

THE BRIDGE BETWEEN.

CHAPTER V.—“BUT OH! HER BEAUTY WAS FAR BEYOND.”

Up they went to the sitting-room; but when they got to the door they stood still, staring in at her. The gas was lighted, and under it was Netta, dressed, not as she had been in the morning, but in a long flowing white dress—delicate lace, it seemed to Dolly, with shining silk beneath—and there were flowers on her skirts and in her hair, and jewels on her neck and arms.

“Oh Netta!” Dolly gasped; and then they entered, and clustering round her, Adrian Fuller—with the rest, forgetting the man in the artist. “Oh Netta!” she said again. “Why, whatever have you come for? and like that, too!”

“Didn’t I tell you I was going to a party to-night? it is only a little way further on, and mamma asked me if I could call in as I passed, just to let her see me.”

“I never saw her dressed for the evening before!” Mrs. Woodward’s words seemed half pathetic to Adrian Fuller, as he stood leaning against the fire-place, for she was speaking of her own child. “Netta, dear, this is Mr. Fuller: Adrian, you never met my daughter before.”

“I have so often heard of you, Mr. Fuller,” and the Beauty held out her hand, and bent her soft blue eyes down upon him.

“Look at her hair,” said little Sally; “it’s as bright as gold. I think she looks just like an angel.”

An angel has a crown on its head though!” said Will, reflectively.

“And an angel doesn’t give herself airs, and she does,” said Tom, with whom Netta had never been a favourite. Then they all turned upon Tom, all but Netta, who laughed merrily.

“I am sure I don’t give myself airs, Tom!” she pouted. She was a born flirt, and coquetted even with her brothers. She was a born woman of the world too, for she added, “You must think me dreadfully vain, Mr. Fuller, to come and show my self in my finery, but I did not know that you would be here.”

“Yes you did,” said Tom, again breaking out. “Dolly told you he was coming when you went on so about her rose.”

“What rose?” asked Adrian.

“Shall I tell him, Dolly?” Netta asked teasingly.

“No!” said the girl, raising her eyes from Netta’s glistening raiment to her beautiful face; “please don’t, Netta!” The tone was so humble and entreating it touched the Beauty’s heart, and she un-snapped a bracelet from her arm, and turned away her head quickly, and, gathering her snowy wraps around her, said good-bye to them, and went back to the carriage, which, with her patient chaperon within it, was waiting for her.

“Good-bye,” she said, looking back at the untidy sitting-room and the group of badly-dressed brothers and sisters. “Dolly, I want you,” and Dolly obeying, followed her. “I want to give you this, dear,” she said, putting the trinket she had un-snapped into her hand. It was not valuable—a little gold bracelet some one had given her years ago, but it seemed priceless to unsophisticated Dolly.

“Oh no, oh no, Netta!” then she looked up again at her sister’s face—that little Dolly was such a beauty-lover—and timidly put her arms about the Beauty’s neck.

“Oh, Netta! if you would only care for me, and not laugh at me, I should like it far better than having a bracelet!”

“I don’t laugh at you, you little goose,” and she kissed her warmly back again. “And I am very fond of you, of course. There, now I shall put this round your

wrist,” and she fastened it on, and rustled out, and into the carriage. “Dolly,” she said, looking back, “your friend, Mr. Fuller, is very handsome. I wish I’d seen him before;” and then she drove away.

“Let us come back to the garden,” Adrian Fuller said, when Dolly returned to the sitting-room. “I have not said good-bye to it yet. We will not stay long, Mrs. Woodward,” he said; “I only want to stroll round it once more.” So the children followed him.

“Do you know,” said Dolly, “I think trees know all sorts of strange things. I always feel as if they are my friends too.” And she looked up at the sheltering branches of her favorite sycamore, through which the stars were glittering. “This is where we buried Venus,” she added. “Netta came and caught us.”

“Yes; and said Dolly was too big for that sort of thing,” said Tom.

“What was that about the rose?”

“Nothing,” said Dolly, hastily.

“I’ll tell you,” said Tom. “Dolly had a rose to give you, and Netta wanted it, and Dolly wouldn’t let her have it.”

“Be quiet, Tom!” exclaimed Dolly, angrily; “it’s very mean of you to tell tales.”

“And then,” continued Tom, remorselessly, “Netta said Dolly was in love with you.”

“Tom!” gasped Dolly, and burst into tears. Adrian Fuller laughed, he could not help it, till he saw poor Dolly’s face, frightened, proud, and pale, ashamed of her position and her tears. Then he smoothed the dark hair off her brow.

“Never mind, Dolly, little woman,” he said, soothingly. “Perhaps, when I come back in two years’ time I shall be in love with you.”

“Isn’t sister Netta pretty?” asked Sally, when they were all in the house again. Mrs. Woodward looked up eagerly. She was so proud of her eldest daughter.

“Pretty!” he answered; “she has the loveliest face I ever saw in my life! I would give anything to get a chance of sketching it.” Dolly looked up wonderingly at him, thinking vaguely that it was a great blessing to be beautiful, and he, seeing the grave childlike face, with the troubled look it had worn beneath the sycamore tree still upon it, forgot the Beauty, and talked to his old playmate, who would never be his playmate more.

“What did you do with the rose, after all?”

“It is there,” she said, pointing to a side table, where it had lain since the morning. He went and took it up, limp and broken as it was, and put it between the leaves of a pocket sketch-book.

“I shall keep it in remembrance,” he said.

“He never wanted to paint you, Dolly,” said Tom, a little later, when by the star-shine the children watched their friend out of sight. “And he did Netta? He thinks you a guy.”

“Yes,” answered Dolly, absently.

“Netta will cut you out when he comes back,” he added, obligingly. Dolly looked at him almost bewildered for a moment, she was thinking of Adrian Fuller’s words, “Perhaps when I come back in two years I shall be in love with you,” and he had taken her rose too! It seemed to Dolly afterwards that she had learnt so much in that day. She had strayed out of her Eden, and the penalty of knowledge is this—that ignorance cannot be regained.

“No she won’t,” she answered, sorrowfully, for she was thinking of his absence, not of his return, or of what would happen then.

CHAPTER VI.—OUT OF THE DREAM-WORLD.

“Well, mamma, he will come,” said

Netta. “He says his mother always used to talk about you, and that he should so like to see you.”

“But I hate visitors,” answered Mrs. Woodward, “unless they are any of your father’s literary friends; they are as Bohemian as ourselves.”

“Is he a jolly fellow?” asked Tom.

“Very, worth a dozen of your paragon Mr. Fullers, with his big eyes, and tawny moustache he was so fond of stroking.”

“How dare you!” flashed Dolly, feeling that she was beginning to hate this interloping George Blakesley already.

“Well, so he is,” she laughed merrily back. Netta never got out of temper, any more than she ever had any violent emotions. “And he’s an excellent match. I advise you to set your cap at him, Dolly. Mr. Fuller has evidently forgotten all about you, for he has been gone an entire year, and not written once.”

“He’s not likely to look at Dolly,” said Mrs. Woodward—referring, of course, to the coming Blakesley—“she is such a plain little thing,” and she looked up at her eldest daughter. A year had only added to her beauty, and the summer sunlight was resting on the golden hair. “Why, I could not help seeing that Adrian Fuller was struck with the difference in the sisters the last evening he was here!” She did not say the words unkindly, or mean them to sound so, and Dolly knew this, and Netta’s beauty and her own plainness were things Dolly had been aware of, and heard lamented all her life, yet the remark struck home, and the hot tears came into her eyes, and a wild wish into her heart for just a little beauty. If her mother could only be proud of her as she was of Netta, or if some one older than herself would love her just a little. She had so longed for this happiness lately. She had no one to look up at now, no one to win praise or love from, save her younger brother and sisters; and her older wiser friends consisted of books and the old sycamore tree. There had been Mr. Fuller, and how she had missed him through all the long months that had formed the present year only Dolly’s self knew; and how she had waited for a letter day after day, and week after week, until angrily, half sadly, she gave him up, it was sorrow even to remember. He was dead, she used to think to herself in the sad moments; and he had forgotten her, she thought, half sorrowfully in the angry ones. Be it which it might, however, she could not allow Netta to speak against him. It was her mother’s speech, however, that cut her on the tenderest point, for it spoilt what was as yet the sweetest memory of her life. Tom came to her rescue, as heretofore. Tom was sixteen now. How they were growing up, these Woodward children!

“Did he notice the difference?” he said, scornfully. “Netta got the worst of it, then, for he was always awfully fond of Dolly. Why, he said he should be in love with her when he comes back, which is more than he’d ever be with Netta, I know!”

“Is it?” laughed the Beauty. “Well, we’ll see if ever this wonderful man returns. I shall try what I can do.”

“Oh no, Netta!” began Dolly, darting forward, and she put her hand on her sister’s arm, and as she did so saw their two faces reflected in a queer old-fashioned looking-glass, before which Netta had been standing. She gazed for a minute almost in surprise, at their two faces; the one, with blue eyes and red pouting lips, and a flush upon her rounded cheek—a sweet, fair, English face, crowned with a wealth of golden hair; the other, grave and pale, with dark brown hair falling low on her forehead, and twisted into a knot behind,