

Pauline gave an irritated sigh. As she did so the door of Mrs. Dares' house was opened by a spruce-looking young negress, and they both passed into the little limited hall beyond. Tapestries of tasteful design were looped back from the small doors which gave upon the hall. Their blended stuffs of differing colours produced a novel effect, wholly disproportioned to the real worth of the fabrics themselves. The deft skill of Mrs. Dares' younger daughter was responsible, not alone for these, but for other equally happy embellishments throughout this delightful miniature dwelling. In every chamber there was to be found some pretty decorative stratagem, whereby a maximum of graceful and even brilliant ornamentation had been won from a minimum of pecuniary expense. Pauline's eye had swept too many costly objects of upholstery not to recognise that a slender purse had here gone with a keen artistic sense. The true instinct of beauty seemed never to err, and its constant accompaniment of simplicity in the way of actual material lent it a new charm. Screen, rug, paneling, mantel-cover, tidy and chair-cushion took for her a quick value because of their being wrought through no luxurious means. It was so easy to buy all these things in velvet, in silk, in choice woods; it was so hard, so rare, to be able to plan them all from less pretentious resources. Before she had been five minutes in Mrs. Dares' abode, Pauline found herself affected by the mingled attractiveness and modesty of its details, as we are lured by the tints, contours and even perfumes of certain wildflowers which glow only the more sweetly because of their contrast with cultured blooms.

Mrs. Dares herself had a look not unlike that of some timid little wildflower. She was short of stature and very fragile; Kindelon's past accounts of her incessant accomplishments took the hue of fable as Pauline gazed upon her. She was extremely pale, with large, warm, dark eyes set in a face of cameo-like delicacy. Her dress hung in folds about her slight person, as if there had been some pitying motive in the looseness of its fit. But she wore it with an air of her own. It was a timid air, and yet it was one of ease and repose. The intelligence and earnestness of her clear-cut face gave her an undeniable dignity; you soon became sure that she was wholly unassuming, but you as soon realized that this trait of diffidence had no weakness in mind or character for its cause. It seemed, in truth, to correspond with her bodily frailty, and to make her individualism more complete while none the less emphatic. The personality that pushes itself upon our heed does not always make us notice it the quickest. Mrs. Dares never pushed herself upon anybody's heed, and yet she was seldom unnoticed. Her voice rarely passed beyond a musical semitone, and yet you rarely failed to catch each word it uttered. Pauline not only caught each word, as her new hostess now stood and addressed her, leaving for the time all other guests who were crowding the rather meagre apartment, but she tacitly decided, as well, that there was an elegance and purity in the expressions used by this notable little lady which some of the grander-mannered dames whom she had intimately known might have copied with profit. One peculiarity about Mrs. Dares, however, was not slow to strike her: the pale, delicate face never smiled. Not that it was melancholy or even uncheerful, but simply serious. Mrs. Dares had no sense of humour. She could sometimes say a witty thing that hit hard and sharp, but she was without any power to wear that lazier mental fatigue-dress from which some of the most vigorous minds have been unable, before hers, to win the least relaxation. This was probably the true reason why her small drawing-room often contained guests whose eccentricity of garb or deportment would otherwise have excluded them from her civilities. She could not enjoy the foibles of her fellow-creatures; she was too perpetually busy in taking a grave view of their sterner and more rational traits. She found something in nearly everybody that interested her, and it always interested her because it was human, solemn, important—a part, so to speak, of the great struggle, the great development, the great problem. This may, after all, be no real explanation of why she never smiled; for a smile, as we know, can hold the sadness of tears in its gleam, just as a drop of morning dew will hold the moisture of the autumn rainfall. But the absence of all mirthful trace on her gentle lips accorded, nevertheless, with the inherent sobriety of her nature, and they who got to know her well would unconsciously assign for both a common origin.

"My dear Mrs. Varick," she said to Pauline, "I am very glad that you chose to seek my poor hospitality this evening. Mr. Kindelon has already prophesied that we shall be good friends, and as I look at you I find myself beginning to form a most presumptuous certainty that he will not prove a false prophet. He tells me that you are weary of the fashionable world; I have seen nothing of that, myself, though I fancy I know what it is like. . . . A great Castle of Indolence, I mean, where there are many beautiful chambers, but where the carpets yield too luxuriously underfoot, and the couches have too inviting a breadth. Now in this little drawing-room of mine you will meet few people who have not some daily task to

perform—however ill many of us may accomplish it. In that way the change will have an accent for you—the air will be fresher and more tonic, though shifting from warm to chilly in the most irregular manner. I want to warn you, my dear lady, that you will miss that evenness of temperature which makes such easy breathing elsewhere. Be prepared for a decided atmospheric shock, now and then: but you will find it rather stimulating when it arrives, and by no means unwholesome."

Pauline could scarcely repress her astonishment at this very original speech of welcome. She and Mrs. Dares were separated from all other occupants of the room while it was being delivered; Kindelon had moved away after making his two friends known to each other, and doubtless with the intention of letting his hostess stand or fall on her own conversational merits, as far as concerned the first impression which Pauline should receive from her. But this impression was one in which admiration and approval played quite as strong a part as surprise. Pauline had wanted just such a spur and impetus as her faculties were now receiving; she kept silent for a few brief seconds, in silent enjoyment of the complex emotions which Mrs. Dares had awakened. Then she said, with a low laugh that had not the least suspicion of frivolity:

"If it is a social temperature with those barometric tricks and freaks, Mrs. Dares, I promise you that I shan't catch cold in it. But I fear Mr. Kindelon has wasted too many premonitory words upon me. He should have politely allowed me to betray myself, as a specimen of harmless and humble commonplace. . . I am sure to do it sooner or later."

"Oh, he has told me of your aim, your purpose," said Mrs. Dares.

Pauline coloured, and laid one hand on the lady's slender arm. "Then we are rivals, I suppose?" she murmured, with an arch smile.

Mrs. Dares turned and looked at her guests before answering; there was a mild, dreamy comprehensiveness in the way she seemed to survey their many shapes, letting her large, soft, dusky eyes dwell upon no special one of them. A little later she regarded Pauline again. She now shook her head negatively before replying.

"Oh, no, no," she said. "What you see here is not in any sense a representative assemblage. I have often wished that someone would establish a stricter and more definite standard than mine. We need it sadly. There are no entertainments given in New York where the mentally alert people—those who read, and think and write—can meet with an assurance that their company has been desired for reasons of an exceptional personal valuation. The guest without the wedding-garment is always certain to be there. I fear that I have paid too little heed to the wedding-garment; my daughters—and especially my eldest daughter, Martha—are always telling me that, in various ways. . . Oh, no, Mrs. Varick, we shall not be rivals. You will have the leisure to sift, to weigh, to admit or exclude, to label, to endorse, to classify—to make order, in short, out of chaos. This I have never had the leisure to do." She looked at Pauline with an almost pensive gravity. Then she slowly repeated the word, "Never."

"I fancy you have never had the cruelty," said Pauline.

"There would be considerable solid mercy in it," was the firm answer.

"Yes. . . To those who were both called and chosen. But how about the repulsed candidates for admission?"

"They would deserve their defeat," said Mrs. Dares, with thoughtful deliberation. "Morals and manners properly combined would be their sole passport."

"And ability," amended Pauline.

"Ability? Oh, they nearly all have ability who care to mingle night after night where that qualification is the dominating necessity for mutual enjoyment. Remember, an organized literary and intellectual society would not demand what that other society, of which you have seen so much, imperatively demands. I mean wealth, position, modishness, *ton*. All these would go for nothing with an aristocracy of talent, of high and true culture, of progress, of fine and wise achievement in all domains where human thought held rule. There, gross egotism, priggishness, raw eccentricity, false assumption of leadership, facile jealousy, dogmatic intolerance—these, and a hundred other faults, would justly exert a debarring influence."

Pauline did not know how her cheeks were glowing and her eyes were sparkling as she now quickly said, after having swept her gaze along the groups of guests not far away:

"And this is what you call making order out of chaos? Ah, yes, I understand. It is very delightful to contemplate. It quite stirs one with ambition. It is like having the merciless and senseless snobbery of mere fashionable life given a reasonable, animating motive. I should like to take upon myself such a task." Here she suddenly frowned in a moderate but rather distressed way. "Not long ago," she went on, "Mr. Kindelon