

CHAPTER IV.--SHE BEHOLDS THE ATTRACTIVE STRANGER

February 16.--We have had such a dull life here all the winter that I have found nothing important enough to set down, and broke off my journal accordingly. I resume it now to make an entry on the subject of dear Caroline's future. It seems that she was too grieved, immediately after the loss of our mother, to answer definitely the question of M. de la Feste how long the postponement was to be; then, afterwards, it was agreed that the matter should be discussed on his autumn visit; but as he did not come, it has remained in abeyance till this week, when Caroline, with the greatest simplicity and confidence, has written to him without any further pressure on his part, and told him that she is quite ready to fix the time, and will do so as soon as he arrives to see her. She is a little frightened now, lest it should seem forward in her to have revived the subject of her own accord; but she may assume that his question has been waiting on for an answer ever since, and that she has, therefore, acted only within her promise. In truth, the secret at the bottom of it all is that she is somewhat saddened because he has not latterly reminded her of the pause in their affairs--that, in short, his original impatience to possess her is not now found to animate him so obviously. I suppose that he loves her as much as ever; indeed, I am sure he must do so, seeing how lovable she is. It is mostly thus with all men when women are out of their sight; they grow negligent. Caroline must have patience, and remember that a man of his genius has many and important calls upon his time. In justice to her I must add that she does remember

it fairly well, and has as much patience as any girl ever had in the circumstances. He hopes to come at the beginning of April at latest. Well, when he comes we shall see him.

April 5.--I think that what M. de la Feste writes is reasonable enough, though Caroline looks heart-sick about it. It is hardly worth while for him to cross all the way to England and back just now, while the sea is so turbulent, seeing that he will be obliged, in any event, to come in May, when he has to be in London for professional purposes, at which time he can take us easily on his way both coming and going. When Caroline becomes his wife she will be more practical, no doubt; but she is such a child as yet that there is no contenting her with reasons. However, the time will pass quickly, there being so much to do in preparing a trousseau for her, which must now be put in hand in order that we may have plenty of leisure to get it ready. On no account must Caroline be married in half-mourning; I am sure that mother, could she know, would not wish it, and it is odd that Caroline should be so intractably persistent on this point, when she is usually so yielding.

April 30.--This month has flown on swallow's wings. We are in a great state of excitement--I as much as she--I cannot quite tell why. He is really coming in ten days, he says.

May 9. Four p.m.--I am so agitated I can scarcely write, and yet am particularly impelled to do so before leaving my room. It is the unexpected shape of an expected event which has caused my absurd

excitement, which proves me almost as much a school-girl as Caroline.

M. de la Feste was not, as we understood, to have come till to-morrow; but he is here--just arrived. All household directions have devolved upon me, for my father, not thinking M. de la Feste would appear before us for another four-and-twenty hours, left home before post time to attend a distant consecration; and hence Caroline and I were in no small excitement when Charles's letter was opened, and we read that he had been unexpectedly favoured in the dispatch of his studio work, and would follow his letter in a few hours. We sent the covered carriage to meet the train indicated, and waited like two newly strung harps for the first sound of the returning wheels. At last we heard them on the gravel; and the question arose who was to receive him. It was, strictly speaking, my duty; but I felt timid; I could not help shirking it, and insisted that Caroline should go down. She did not, however, go near the door as she usually does when anybody is expected, but waited palpitating in the drawing-room. He little thought when he saw the silent hall, and the apparently deserted house, how that house was at the very same moment alive and throbbing with interest under the surface. I stood at the back of the upper landing, where nobody could see me from downstairs, and heard him walk across the hall--a lighter step than my father's--and heard him then go into the drawing-room, and the servant shut the door behind him and go away.

What a pretty lover's meeting they must have had in there all to themselves! Caroline's sweet face looking up from her black gown--how it

must have touched him. I know she wept very much, for I heard her; and her eyes will be red afterwards, and no wonder, poor dear, though she is no doubt happy. I can imagine what she is telling him while I write this--her fears lest anything should have happened to prevent his coming after all--gentle, smiling reproaches for his long delay; and things of that sort. His two portmanteaus are at this moment crossing the landing on the way to his room. I wonder if I ought to go down.

A little later.--I have seen him! It was not at all in the way that I intended to encounter him, and I am vexed. Just after his portmanteaus were brought up I went out from my room to descend, when, at the moment of stepping towards the first stair, my eyes were caught by an object in the hall below, and I paused for an instant, till I saw that it was a bundle of canvas and sticks, composing a sketching tent and easel. At the same nick of time the drawing-room door opened and the affianced pair came out. They were saying they would go into the garden; and he waited a moment while she put on her hat. My idea was to let them pass on without seeing me, since they seemed not to want my company, but I had got too far on the landing to retreat; he looked up, and stood staring at me--engrossed to a dream-like fixity. Thereupon I, too, instead of advancing as I ought to have done, stood moonstruck and awkward, and before I could gather my weak senses sufficiently to descend, she had called him, and they went out by the garden door together. I then thought of following them, but have changed my mind, and come here to jot down these few lines. It is all I am fit for . . .

He is even more handsome than I expected. I was right in feeling he must have an attraction beyond that of form: it appeared even in that momentary glance. How happy Caroline ought to be. But I must, of course, go down to be ready with tea in the drawing-room by the time they come indoors.

11 p.m.--I have made the acquaintance of M. de la Feste; and I seem to be another woman from the effect of it. I cannot describe why this should be so, but conversation with him seems to expand the view, and open the heart, and raise one as upon stilts to wider prospects. He has a good intellectual forehead, perfect eyebrows, dark hair and eyes, an animated manner, and a persuasive voice. His voice is soft in quality--too soft for a man, perhaps; and yet on second thoughts I would not have it less so. We have been talking of his art: I had no notion that art demanded such sacrifices or such tender devotion; or that there were two roads for choice within its precincts, the road of vulgar money-making, and the road of high aims and consequent inappreciation for many long years by the public. That he has adopted the latter need not be said to those who understand him. It is a blessing for Caroline that she has been chosen by such a man, and she ought not to lament at postponements and delays, since they have arisen unavoidably. Whether he finds hers a sufficiently rich nature, intellectually and emotionally, for his own, I know not, but he seems occasionally to be disappointed at her simple views of things. Does he really feel such love for her at this moment as he no doubt believes himself to be feeling, and as he no doubt hopes to feel for the remainder of his life towards her?

It was a curious thing he told me when we were left for a few minutes alone; that Caroline had alluded so slightly to me in her conversation and letters that he had not realized my presence in the house here at all. But, of course, it was only natural that she should write and talk most about herself. I suppose it was on account of the fact of his being taken in some measure unawares, that I caught him on two or three occasions regarding me fixedly in a way that disquieted me somewhat, having been lately in so little society; till my glance aroused him from his reverie, and he looked elsewhere in some confusion. It was fortunate that he did so, and thus failed to notice my own. It shows that he, too, is not particularly a society person.

May 10.--Have had another interesting conversation with M. de la Feste on schools of landscape painting in the drawing-room after dinner this evening--my father having fallen asleep, and left nobody but Caroline and myself for Charles to talk to. I did not mean to say so much to him, and had taken a volume of Modern Painters from the bookcase to occupy myself with, while leaving the two lovers to themselves; but he would include me in his audience, and I was obliged to lay the book aside. However, I insisted on keeping Caroline in the conversation, though her views on pictorial art were only too charmingly crude and primitive.

To-morrow, if fine, we are all three going to Wherryborne Wood, where Charles will give us practical illustrations of the principles of coloring that he has enumerated to-night. I am determined not to occupy

his attention to the exclusion of Caroline, and my plan is that when we are in the dense part of the wood I will lag behind, and slip away, and leave them to return by themselves. I suppose the reason of his attentiveness to me lies in his simply wishing to win the good opinion of one who is so closely united to Caroline, and so likely to influence her good opinion of him.

May 11. Late.--I cannot sleep, and in desperation have lit my candle and taken up my pen. My restlessness is occasioned by what has occurred to-day, which at first I did not mean to write down, or trust to any heart but my own. We went to Wherryborne Wood--Caroline, Charles and I, as we had intended--and walked all three along the green track through the midst, Charles in the middle between Caroline and myself. Presently I found that, as usual, he and I were the only talkers, Caroline amusing herself by observing birds and squirrels as she walked docilely alongside her betrothed. Having noticed this I dropped behind at the first opportunity and slipped among the trees, in a direction in which I knew I should find another path that would take me home. Upon this track I by and by emerged, and walked along it in silent thought till, at a bend, I suddenly encountered M. de la Feste standing stock still and smiling thoughtfully at me.

'Where is Caroline?' said I.

'Only a little way off,' says he. 'When we missed you from behind us we thought you might have mistaken the direction we had followed, so she has

gone one way to find you and I have come this way.'

We then went back to find Caroline, but could not discover her anywhere, and the upshot was that he and I were wandering about the woods alone for more than an hour. On reaching home we found she had given us up after searching a little while, and arrived there some time before. I should not be so disturbed by the incident if I had not perceived that, during her absence from us, he did not make any earnest effort to rediscover her; and in answer to my repeated expressions of wonder as to whither she could have wandered he only said, 'Oh, she's quite safe; she told me she knew the way home from any part of this wood. Let us go on with our talk. I assure you I value this privilege of being with one I so much admire more than you imagine;' and other things of that kind. I was so foolish as to show a little perturbation--I cannot tell why I did not control myself; and I think he noticed that I was not cool. Caroline has, with her simple good faith, thought nothing of the occurrence; yet altogether I am not satisfied.