

ment of her widowhood for the first time, for the purpose of chaperoning her young cousin Alice Riley and myself through the shoals and quicksands of London society, and at the end of the season—only such a short time since—poor Alice went into a low state of mind, and on to the Continent, in consequence, it was whispered, of the sudden cessation of the attack Mr. Lionel Poole had made upon a heart that the world had not hardened yet.

I was sorry to see him at the Firs, therefore—sorry, that is, just for a few minutes, in fact, until he left Mrs. Fitzgerald's side and came to mine, where he remained. All married people had said that the beautiful Mrs. Fitzgerald had not resented his sudden desertion from the side of her blonde charge, as it would have been becoming for a chaperon and a cousin to do. And they added that the light which came into her eyes when his perfidy was discussed was not kindled by wrath.

She was the most beautiful brunette I ever saw, this young widowed hostess of ours. A graceful, charming woman, too, with a way that was winning alike to women and men. Why she had never married again—she had been five years a widow—we none of us knew for certain; but report had told me that her last husband, in a rabid fit of jealousy, had bound her by a solemn oath to be faithful for ever to his unpleasant memory.

Only one of the other men have I time or space to describe. He was a Captain Villars, R.A., and neither mad, Methodist, or married, as officers of that gallant corps are popularly supposed to be. He was not such a handsome man as Lionel Poole, nor could he converse in so smoothly pleasing a way, but he was a man on whom a woman would rely instinctively, for one glance at his broad open brow, and frank, fearless, honest eyes showed clearly, even to the worst read in such matters, that he was the soul of honesty.

The other ladies, too, are deserving of something better than the scant courtesy of a curt mention; so, as a curt mention is all I could make of them here, I will refrain from one at all, and simply say that I was the hieer.

During the earlier part of my sojourn at the Firs I did not observe Captain Villars or anybody else, but Lionel Poole and Mrs. Fitzgerald very much. I had known the soldier in London before, and then (it was before I had been left the fortune which altered my point of view of life entirely) he had seemed to like me well. But now he stood gravely aloof from me, and I sorely noticed the fact, for I was absorbed in the contemplation of Lionel Poole.

We had a variety of ways of passing the time. No one thing at the Firs called upon us by reason of our doing it often through lack of something else to do. When it was fine, and the ground not slippery, there were riding horses and carriages; when it was bitter and brightly frosty, there was the artificial lake to skate on; and when we couldn't go out at all, there was the billiard and music room; and in the evening we always had charades and *tableaux*.

In all of these Lionel Poole and Mrs. Fitzgerald excelled. She had a marvelous power of depicting intense passion—love, or hate, or scorn—and he we all declared to be a consummate actor. He was *Rizzio* to her Mary, *Crichton* to her Margaret of Navarre, *Fansh* to her Cretchley, *Leicester* to her Elizabeth (and my Amy Robsart), and he was all things well.

'She is insatiable about private theatricals,' he said to me one morning when we were knocking the billiard balls about together. 'I'm sick of playing at being Mrs. Fitzgerald's lover.'

I could not resist giving him a hasty glance as he spoke, for I wished to believe him, and wanted to read the truth in his face. His tender greyish-blue eyes (how tender they had been last night, when as the dying *Don Juan* minstrel he had fixed them on his royal mistress!) met mine unflinchingly, and I blushed.

'You must be aware Miss Traversers,' he went on in a low voice, 'that it was not to act the part of Mrs. Fitzgerald's lover that I came down to the Firs.'

I had already weakly begun to hope that it was not, but I could only say now, 'You act the part remarkably well.'

'She forces it upon me,' he said; and as he spoke Captain Villars came into the room, and the two men stiffened themselves at each other in that indescribable way men have of showing their mutual annoyance when a woman is the cause of it.

I soon left them together for their ill-concealed dissatisfaction was depressing, and betook myself to Mrs. Fitzgerald's dressing-room, to which, in the earlier days of our intercourse, I had always been allowed free access. It was locked against me now, but she presently opened the door and admitted me with an air of the old welcome.

'Do I disturb you?' I asked.

'Oh no,' she answered, 'but I thought you were in the billiard-room with Lion—with Mr. Poole.'

'Well, I got tired of billiards, so I have left him to play with Captain Villars,' I answered carelessly; 'I thought I'd come to you,' I continued, 'and ask if you would tell me the rights of the story about Alice Riley.'

'I didn't think that there was any story about her.'

'Did Mr. Poole behave badly to her?' I interrogated, eagerly; for though my heart was nearly gone, I thought that I could withdraw it from a man who had been cruel to gentle Alice Riley.

'No, he did not,' she replied almost sharply. 'Alice Riley was a little goose, and deceived herself.'

'I'm glad to hear it was only that,' I answered, absently, and then she flung her arms around my neck and kissed me and said—

'Don't trust her, believe me that it was so. Don't distrust me.'

'She says that she loves me, then,' I thought, for I was blind to the fact of its being herself that Blanche Fitzgerald was thinking about.

'How well a sprig of holly would look in your fair hair,' Lionel Poole murmured to me a little later in the day; 'the vivid green leaves, and the brilliant veins, and the bright golden locks would intensify one another.'

I resolved immediately upon wearing one that night; but I would not tell him so. He should have the benefit of the full force of the flattery by seeing it in my hair.

It was to please and honour Lionel Poole that I at first decided to wear the sprig of holly.

I hardly know how it came about, but it did come about in a few minutes after this, that Lionel Poole made me believe that I had been the object that attracted him to Mrs. Fitzgerald's party so constantly during the past season, and that Mrs. Fitzgerald knew that it was so.

'I suppose I believed it all truly, for when our interview was over, he had proposed and I had accepted him, and to spare my blushes, he had suggested, with a vast show of magnanimity, to keep it quiet until after my departure.'

'May I not—had I not better tell Blanche?' I asked; and he said—

'Well, I think not, Eva dear. She'll be so delighted at her expectations being realized that she'll air the fact, and then you will have no peace.'

About an hour after this I put on my balmorals, did my dress up in the most symmetrical vandykes, put on a sea-king's palette, and a cavalier hat and scarlet feather, and sallied forth into the snow-covered park in search of a sprig of holly befitting the occasion. I did not claim Mr. Lionel's escort, for I wanted to be alone to realize my new prospects.

At a short distance from the house I met Captain Villars. 'Are you going to join the others, Miss Traversers?' he asked. And I told him 'No; what others? and don't stop me, please; I'm to get something and go in and dress for dinner.'

'Don't be in such haste to quit me,' he said, rather mournfully. 'I'm going away to-morrow.'

'Going away?' I asked.

'Yes,' he said, stoutly. 'It's no use a man making an offer when he knows he'll be refused. But I can't stop any longer and witness your indifference.' And then seeing that I looked sorry, I suppose, he went on, 'And it makes my blood boil to see a woman I respect as I do Mrs. Fitzgerald, tolerate and encourage a heartless scoundrel.'

I did not condescend to reply to this attack on Lionel, but I drew myself up indignantly, and pruned off on my high heels like a badger. I tried to think that it was of no consequence, and that I had just as soon it was so. But all the time I felt sore and annoyed that Captain Villars should despise and condemn, however unjustly, the man I was going to marry.

'In spite of him having loved me in vain himself,' I said to myself, romantically, as I walked in the direction of a thick holly hedge, 'I hope that in time, when I'm married, Captain Villars will do justice to Lionel's noble qualities, and that we shall all be friends.' I attributed noble qualities to Lionel on the strength of his eye, ring large and plaintive, and his nose delicately chiselled; and I thought his judgment sound, naturally enough, because he had chosen me!

The holly hedge ran along straight for a considerable distance, and then curled itself round in a small circle, in the centre of which stood an arbutus. On no portion of the straight part could I find a sprig that fulfilled all my requirements. I wanted plenty of berries, not in heavy masses, but judiciously sprinkled amongst the leaves. I could have pleased myself in Michel's or Eagle's ever so much sooner, I was fain to confess, as I grew bluer momentually in the search. At last I came to the circle, the entrance to which was nearly blocked up by the branches of the arbutus, and there, full in view, but at an elevation which I could not attain from the sunken path on which I stood, was a magnificent spray of holly.

Its leaves were vivid, glossy, gem-like, and its berries were so fairly placed between and about them, that I counted what I had given utterance to respecting Michel's and Eagle's. The ground inside was considerably higher, it was thickly turfled, and in addition to this, the snow lay in frozen masses, for the sun's rays could scarcely penetrate the recesses of that gloomy little nook.

'I must have it,' I said, and stepped into the magic circle which was to be the means of disclosing to me many things; and scarcely had I entered it when I heard voices coming up the path behind.

I did not recognize the voices till they approached my nook, where I had no fancy for being discovered getting the holly that Lionel admired. But when they came close I found that the disturbers of my solitude were Mrs. Fitzgerald and the man to whom I had betrothed myself.

Her tones were passionate and warm; his low, distinct, and calm; they both fell clearly upon my ears; and from the moment I heard her first words, for Blanche's sake, as well as my own, I could not betray myself.

'I have told you the truth,' she said; 'what is your answer to it, Lionel?'

'That I cannot ask you to sacrifice so much to my selfish, love, dearest,' he answered tenderly. 'No, Blanche, I am not so careless of you, as you, even though loving me, had supposed. I cannot ask you to be my wife, dear, since it would cost you so much.'

I covered down trembling with rage in my secluded nook as the pair passed at the entrance.

'If you would not count the cost, she murmured fondly, 'I could bear poverty, even penury with you, Lionel, rather than be the mistress of the Firs with an empty, blighted heart.'

There was such simple womanly eloquence in her soul-fraught tones! My sympathies were all with her—with this woman who loved with a self-sacrificing love the man who asked me to marry him that morning. What a double game he had been playing to bring such a climax about!

'Do not tempt me,' he said; 'for your own sake do not tempt me to make you violate the condition of that cruel will. I should be a coward to win you from such a place and position to share such a fate as mine.'

'Then why have you won my heart?' she cried with a great sob. And then I heard her light footsteps flying away, and I was left alone with only a hedge intervening between myself and this perjured man, who had won my promise to be his wife, though he affected love for another woman at the time, and only abstained from wedding her because I was the richer prize.

I read our mutual self-deceptions aright at that moment. I knew that poor Blanche had unconsciously deceived me, and that I had unconsciously deceived her, and that Lionel had wittingly deceived us both. But I did not see my way clearly out of this mass of deception yet; for I was engaged to this man; and I could not shame my friend by letting her know that I had heard that which would honourably relieve me from Mr. Poole.