

CHAPTER II

In the month of May, seven years after the flight of the two boys from Moncrief House, a lady sat in an island of shadow which was made by a cedar-tree in the midst of a glittering green lawn. She did well to avoid the sun, for her complexion was as delicately tinted as mother-of-pearl. She was a small, graceful woman, with sensitive lips and nostrils, green eyes, with quiet, unarched brows, and ruddy gold hair, now shaded by a large, untrimmed straw hat. Her dress of Indian muslin, with half-sleeves terminating at the elbows in wide ruffles, hardly covered her shoulders, where it was supplemented by a scarf through which a glimpse of her throat was visible in a nest of soft Tourkaris lace. She was reading a little ivory-bound volume--a miniature edition of the second part of Goethe's "Faust."

As the afternoon wore on and the light mellowed, the lady dropped her book and began to think and dream, unconscious of a prosaic black object crossing the lawn towards her. This was a young gentleman in a frock coat. He was dark, and had a long, grave face, with a reserved expression, but not ill-looking.

"Going so soon, Lucian?" said the lady, looking up as he came into the shadow.

Lucian looked at her wistfully. His name, as she uttered it, always stirred him vaguely. He was fond of finding out the reasons of things, and had long ago decided that this inward stir was due to her fine pronunciation. His other intimates called him Looshn.

"Yes," he said. "I have arranged everything, and have come to give an account of my stewardship, and to say good-bye."

He placed a garden-chair near her and sat down. She laid her hands one on the other in her lap, and composed herself to listen.

"First," he said, "as to the Warren Lodge. It is let for a month only; so you can allow Mrs. Goff to have it rent free in July if you still wish to. I hope you will not act so unwisely."

She smiled, and said, "Who are the present tenants? I hear that they object to the dairymaids and men crossing the elm vista."

"We must not complain of that. It was expressly stipulated when they took the lodge that the vista should be kept private for them. I had no idea at that time that you were coming to the castle, or I should of course have declined such a condition."

"But we do keep it private for them; strangers are not admitted. Our people pass and repass once a day on their way to and from the dairy; that is all."

"It seems churlish, Lydia; but this, it appears, is a special case--a young gentleman, who has come to recruit his health. He needs daily exercise in the open air; but he cannot bear observation, and he has only a single attendant with him. Under these circumstances I agreed that they should have the sole use of the elm vista. In fact, they are paying more rent than would be reasonable without this privilege."

"I hope the young gentleman is not mad."

"I satisfied myself before I let the lodge to him that he would be a proper tenant," said Lucian, with reproachful gravity. "He was strongly recommended to me by Lord Worthington, whom I believe to be a man of honor, notwithstanding his inveterate love of sport. As it happens, I expressed to him the suspicion you have just suggested. Worthington vouched for the tenant's sanity, and offered to take the lodge in his own name and be personally responsible for the good behavior of this young invalid, who has, I fancy, upset his

nerves by hard reading. Probably some college friend of Worthington's."

"Perhaps so. But I should rather expect a college friend of Lord Worthington's to be a hard rider or drinker than a hard reader."

"You may be quite at ease, Lydia. I took Lord Worthington at his word so far as to make the letting to him. I have never seen the real tenant. But, though I do not even recollect his name, I will venture to answer for him at second-hand."

"I am quite satisfied, Lucian; and I am greatly obliged to you. I will give orders that no one shall go to the dairy by way of the warren. It is natural that he should wish to be out of the world."

"The next point," resumed Lucian, "is more important, as it concerns you personally. Miss Goff is willing to accept your offer. And a most unsuitable companion she will be for you!"

"Why, Lucian?"

"On all accounts. She is younger than you, and therefore cannot chaperone you. She has received only an ordinary education, and her experience of society is derived from local subscription balls. And, as she is not unattractive, and is considered a beauty in Wiltstoken, she is self-willed, and will probably take your patronage in bad part."

"Is she more self-willed than I?"

"You are not self-willed, Lydia; except that you are deaf to advice."

"You mean that I seldom follow it. And so you think I had better employ a professional companion--a decayed gentlewoman--than save this young girl from going out as a governess and beginning to decay at twenty-three?"

"The business of getting a suitable companion, and the pleasure or duty of relieving poor people, are two different things, Lydia."

"True, Lucian. When will Miss Goff call?"

"This evening. Mind; nothing is settled as yet. If you think better of it on seeing her you have only to treat her as an ordinary visitor and the subject will drop. For my own part, I prefer her sister; but she will not leave Mrs. Goff, who has not yet recovered from the shock of her husband's death."

Lydia looked reflectively at the little volume in her hand, and seemed to think out the question of Miss Goff. Presently, with an air of having made up her mind, she said, "Can you guess which of Goethe's characters you remind me of when you try to be worldly-wise for my sake?"

"When I try--What an extraordinary irrelevance! I have not read Goethe lately. Mephistopheles, I suppose. But I did not mean to be cynical."

"No; not Mephistopheles, but Wagner--with a difference. Wagner taking Mephistopheles instead of Faust for his model." Seeing by his face that he did not relish the comparison, she added, "I am paying you a compliment. Wagner represents a very clever man."

"The saving clause is unnecessary," he said, somewhat sarcastically. "I know your opinion of me quite well, Lydia."

She looked quickly at him. Detecting the concern in her glance, he shook his head sadly, saying, "I must go now, Lydia. I leave you in charge of the housekeeper until Miss Goff arrives."

She gave him her hand, and a dull glow came into his gray jaws as he took it. Then he buttoned his coat and walked gravely away. As he went, she watched the sun mirrored in his glossy hat, and drowned in his respectable coat. She sighed, and took up Goethe again.

But after a little while she began to be tired of sitting still, and she rose and wandered through the park for nearly an hour, trying to find the places in which she had played in her childhood during a visit to her late aunt. She recognized a great toppling Druid's altar that had formerly reminded her of Mount Sinai threatening to fall on the head of Christian in "The Pilgrim's Progress." Farther on she saw and avoided a swamp in which she had once earned a scolding from her nurse by filling her stockings with mud. Then she found herself in a long avenue of green turf, running east and west, and apparently endless. This seemed the most delightful of all her possessions, and she had begun to plan a pavilion to build near it, when she suddenly recollected that this must be the elm vista of which the privacy was so stringently insisted upon, by her invalid tenant at the Warren Lodge. She fled into the wood at once, and, when she was safe there, laughed at the oddity of being a trespasser in her own domain. She made a wide detour in order to avoid intruding a second time; consequently, after walking for a quarter of an hour, she lost herself. The trees seemed never ending; she began to think she must possess a forest as well as a park. At last she saw an opening. Hastening toward it, she came again into the sunlight, and stopped, dazzled by an apparition which she at first took to be a beautiful statue, but presently recognized, with a strange glow of delight, as a living man.

To so mistake a gentleman exercising himself in the open air on a nineteenth-century afternoon would, under ordinary circumstances, imply incredible ignorance either of men or statues. But the circumstances in Miss Carew's case were not ordinary; for the man was clad in a jersey and knee-breeches of white material, and his bare arms shone like those of a gladiator. His broad pectoral muscles, in their white covering, were like slabs of marble. Even his hair, short, crisp, and curly, seemed like burnished bronze in the evening light. It came into Lydia's mind that she had disturbed an antique god in his sylvan haunt. The fancy was only momentary; for she perceived that there was a third person present; a man impossible to associate with classic divinity. He looked like a well-to-do groom, and was contemplating his companion much as a groom might contemplate an exceptionally fine horse. He was the first to see Lydia; and his expression as he did so plainly showed that he regarded her as a most unwelcome intruder. The statue-man, following his sinister look, saw her too, but with different feelings; for his lips parted, his color rose, and he stared at her with undisguised admiration and wonder. Lydia's first impulse was to turn and fly; her next, to apologize for her presence. Finally she went away quietly through the trees.

The moment she was out of their sight she increased her pace almost to a run. The day was too warm for rapid movement, and she soon stopped and listened. There were the usual woodland sounds; leaves rustling, grasshoppers chirping, and birds singing; but not a human voice or footstep. She began to think that the god-like figure was only the Hermes of Praxiteles, suggested to her by Goethe's classical Sabbat, and changed by a day-dream into the semblance of a living reality. The groom must have been one of those incongruities characteristic of dreams--probably a reminiscence of Lucian's statement that the tenant of the Warren Lodge had a single male attendant. It was impossible that this glorious vision of manly strength and beauty could be substantially a student broken down by excessive study. That irrational glow of delight, too, was one of the absurdities of dreamland; otherwise she should have been ashamed of it.

Lydia made her way back to the castle in some alarm as to the state of her nerves, but dwelling on her vision with a pleasure that she would not have ventured to indulge had it concerned a creature of flesh and blood. Once or twice it recurred to her so vividly that she asked herself whether it could have been real. But a little reasoning convinced her that it must have been an hallucination.

"If you please, madam," said one of her staff of domestics, a native of Wiltstoken, who stood in deep awe of

the lady of the castle, "Miss Goff is waiting for you in the drawing-room."

The drawing-room of the castle was a circular apartment, with a dome-shaped ceiling broken into gilt ornaments resembling thick bamboos, which projected vertically downward like stalagmites. The heavy chandeliers were loaded with flattened brass balls, magnified fac-similes of which crowned the uprights of the low, broad, massively-framed chairs, which were covered in leather stamped with Japanese dragon designs in copper-colored metal. Near the fireplace was a great bronze bell of Chinese shape, mounted like a mortar on a black wooden carriage for use as a coal-scuttle. The wall was decorated with large gold crescents on a ground of light blue.

In this barbaric rotunda Miss Carew found awaiting her a young lady of twenty-three, with a well-developed, resilient figure, and a clear complexion, porcelain surfaced, and with a fine red in the cheeks. The lofty pose of her head expressed an habitual sense of her own consequence given her by the admiration of the youth of the neighborhood, which was also, perhaps, the cause of the neatness of her inexpensive black dress, and of her irreproachable gloves, boots, and hat. She had been waiting to introduce herself to the lady of the castle for ten minutes in a state of nervousness that culminated as Lydia entered.

"How do you do, Miss Goff, Have I kept you waiting? I was out."

"Not at all," said Miss Goff, with a confused impression that red hair was aristocratic, and dark brown (the color of her own) vulgar. She had risen to shake hands, and now, after hesitating a moment to consider what etiquette required her to do next, resumed her seat. Miss Carew sat down too, and gazed thoughtfully at her visitor, who held herself rigidly erect, and, striving to mask her nervousness, unintentionally looked disdainful.

"Miss Goff," said Lydia, after a silence that made her speech impressive, "will you come to me on a long visit? In this lonely place I am greatly in want of a friend and companion of my own age and position. I think you must be equally so."

Alice Goff was very young, and very determined to accept no credit that she did not deserve. With the unconscious vanity and conscious honesty of youth, she proceeded to set Miss Carew right as to her social position, not considering that the lady of the castle probably understood it better than she did herself, and indeed thinking it quite natural that she should be mistaken.

"You are very kind," she replied, stiffly; "but our positions are quite different, Miss Carew. The fact is that I cannot afford to live an idle life. We are very poor, and my mother is partly dependent on my exertions."

"I think you will be able to exert yourself to good purpose if you come to me," said Lydia, unimpressed. "It is true that I shall give you very expensive habits; but I will of course enable you to support them."

"I do not wish to contract expensive habits," said Alice, reproachfully. "I shall have to content myself with frugal ones throughout my life."

"Not necessarily. Tell me, frankly: how had you proposed to exert yourself? As a teacher, was it not?"

Alice flushed, but assented.

"You are not at all fitted for it; and you will end by marrying. As a teacher you could not marry well. As an idle lady, with expensive habits, you will marry very well indeed. It is quite an art to know how to be rich--an indispensable art, if you mean to marry a rich man."

"I have no intention of marrying," said Alice, loftily. She thought it time to check this cool aristocrat. "If I

come at all I shall come without any ulterior object."

"That is just what I had hoped. Come without condition, or second thought of any kind."

"But--" began Alice, and stopped, bewildered by the pace at which the negotiation was proceeding. She murmured a few words, and waited for Lydia to proceed. But Lydia had said her say, and evidently expected a reply, though she seemed assured of having her own way, whatever Alice's views might be.

"I do not quite understand, Miss Carew. What duties?--what would you expect of me?"

"A great deal," said Lydia, gravely. "Much more than I should from a mere professional companion."

"But I am a professional companion," protested Alice.

"Whose?"

Alice flushed again, angrily this time. "I did not mean to say--"

"You do not mean to say that you will have nothing to do with me," said Lydia, stopping her quietly. "Why are you so scrupulous, Miss Goff? You will be close to your home, and can return to it at any moment if you become dissatisfied with your position here."

Fearful that she had disgraced herself by ill manners; loath to be taken possession of as if her wishes were of no consequence when a rich lady's whim was to be gratified; suspicious--since she had often heard gossiping tales of the dishonesty of people in high positions--lest she should be cheated out of the salary she had come resolved to demand; and withal unable to defend herself against Miss Carew, Alice caught at the first excuse that occurred to her.

"I should like a little time to consider," she said.

"Time to accustom yourself to me, is it not? You can have as long as you plea--"

"Oh, I can let you know tomorrow," interrupted Alice, officiously.

"Thank you. I will send a note to Mrs. Goff to say that she need not expect you back until tomorrow."

"But I did not mean--I am not prepared to stay," remonstrated Alice, feeling that she was being entangled in a snare.

"We shall take a walk after dinner, then, and call at your house, where you can make your preparations. But I think I can supply you with all you will require."

Alice dared make no further objection. "I am afraid," she stammered, "you will think me horribly rude; but I am so useless, and you are so sure to be disappointed, that--that--"

"You are not rude, Miss Goff; but I find you very shy. You want to run away and hide from new faces and new surroundings." Alice, who was self-possessed and even overbearing in Wiltstoken society, felt that she was misunderstood, but did not know how to vindicate herself. Lydia resumed, "I have formed my habits in the course of my travels, and so live without ceremony. We dine early--at six."

Alice had dined at two, but did not feel bound to confess it.

"Let me show you your room," said Lydia, rising. "This is a curious drawingroom," she added, glancing around. "I only use it occasionally to receive visitors." She looked about her again with some interest, as if the apartment belonged to some one else, and led the way to a room on the first floor, furnished as a lady's bed-chamber. "If you dislike this," she said, "or cannot arrange it to suit you, there are others, of which you can have your choice. Come to my boudoir when you are ready."

"Where is that?" said Alice, anxiously.

"It is--You had better ring for some one to show you. I will send you my maid."

Alice, even more afraid of the maid than of the mistress, declined hastily. "I am accustomed to attend to myself, Miss Carew," with proud humility.

"You will find it more convenient to call me Lydia," said Miss Carew. "Otherwise you will be supposed to refer to my grandaunt, a very old lady." She then left the room.

Alice was fond of thinking that she had a womanly taste and touch in making a room pretty. She was accustomed to survey with pride her mother's drawing-room, which she had garnished with cheap cretonnes, Japanese paper fans, and knick-knacks in ornamental pottery. She felt now that if she slept once in the bed before her, she could never be content in her mother's house again. All that she had read and believed of the beauty of cheap and simple ornament, and the vulgarity of costliness, recurred to her as a hypocritical paraphrase of the "sour grapes" of the fox in the fable. She pictured to herself with a shudder the effect of a sixpenny Chinese umbrella in that fireplace, a cretonne valance to that bed, or chintz curtains to those windows. There was in the room a series of mirrors consisting of a great glass in which she could see herself at full length, another framed in the carved oaken dressing-table, and smaller ones of various shapes fixed to jointed arms that turned every way. To use them for the first time was like having eyes in the back of the head. She had never seen herself from all points of view before. As she gazed, she strove not to be ashamed of her dress; but even her face and figure, which usually afforded her unqualified delight, seemed robust and middle-class in Miss Carew's mirrors.

"After all," she said, seating herself on a chair that was even more luxurious to rest in than to look at; "putting the lace out of the question--and my old lace that belongs to mamma is quite as valuable--her whole dress cannot have cost much more than mine. At any rate, it is not worth much more, whatever she may have chosen to pay for it."

But Alice was clever enough to envy Miss Carew her manners more than her dress. She would not admit to herself that she was not thoroughly a lady; but she felt that Lydia, in the eye of a stranger, would answer that description better than she. Still, as far as she had observed, Miss Carew was exceedingly cool in her proceedings, and did not take any pains to please those with whom she conversed. Alice had often made compacts of friendship with young ladies, and had invited them to call her by her Christian name; but on such occasions she had always called them "dear" or "darling," and, while the friendship lasted (which was often longer than a month, for Alice was a steadfast girl), had never met them without exchanging an embrace and a hearty kiss.

"And nothing," she said, springing from the chair as she thought of this, and speaking very resolutely, "shall tempt me to believe that there is anything vulgar in sincere affection. I shall be on my guard against this woman."

Having settled that matter for the present, she resumed her examination of the apartment, and was more and more attracted by it as she proceeded. For, thanks to her eminence as a local beauty, she had not that fear of beautiful and rich things which renders abject people incapable of associating costliness with comfort. Had the counterpane of the bed been her own, she would have unhesitatingly converted it into a ball-dress. There were

toilet appliances of which she had never felt the need, and could only guess the use. She looked with despair into the two large closets, thinking how poor a show her three dresses, her ulster, and her few old jackets would make there. There was also a dressing-room with a marble bath that made cleanliness a luxury instead of one of the sternest of the virtues, as it seemed at home. Yet she remarked that though every object was more or less ornamental, nothing had been placed in the rooms for the sake of ornament alone. Miss Carew, judged by her domestic arrangements, was a utilitarian before everything. There was a very handsome chimney piece; but as there was nothing on the mantel board, Alice made a faint effort to believe that it was inferior in point of taste to that in her own bedroom, which was covered with blue cloth, surrounded by fringe and brass headed nails, and laden with photographs in plush frames.

The striking of the hour reminded her that she had forgotten to prepare for dinner. She hastily took off her hat, washed her hands, spent another minute among the mirrors, and was summoning courage to ring the bell, when a doubt occurred to her. Ought she to put on her gloves before going down or not? This kept her in perplexity for many seconds. At last she resolved to put her gloves in her pocket, and be guided as to their further disposal by the example of her hostess. Then, not daring to hesitate any longer, she rang the bell, and was presently joined by a French lady of polished manners--Miss Carew's maid who conducted her to the boudoir, a hexagonal apartment that, Alice thought, a sultana might have envied. Lydia was there, reading. Alice noted with relief that she had not changed her dress, and that she was ungloved.

Miss Goff did not enjoy the dinner. There was a butler who seemed to have nothing to do but stand at a buffet and watch her. There was also a swift, noiseless footman who presented himself at her elbow at intervals and compelled her to choose on the instant between unfamiliar things to eat and drink. She envied these men their knowledge of society, and shrank from their criticism. Once, after taking a piece of asparagus in her hand, she was deeply mortified at seeing her hostess consume the vegetable with the aid of a knife and fork; but the footman's back was turned to her just then, and the butler, oppressed by the heat of the weather, was in a state of abstraction bordering on slumber. On the whole, by dint of imitating Miss Carew, who did not plague her with any hostess-like vigilance, she came off without discredit to her breeding.

Lydia, on her part, acknowledged no obligation to entertain her guest by chatting, and enjoyed her thoughts and her dinner in silence. Alice began to be fascinated by her, and to wonder what she was thinking about. She fancied that the footman was not quite free from the same influence. Even the butler might have been meditating himself to sleep on the subject. Alice felt tempted to offer her a penny for her thoughts. But she dared not be so familiar as yet. And, had the offer been made and accepted, butler, footman, and guest would have been plunged into equal confusion by the explanation, which would have run thus:

"I saw a vision of the Hermes of Praxiteles in a sylvan haunt to-day; and I am thinking of that."