

DUNSTONE'S DEAR LADY

The story of Dunstone is so slight, so trivial in its cardinal incidents, such a business of cheap feathers and bits of ribbon on the surface, that I should hesitate to tell it, were it not for its inwardness, what one might call the symbolism of the thing. Frankly, I do not clearly see what that symbolism is, but I feel it hovering in some indefinable way whenever I recall his case. It is one of those things that make a man extend his arm and twiddle his fingers, and say, blinking, "Like that, you know." So do not imagine for one moment that this is a shallow story, simply because it is painted, so to speak, not in heart's blood but in table claret.

Dunstone was a strong, quiet kind of man--a man of conspicuous mediocrity, and rising rapidly, therefore, in his profession. He was immensely industrious, and a little given to melancholia in private life. He smoked rather too many cigars, and took his social occasions seriously. He dressed faultlessly, with a scrupulous elimination of style. Unlike Mr. Grant Allen's ideal man, he was not constitutionally a lover; indeed, he seemed not to like the ordinary girl at all--found her either too clever or too shallow, lacking a something. I don't think he knew quite what it was. Neither do I--it is a case for extended hand and twiddling fingers. Moreover, I don't think the ordinary girl took to Dunstone very much.

He suffered, I fancy, from a kind of mental greyness; he was all subtle tones; the laughter of girls jarred upon him; foolish smartness or amiable foolishness got on his nerves; he detested, with equal sincerity, bright dressing, artistic dabbling, piety, and the glow of health. And when, as his confidential friend--confidential, that is, so far as his limits allowed--I heard that he intended to marry, I was really very much surprised.

I expected something quintessential; I was surprised to find she was a visiting governess. Harringay, the artist, thought there was nothing in her, but Sackbut, the art critic, was inclined to admire her bones. For my own part, I took rather a liking to her. She was small and thin, and, to be frank, I think it was because she hardly got enough to eat--of the delicate food she needed. She was shabby, too, dressed in rusty mourning--she had recently lost her mother. But she had a sweet, low voice, a shrinking manner, rather a graceful carriage, I thought, and, though she spoke rarely, all she said was sweet and sane. She struck me as a refined woman in a blatant age. The general effect of her upon me was favourable; upon Dunstone it was tremendous. He lost a considerable proportion of his melancholia, and raved at times like a common man. He called her in particular his "Dear Lady" and his "Sweet Lady," things that I find eloquent of what he found in her. What that was I fancy I understand, and yet I cannot say it quite. One has to resort to the extended arm and fingers vibratile.

Before he married her--which he did while she was still in

half-mourning--there was anxiety about her health, and I understood she needed air and exercise and strengthening food. But she recovered rapidly after her marriage, her eyes grew brighter, we saw less of Sackbut's "delicious skeleton." And then, in the strangest way, she began to change. It is none of my imagining; I have heard the change remarked upon by half a dozen independent observers. Yet you would think a girl of three-and-twenty (as she certainly was) had attained her development as a woman. I have heard her compared to a winter bud, cased in its sombre scales, until the sun shone, and the warm, moist winds began to blow. I noticed first that the delicate outline of her cheek was filling, and then came the time when she reverted to colour in her dress.

Her first essays were charitably received. Her years of struggle, her year of mourning, had no doubt dwarfed her powers in this direction; presently her natural good taste would reassert itself. But the next effort and the next were harder to explain. It was not the note of nervousness or inexperience we saw; there was an undeniable decision, and not a token of shame. The little black winter bud grew warm-coloured above, and burst suddenly into extravagant outlines and chromatic confusion. Harringay, who is a cad, first put what we were all feeling into words. "I've just seen Dunstone and his donah," he said. Clearly she was one of those rare women who cannot dress. And that was not all. A certain buoyancy, hitherto unsuspected, crept into her manner, as the corpuscles multiplied in her veins--an archness. She talked more, and threw up a spray of playfulness. And, with a growing energy, she began

to revise the exquisite æsthetic balance of Dunstone's house. She even enamelled a chair.

For a year or so I was in the East. When I returned Mrs. Dunstone amazed me. In some odd way she had grown, she had positively grown. She was taller, broader, brighter--infinitely brighter. She wore a diamond brooch in the afternoon. The "delicious skeleton" had vanished in plumpness. She moved with emphasis. Her eye--which glittered--met mine bravely, and she talked as one who would be heard. In the old days you saw nothing but a rare timid glance from under the pretty lids. She talked now of this and that, of people of "good family," and the difficulty of getting a suitable governess for her little boy. She said she objected to meeting people "one would not care to invite to one's house." She swamped me with tea and ruled the conversation, so that Dunstone and I, who were once old friends, talked civil twaddle for the space of one hour--theatres, concerts, and assemblies chiefly--and then parted again. The furniture had all been altered--there were two "cosy nooks" in the room after the recipe in the *Born Lady*. It was plain to me, it is plain to everyone, I find, that Mrs. Dunstone is, in the sun of prosperity, rapidly developing an extremely florid vulgarity. And afterwards I discovered that she had forgotten her music, and evidently enjoyed her meals. Yet I for one can witness that five years ago there was that about her--I can only extend my arm with quivering digits. But it was something very sweet and dainty, something that made her white and thoughtful, and marked her off from the rest of womankind. I sometimes fancy it may have been anæmia in part, but it was certainly

poverty and mourning in the main.

You may think that this is a story of disillusionment. When I first heard the story, I thought so too. But, so far as Dunstone goes, that is not the case. It is rare that I see him now, but the other day we smoked two cigars apiece together. And in a moment of confidence he spoke of her. He said how anxious he felt for her health, called her his "Dainty Little Lady," and spoke of the coarseness of other women. I am afraid this is not a very eventful story, and yet there is that----That very convenient gesture, an arm protruded and flickering fingers, conveys my meaning best. Perhaps you will understand.