dove, or an angel, or some such poetic simile. Why don't you go in for her, Arthur? She would just suit you."

"Too good for me," says Mr. Blunden, carelessly. "I'm not of much account, you know; and, besides, I'm not one of your marrying fellows." With this he rises, and, going over to the window, stands there gazing out idly upon the darkening landscape,—upon the soft green lawns, and swaying beeches, and little flickering sunbeams that seem so loath to die.

"Who is that coming across the grass?" he asks, presently; and Sir John, thus accosted, gets up also and joins him at the window.

Standing thus side by side, with their backs to the room and only part of their faces to be seen, one cannot fail to be struck with the wonderful similarity between the two men. There is in each the tall, straight figure, the chestnut hair, warm and rich in tint, the same beautifully turned cheek and chin destitute of beard, and, from where they stand, just a suspicion of the long drooping moustache.

"It is Brandy Tremaine, is it not?" Sir John says, after short scrutiny. "Let us come out to meet him."

"Her brother!" returns Arthur, with a little shrug. "Oh, by all means. Let us pay him every attention in our power."

Sir John laughs; and as they both turn to move towards the door there comes an opportunity to mark the great difference between them. About Arthur's mouth there is a superciliousness, and in his blue eyes an expression keen and penetrating, quite foreign to Sir John's, whose mouth is always more prone to laughter than to contempt, and whose eyes rarely ever trouble themselves to look beyond the surface.

CHAPTER II.

Descriptions, like comparisons, are odious. The "mind's eye," though following with willing haste the tongue that speaks, never quite grasps the truth. It sees either too much or too little. You may have the pen of a genius, and may paint your Paul and Virginia in glowing colours, yet you will never get the uninitiated to understand in the very least what he or she may be like. Nevertheless a slight sketch of the Tremaines must be given.

They are, to begin with, that most interesting of all things, a handsome family. They are all handsome: the Tremaines would have scorned to acknowledge an "ugly duckling." For generations such a thing had not been so much as hinted at among them.

Mrs. Tremaine, though arrived at that age when the question of birthdays is viewed with disfavor, is still very good to look at, and eminently aristocratic. She rejoices in the thin transparent nostrils, the fine lips, the pale blue eyes, and high white brow that are generally supposed to belong by right to blue blood. She rarely laughs, but she has the most charming smile in the world,—a lingering, perfect smile, with something in it unwilling, that adds to it but another charm, compelling as it does the companion of the moment to accept it as an irrespressible tribute to his own particular powers of pleasing. She also possesses to perfection the calm indifference of manner that goes so far to hide the craving for settlements so undying in the breast of the British matron.

Mr. Tremaine is handsome also, but of a darker type, and is one of those men who are indebted to their wives for their individuality. He is "Mrs. Tremaine's husband," and many people liked him the better for that. He is a most estimable man, warm-hearted and affectionate, but I don't think even his best friend could call him brilliant. And when, twenty-five years before this story opens, he offered his hand, which was large,—and his fortune which was larger,—to Miss Lascelles, the spoiled beauty of the year, all the world—that is, the male portion of it—expressed astonishment at his presumption. None, however, was expressed by Miss Lascelles herself, who accepted both the hand and fortune without hesitation.

The marriage proved a very happy one,—which disgusted the world—that is, the female portion of it—extremely. Mrs. Tremaine was fond of life and its good things, and very fond of her own way. Mr. Tremaine (wise man) never thwarted her in anything. The result of their union, therefore, was a most unusual amount of real contentment, and four pretty children.

Brandrum, the eldest,—commonly called "Brandy,"—is a cheerful, perhaps rather too cheerful, young gentleman of twenty-three. He calls himself a hussar; but, as he is generally on leave all the year round, his friends say it doesn't seem to matter much what he calls himself: any other regiment (for all it is likely to see of him) will do just as well. He has curly hair and blue eyes, like all the Tremaines, and a smile like a cherub; and women as a rule pet him more than is good for him.

The second child, Kitty, is exceedingly handsome, tall, and dark, like her father, and an undoubted success. All last season she was caressed and made much of, and had actually been able to refuse an earl,—greatly to her mother's chagrin. But when, towards the close of July, she left town with every satisfactory symptom of having made a conquest of Sir John Blunden, Mrs. Tremaine forgave her, and devoutly, though secretly, thanked her stars that she had been disobedient in the matter of old Lord Sugden, who, though of higher rank than Sir John, was of infinitely shorter rent roll.

Sir John as yet has not proposed in form, but words have been spoken and looks interchanged; and, though nobody enlarges on the subject, everybody hopes he means to do so. Although near neighbours,—Coolmore, the Blunden property, being only eight miles distant from the Court, where the Tremaines live,—he and Kitty had never met until that last memorable occasion in town; and now that he has followed her to the country, under the pretence that his fine old house wants renovating, everybody feels that Kitty in effect is Lady Blunden,—Sir John being a young man not addicted to the country except at

certain seasons, and then very much fonder of other people's houses than his own.

Perhaps Kitty herself is the only one who feels any serious doubt about his ultimate intentions. She knows him to be a careless, easy-going, good-humoured young man, who has held his own successfully through many a hot campaign with managing mothers, and who up to this has cautiously avoided matrimony as one might the plague or any other misfortune. Young men like Sir John, who have proved themselves over-attentive to various young women year after year, and yet have obstinately abstained from bringing their attentions to a satisfactory finish, are generally termed flirts: Kitty has heard Sir John so called, and in her heart has not liked the speaker the better for saying it. A man who flirts systematically is a disgraceful thing—so she tells herself,—yet she cannot bring herself to think Sir John disgraceful. He has said things to her that have interested her and have had a good deal to do with her rejection of Lord Sugden and others,—things that might almost be construed into an offer of marriage: and still she cannot be certain he means to propose to her. In town there had been many opportunities to speak had he so willed it, but he not seized them. Above all there was that last evening at Lady Brompton's, when the lights burned low in the conservatory, and the flowers slept, and the very stillness breathed love, yet he had not spoken. No one, of course, mentions Sir John to Kitty Tremaine as an acknowledged lover, nor does she ever mention him as anything but a casual acquaintance, even to Gretchen; though in her she would have surely gained a sympathetic listener.

Pretty Gretchen! with her pale pure face, and little Grecian nose, and great blue eyes, that remind one of nothing so much as the sweet Czar violet. She is two years younger than Kitty, and smaller and slighter, with an expression calm and unspeakably tender. To think of Gretchen is to think of moonlight, or the soft perfume of roses, or faint strains of sweetest music. To see her is to love her. To know her is a "liberal education."

Then there is Flora, the last but by no means the least of the Tremaines,—a tall and very determined person of twelve, who would reject with ignominy the notion that she is still a child. Her eyes are gray, steady, and severe; her small mouth is incorruptible. She is one of those awful people with whom a spade is a spade; and to even hint a harmless falsehood in her presence, and to suddenly find those gray orbs fixed upon you, is to lose instant self-control, and to long for the earth to open and swallow you up. She admires Kitty,—though, being cognizant of her faults, she does not scruple to tell her of them occasionally; she adores Gretchen, and maintains an undying feud with Brandy, to whom she is a joy and everlasting resource.

Kitty, having searched the house diligently for Gretchen, and failed to find her, walks into the school-room as a last chance, and looks anxiously around her; whereupon Flora raises her head from her German in a vain hope that something is going to occur to put an end to her detested lessons; and Brandy who is smoking a cigar against all rules upon an elderly sofa, asks, inelegantly, "What's the row?"

"Meg, are you here? Where is Gretchen?" asks Kitty, anxiously.

"Meg was meek, and Meg was mild,
And Bonnie Meg was Nature's child,"

quotes Flora, gayly, glad of the interruption.

"If it is 'Nature's child' you want," says Brandy, obligingly, sinking back again upon his faded though luxurious cushions, "I am almost sure you will find her in the garden."

Thus encouraged, Miss Tremaine crosses the room, and putting her head out of the open window, says, loudly, "Are you there, Gretchen?" to the back of a pretty summer-house all overgrown with silvery clematis and the fast reddening Virginia creeper.

A soft voice answers,—

"Yes. Do you want me, Kitty? And Gretchen, emerging from her bower, stands gazing inwards, one white hand shielding her eyes from the sun.

"Not I so much as mamma. She wishes you to go visiting with her. Be quick, dearest: the carriage is ordered."

"Coming," says Gretchen, disappearing behind the escalonias and running down the garden-walks through borders of glowing flowers.

"I wish, Brandy," says Kitty, drawing in her head, "you would not smoke in the school-room. You know mamma particularly objects to your doing so. And why have a smoking-room, if people won't smoke in it?"

"Why, indeed?" returns Brandy, mildly. "I only smoke here, against my better judgment, to oblige Flora, who is never entirely happy except when enveloped in a thick cloud of tobacco."

"No, I am not," says Flora, indignantly, but wrongly.

"You hear her," says Brandy, with a faint but triumphant flourish of his right hand.

"I mean I hate it, I perfectly abhor it. It runs right up my nose and into my brain, and makes me quite dazy," says Flora; "I can't do a bit of my German with the odiousness of it."

"Mere imagination. I always found it an incentive to study," declares Mr. Tremaine, positively. "I can't bear smoking myself: it disagrees with me, and in fact I only indulge in it in the vain hope of knocking some intelligence into your dull head."

"Don't call my head dull," says Flora. "I've as good a head as ever you had, and a great deal better. I wasn't spun for an examination, at all events."

"My dear Flora!" says Kitty.

"Yes, isn't she a darling?" remarks Brandy, undisturbed. "I can't tell you how I admire our Flora; she is so *spirituelle*, so full of wit, *espièglerie*, and all the rest of it."

"I wonder that you will still be talking, Signor Benedick; nobody marks you," quies Flora, disdainfully. "I should think your colonel must love you."

"For once," says Brandy, "you have hit the right nail on the head: such perspicacity in one so young is truly delightful. Yes, he adores me."

"So one might readily imagine," murmurs Miss Flora, with cutting irony.

"Now, might one?" questions Brandy, assuming an air of deep thought.