

THE GROOVES OF CHANGE.

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CHAPTER III.



T was a curious revolution of the wheel of fate that turned Boscombe Hall into paradise for two people in the course of the following week. One was David Russell and the other Deborah. For David fell head over ears in love, as might be expected, with Miss Laing, who allowed him to linger by her side morning, noon and night, accepting his very self-evident and honest admiration with the same calm indifference with which she appropriated Deborah's devotion. She neither encouraged nor repulsed him. She listened, rather than talked, was the quiet recipient of all the young fellow's hopes and fears, and looked sympathetic, without being so.

David was by far too honourable a young fellow to seek to bind this beautiful girl of eighteen into any promise of marrying him. He knew that at present he had nothing to offer her but his honest young heart, but he told her of his prospects, of the good opening that was before him, should he prove one of the successful candidates in the Indian Civil Service, of his determination to make his way in the world, and of the hope of one day having a home of his own.

"I may be out there for years, you know," he faltered during one of these talks, "but if I come home, may I come and see you? Shall you mind if I've turned yellow?"

"I think I shall; I like you best as you are," answered Miss Laing, turning her great eyes on him for a moment, a reply which positively set every pulse in David's body tingling, and yet when he came to digest the sentiment there was not a grain of encouragement in it, not a vestige of hope for the future.

Deborah's paradise was of a different and safer order. It was the realisation of a strange and bewildering novelty that had dawned upon her life. Before, the days had passed in the same routine, and the child had found her amusement in watching those about her; every day of this memorable week brought some startling novelty with it, and the prime promoter of this delightful state of things was David Russell. Sometimes he would go off to the nearest town and bring her back a toy or a picture book, at another he would take her for a walk; one never to be forgotten afternoon was spent with him and Miss Laing in the woods, and it became an established right that she should fetch him out every evening for a game of hide and seek before she went off to bed. It was no wonder that she adored him. It was too happy a state

of things to last, and it broke up all in a moment, like an American summer.

The week was coming to a close, and David in his infatuation had almost decided to stay for another when, coming from a long and rapturous morning in the garden, he found a stranger at the luncheon table; no stranger alas! to Miss Laing, who accorded the newcomer, a young and rising barrister, a smiling reception.

"I had a few days to spare, and I thought I would come and look you up," he said, with the air of a conscious favourite. "I can stay for a week if Mrs. Menzies will be good enough to take me in."

"Delighted I'm sure, and I daresay you and Mr. Russell—may I introduce you to each other? Mr. Dayrell, Mr. Russell—will go out together sometimes. I'm afraid it has been dull for him with no companions this week."

The two young men glared at each other, like knights at a tournament. Mr. Dayrell had caught sight of the reclining figure by Miss Laing's easel as he came up the drive. They mutually acknowledged the introduction, however, by a bow.

"Thank you," said David, turning politely to his hostess, "but I am afraid I shall have to be moving on, not that I have been dull. I have seldom spent a more delightful week."

The statement sounded almost like a challenge to the young man opposite, and if David had hoped that the announcement of his near departure would extort even an unspoken protest from Miss Laing he was doomed to disappointment. She kept her eyes on her plate and did not even look at him.

He gulped down his own lunch with mingled feelings of mortification and anger. Did not she really care a straw for him, when he felt ready to live and die for her? It was almost maddening that when the meal was ended, Mr. Dayrell took up his position by Miss Laing's side as if it belonged to him by right, and presently the pair disappeared down the garden, and David was too much of a gentleman to follow. Instead he went back disconsolately into the hall.

Deborah came slowly down the stairs, one step at a time. She quickened her steps to a run when she caught sight of her friend.

"Where are you going? Can't I come too?" entreatingly.

"Yes, Deborah. I want you very much, for I'm going away to-morrow."

Deborah's pale face turned positively a shade paler.

"You said—you said—that perhaps you'd stop another week; I heard you tell Miss Laing so this morning," she stammered.

"Yes, little one, but everybody may change their mind, you know, and I've changed mine. I'm going to-morrow.

One can't play all one's life, and my game is ended."

Deborah was a child of curious self-control, but a knot climbed into her throat, and David saw it climb, and was comforted that even a little child should dread his leaving.

"But we will have a jolly afternoon together, you and I. Just run up-stairs quickly and get your hat, and ask mother if you may come out with me for an hour or two."

The proposition was so delightful that Deborah forgot the impending sorrow in the present joy.

She trotted off by David's side in high content, and if her legs ached before they reached Hailstone she would have died sooner than own it. David's destination was a toy-shop and he demanded dolls to look at, the most beautiful ones in the shop.

They were laid out in a row before Deborah, and then David told her to choose the one she liked best and sauntered off to the window. His eyes followed dreamily the things that passed to and fro in the street; his thoughts unwittingly went back to Miss Laing. Was that beast Dayrell lying by her on the grass whilst she painted, as he himself had done that morning, he wondered bitterly? Poor lad! he was too sick at heart to be reasonable. His meditations were disturbed by a little hand laid gently on his arm.

"You must help me choose, please. There is not one quite as pretty as she is, but this one's got lots of hair, and shuts her eyes with a click."

"That's a great recommendation," said David rousing himself. "Let's have a look at her. Yes, she's got a jolly wig," but there in common truthfulness David's praise stopped short. The beady eyes with lashes painted on the highly-coloured face did not in the least remind him of the soft beauty of Miss Laing's eyes, but even this faintly expressed approval was enough for Deborah.

"This one, please," she said, handing the doll under discussion to the shop-keeper, and shortly after she emerged into the street with the silver-papered parcel held close to her beating heart. It required open air and daylight to help her to realise the value and beauty of her new possession.

David's vanishing hopes revived a little that evening when Miss Laing suffered him to seat himself by her for a minute or two on the sofa.

"You are an impulsive man! I wonder why you decided to leave so suddenly. I suppose you want to know the result of your examination?"

"Do you really want to know what makes me run away?" blurted David, colouring to the roots of his hair.

"Shall I tell you? May I?"

"I think I can guess," Miss Laing answered, with a soft little laugh. "I believe you are running away from—"