

## MOUSIE.

## CHAPTER I.

"I could not have found a better name for her!" Brenda Lisle protested, as, in her dainty evening dress, she sat under the veranda outside the drawing-room windows. She was leaning her head against the heavy trails of passiflora climbing up and around one of the columns; sometimes lifting her dreamy gaze to the scarlet flowers drooping from above till they touched the masses of her raven hair; sometimes looking up into the thoughtful face of Sir Damer Wentbury, the young Baronet lounging beside her.

Claude Essilton, the Baronet's dearest friend, albeit only a struggling artist, surreptitiously drew forth pencil and sketch-book; for where could he have found a more charming subject for his pencil than Brenda Lisle, with her striking face and unstudied attitudes?

Yet he sighed as he dashed in his vigorous outlines, and could scarcely refrain from envying the Baronet, who might talk to her, walk with her, or keep his post beside her as long as he pleased, aware that with his fine ront-roll he was an eligible *parti* for wealthier maidens than Mrs. Lisle's pretty daughter; whilst he, Claude, had to climb to the top of the ladder before he must think of a wife at all.

"I could not have found a better name for her!" Brenda repeated. "The bright brown eyes, her sleek, satiny hair, and shy, quick movements, remind me irresistibly of a pet mouse Tom and Trot had in their nursery at Calcutta. And she is a singing mousie too, for she has the sweetest of voices—not powerful, yet fresh and joyous as a lark's."

"But how puzzled you look!" she added, laughing saucily at her silent companion. "Is it possible that you do not know whom I am alluding to?"

"Not the young lady who dined here yesterday?"

"And who talked you into a headache? No, no! my Mousie has nothing in common with handsome, self-sufficient Sarah Bellairs. She is not even beautiful according to the pink and white, blue-orbed, languishing beauty your sex always appreciates."

"There are exceptions to every rule, Miss Lisle. I do not admire blonde belles!"

"In the presence of a brunette," added Brenda, demurely. "Of course you could not be so rude as to disparage my few charms in my hearing. But Mousie is neither the one nor the other; she is not pretty enough to be painted," and her glance at Claude Essilton proved that she had detected his occupation, "nor attractive enough to win a train of adorers; but she is just Mousie; shy, sweet, and lovable; and I am delighted with her!"

"And who is Mousie?" the young Baronet queried.

"She has been here three days and yet you ask me that! She is a dear little cousin of mine of whose very existence I was ignorant till a fortnight ago. That is the worst of holding a colonial appointment—you grow up a stranger to your nearest and dearest ties!"

"The worst or the best?" smiled Sir Damer. "To own a host of relatives, who inflict themselves upon you at unseasonable times—feel affronted if you do not help them, and ungrateful if you do—does not always prove agreeable."

"I suppose not! but," and Brenda's voice took a lower, sadder tone, "yet, since our coming home it has cost papa a good many pangs—of course it was of him I was thinking, not myself—to learn how many old friends and valued connections have dropped into the grave or out of sight during the twelve years he has spent in India. He was very much attached to the sisters of my own mamma! (Sir Damer knew already that Brenda was not the daughter of the pretty, delicate, insipid little lady who sat at the head of Mr. Lisle's table, and did her best to spoil Brenda's frolicsome half-brothers); of these sisters one is dead, the other has become—peculiar. A girl—my namesake, and the image, papa says, of her sweet, young mother—is all that remains of an ill-starred marriage, and Mousie was pining under the tyranny of her spinster aunt, when papa swooped down upon the fortress and emancipated her."

Again Brenda laughed provokingly.

"She sat opposite to you at dinner. Oh, Sir Damer, witty and wise though the world acknowledges you to be, you are not keen-eyed enough to discover a woman's perfections unless they are pointed out to you!"

"I have no partiality for perfect women," was the gay reply; "I prefer one who lectures me or deserves to be scolded herself twice or thrice in every hour of the day. I certainly did catch a glimpse between the flowers in the *epergne* of my *vis-à-vis*, but I thought she was the governess."

"Because she lets Tom and Trot monopolize her? Unfortunately for herself she permitted those urchins to discover that she has stored in her memory all the fairy tales and wonderful adventures she has ever read, and they are always asking for more."

"There they are now!" cried Brenda, pushing aside the passion-flowers to glimpse at a figure in white flitting across the lawn with two rosy, shouting children in pursuit. "It is cooler out there than here. Sir Damer—Mr. Essilton—shall we go and rescue my cousin from her persecutors?"

"Don't call the darlings such frightful names, Brenda," Mrs. Lisle feebly remonstrated, but no one noticed her.

Nothing loth, both gentlemen sauntered with the young lady across the sward, enjoying the soft southern breeze springing up with the approach of twilight.

But long before they reached the spot where Brenda had seen her cousin pause and glance back at the house—perhaps to admire its prettiness, perhaps to wonder why no one craved her society but the children—Mousie and the boys had disappeared.

"They would not have thanked us for finding them," the artist observed; "Miss Menvyn confessed to me yesterday morning that she is so unused to society that it is a relief to steal away with the little laddies."

"Then you know my cousin, if Sir Damer does not," exclaimed Brenda, with the smallest possible *soupeçon* of zealous displeasure.

"Yes; she coaxed Trot to sit still while I painted at the portrait of the child Mrs. Lisle is so anxious to have. It was a happy hour, for we talked—"

"Yes?"

"Of you."

Brenda, with avorted face, walked away to where Sir Damer was parting the boughs of a tree to show her the deserted nest of a wood-pigeon. Whether she was angry or not Claude Essilton was not allowed to know, for while peeping at the nest she had caught the murmur of voices. Mousie was singing some curious but musical old ballad to her little companions, and guided by the sounds, Brenda made her way to the bank on which they were seated.

Was Mousie as charming as her brighter, more fortunately-placed cousin depicted her?

To the casual observer she was a bashful, silent, common-place little creature, who came and went so noiselessly that nobody noticed her coming, nor missed her when she stole away.

Yet others might have discerned how the lovely bloom on her cheeks deepened or faded with every fresh emotion; how eagerly she listened when the conversation took an interesting turn; and with what prompt good-nature she submitted to the teasing of the children; or waited on Mrs. Lisle; or flew hither and thither to fulfil any wishes of Brenda, whom she admired with genuine, unaffected sincerity.

Brenda signed to the young men to establish themselves on a rustic bench near the bank, on which she seated herself beside her cousin.

"Oh yes! oh yes! oh yes! silence, messieurs!" she cried, gaily. "Mousie is going to sing for us. 'Music sounds the sweetest,' etc., etc. Run away, children; you have had the monopoly of the minstrel long enough. To bed with you—to bed!"

But Mousie could be firm, in spite of her timidity. She had promised Mrs. Lisle that the little boys should return to the house at a certain hour, and must keep her word. Left to themselves they might loiter, and Trot's chest was delicate enough to cause much anxiety already.

Brenda was vexed; but she yielded the point gracefully.

"We will all go in, and when peace reigns in the household Mousie shall charm us in the veranda."

"I wish I could be sure that you do not say this simply from politeness!" Mousie surprised her companions by exclaiming, in the tremulous tones of great earnestness. "It is so little I can do to give pleasure that it would make me very glad if I could feel *sure* I amuse you with my singing!"

"My dear, simple-minded coz, you are the quaintest little puritan that ever lived! Don't you know that the chief end and aim of woman is to please herself?"

But though Brenda had laughed at her cousin she shielded her from observation till the tears that glittered on her eyelashes had been wiped away. Mousie had been so severely repressed by her strange-tempered aunt, so frequently assured that she was neither useful nor ornamental, that the milder *regime* at Mr. Lisle's handsome house and the petting of Brenda affected her strangely.

Sitting on a stool at her cousin's feet, with the moonlight streaming down upon her small pensive face, she sang her best. Her sweet fresh voice and old-world songs carried Mr. Lisle back to the happy days of his youth. Even Mrs. Lisle ventured forth to listen; the artist dreamed happy dreams; and Brenda sometimes sighed—sometimes smiled.

Everyone thanked the singer with effusion when she stopped—everyone but Sir Damer, who did not speak till he lighted her candle for her as she was retiring.

"You have done something more than amuse us, Miss Menvyn. Such singing as yours awakens feelings we are but too apt to forget."

"Thank you," responded Mousie, simply, "I shall prize my gift now; and when I go back to aunt Ursula, who does not like me to sing, I shall often recall the kind things you have all said to me to-night."

"Is this aunt of hers a tyrant?" Sir Damer hotly demanded, when she had gone out of hearing.

"Something like it," Mr. Lisle replied. She is trying to imbue her sister's orphan with her own ascetic tastes; and would have her believe that to be young and cheerful are bad habits, that should be shaken off as quickly as possible!"

"And she returns to such a woman!" exclaimed Claude Essilton. "Must it be?"

"Yes, I suppose she will have to do so," responded Mr. Lisle, rather dubiously. "I had great trouble in getting her here for a few weeks. Her aunt fears that we shall arouse in her that love of the world she is striving to subdue; and if she had seen this flighty daughter of mine, I don't suppose she would have trusted me with the care of Mousie at all."

Everyone smiled as Brenda swept her father a mocking courtesy, and danced away, reminded by Mrs. Lisle, as she went, that the dressmaker would call early on the morrow to take directions for the costumes to be worn at a fancy ball in the ensuing week.

Yet Brenda's face was grave enough when she reached her own room, and sat down before her glass to brush her hair.

"So I have raised myself a rival! This little inexperienced Mousie has a witchery about her that will win all hearts, and I must stand by and smile at her conquests."

"Am I unselfish enough to do this?" she asked herself presently. "To give up the hopes I was beginning to cherish, and know all the while that it was my own hand that knocked down my airy castles?"

"No, I need not make such sacrifices, and I will not. I like you, my little cousin; and I will be your very good friend all my life long; but you shall not stay here to rob me of my dearest treasure—the hope of becoming his lady and queen!"