

His Heart's Delight.

IN TWO INSTALMENTS.

CHAPTER IV. SKIDLER'S ALLEY.

The range of studios known to the art world as Skidler's Alley were built in pairs with a connecting door between each two, which was handy for friends.

In one of these pairs resided—or more properly speaking painted—the two cousins, Charles and Rupert Norton.

The further one belonged to the first named, and on the morning after the picnic, he was making a pretence at work, though the picture on the easel before him had scarce been touched since he sat down to it.

Presently he was roused from his day-dream by the entrance of Rupert.

'Charlie,' the latter exclaimed, 'I have come to drag you out. So just throw down your tools and get into your war-paint.'

'It was a temptation; but suddenly the young artist remembered how much depended on his getting on.'

'My dear fellow,' he exclaimed, beginning to paint as if for dear life, 'I can't. I must positively get this done. I am going to rattle in a dozen like this and then settle down to do something better.'

'A very meritorious resolution. But supposing that, by taking a short walk, you can put more money in your pocket than old Sol Davis would give you for all of these?' and he prodded the canvas on the easel with the point of his umbrella.

'When? You don't mean that you have got an order for me?'

Rupert nodded.

'An old friend of yours wants you to paint her portrait,' he said.

Charlie looked at his cousin in utter surprise.

'An old friend of mine! I think you said her portrait? My dear fellow, I can't guess it; it's no good trying. Tell me, for goodness sake!'

'You admired her very much, Charlie, at one time. Carry your mind back to Monte Carlo.'

'Monte Carlo! I don't remember any ladies there. I only remember we lost our money on number thirteen.'

Rupert gave an impatient gesture.

'Confound number thirteen! he said a beastly unlucky number. But your memory is sadly defective, my dear boy. What! have you forgotten the beautiful Clara Wilmot?'

'By Jove, you don't say it's she! Do you mean she remembered me after all these years? And she wants her portrait painted? My dear Rupert, it will be making of me. Why, she is quite a celebrity!'

'Few better-known actresses in London.'

'If we could only get it exhibited next year! Why, if it was, it would be worth a thousand a year to me.'

'Very true. So now, if you wish the vision of wealth to grow into reality, come with me and renew your acquaintanceship with the fair Clara.'

Rupert walked on, in which huge edifice Clara Wilmot possessed a flat was not more than a mile from Skidler's Alley, so the cousins walked.

For Charlie there had never been so bright a day, so warm a sun, such delightful air.

At last he could contain himself no longer.

'My dear Rupert,' he exclaimed, 'do you know why I am the happiest fellow in the world?'

Rupert's cheek paled for a second, but before his cousin could answer his own question, which he was evidently on the point of doing, he held up his hand.

'Why, Charlie,' he said, smiling, 'anyone can see you are happy; but take care, or in telling me the cause, you may be letting some other person's secret out of the bag as well as your own.'

'By Jove! Rupert you are quite right. I never thought of that. Well, never mind. You can guess, you know. I am the very luckiest dog that ever was born.'

'Yes; meeting Clara was a fortunate chance for you, as it turns out,' replied Rupert, purposely mistaking the other's meaning. 'That bright face of yours has much to answer for.'

Charlie laughed, and a few minutes later they found themselves in the actress's drawing-room. She came forward with a bright smile and extended hand.

'How good of you to come and see me so soon!' she said to Charlie. 'It was only the other day that your cousin told me you had a studio in London and were becoming quite famous. How delightful!'

'I am afraid my fame has not spread beyond a few dealers, yet. I only returned from Italy a year ago.'

She asked him at once about his stay there, and presently Rupert joined in, and the chat became general.

Before taking their leave it was arranged that Miss Wilmot was to commence sitting for her portrait at once—the very next day in fact.

'Well, and how do you think she is looking?' Rupert asked, as soon as they were out in the street.

'She is beautiful. I do not think I ever saw a more magnificent woman. She has improved from the Monte Carlo days.'

A sneering smile fluttered for a moment round the elder cousin's lips.

'You are quite right,' he answered.

'Magnificent is the proper word. I rather envy you your task, Master Charlie.'

The young artist laughed.

As if he could have eyes for any woman except one!

'By the way,' he said, 'what has become of the other sister—the one you were after?'

The cigarette which he had just lighted dropped from Rupert's lips, and he stooped to pick it up.

Charlie noticed, as they went on again, that the exertion had sent the blood to his cousin's face.

'What were we talking about?' Rupert asked.

'I was asking what had become of the sister—your girl, you know?'

'Dead, I believe!'

The words were spoken so coldly, with such indifference, that Charlie was struck.

'By Jove, Rupert!' he said, 'your indifference is sublime. If she had been a cat you could not show less feeling.'

'My dear boy, what would be the good if I grieved over every one of my acquaintances as they died? I am not different from the majority of people. I don't pretend to what I do not feel, that's all.'

'Well, then, I'll say "Poor girl" for you,' the younger cousin rejoined. 'If one I've known, however little, dies, I'm cut up.'

Rupert shrugged his shoulders.

'Let us speak of something else,' he said.

'Clara is better worth talking about—the living before the dead.'

'I wonder she did not ask you to paint her portrait, if she really wanted it done.'

Charlie said, pleased to get away from the dismal topic of the dead sister.

'It started that way; but though I daub a little, I have not the energy to paint such a portrait as she wants. Why don't you suggest to her that she should sit in character—in one of her best known roles?'

Charlie agreed that the idea was good, and as Rupert was not going to return to the studios, they shook hands and parted.

CHAPTER V. HAPPY DAYS.

'What is she like, Charlie? This Miss Wilmot, I mean,' Iris questioned. 'I forgot to ask you the last time you were here.'

It had been on her lips to put the question half-a-dozen times when Charlie had rushed down to Twickenham with the news of his order—an order that was going to make his fortune—but they had been so busy building castles in the air that it had been unsaid.

He dreaded that she should think he saw beauty in anyone save herself, so he answered carelessly—

'Oh, passable enough! A big woman.'

'Young?'

'Over thirty. But what does it matter about her looks? It's her name which is the chief point. Don't you see that, if they will only hang the picture anywhere near the line where people can see it, they will crowd to look at so well-known an actress?'

Iris was satisfied.

For a moment Rupert's words about Charlie seeing beauty in every fresh face had flashed across her mind, but a big woman over thirty did not sound very dangerous.

Still, she persevered, giving herself pain in order to have the pleasure of being reassured.

'Can't you describe her, Charlie?'

'Wait till she has sat to me three or four times. The sittings begin to-morrow. Yesterday we only talked about the style of portrait she wanted.'

Iris dismissed the subject from her mind and left herself be unreservedly happy for the rest of the day.

The portrait was duly commenced.

At first Clara declared that she could only find time to give an hour to sitting for it, two or three times a week, and that only till the end of the month, when she was going away on her holiday.

Gradually, however, the sittings became more frequent, and when her engagement terminated, the holiday was forgotten or put off, and she still stayed in town.

Charlie put his whole strength into the work.

Fortune had given him a chance, and he was determined to deserve her smiles.

It was no common portrait.

Clara had decided to be painted in the dress of a Spanish gipsy—a stage Spanish gipsy he well understood—a character in which she had achieved a great success.

She wore a loose white bodice, which left the neck and arms bare.

The short skirt was of dark green stuff, confined at the waist by a scarlet sash.

On her head was a piece of red cloth which fell on either side, framing the oval of her face, and fastened by great gold pins.

Never had she looked handsomer, more bewitching, as, reclining amongst a pile of gorgeous cushions, she with half-closed eyes watched the painter at his work.

'Am I really like that?' she said one day, as, the sitting over, she stood in front of the canvas.

'It is a good likeness,' he said, his face brightening; 'but I am afraid that, so far, it hardly does you justice. With you expression means so much, and it is difficult to catch it.'

She blushed with pleasure.

'I am afraid, Mr. Norton, that you are given to flattery,' she said. 'I know what you mean, but I am more than pleased with the picture as it is.'

'You are very good, Miss Wilmot. I am glad you like it; but I shall not be

contented till I catch the expression I want.'

'Please don't be formal and call me Miss Wilmot. All my friends call me Clara, and you are quite an old friend, you know.'

'A friend of more than four years' standing,' he answered, laughing.

A shadow seemed to fall on the actress's face.

'More than four years?' she said. 'So it must be. If only that fatal number thirteen had not turned up! Of course you don't understand,' she went on, seeing him look surprised. 'How could you? But our misfortune began—or rather my sister's did—on the day we backed that fatal number. You know thirteen is always considered unlucky.'

'I heard your sister was dead,' he said, 'and I was very sorry.'

She looked at him with something like terror in her eyes.

'Yes; dead!' she murmured. 'But who told you?'

'It was Rupert.'

'Ah! true; of course. I forgot for the moment that you and he were friends. Tell me, are you fond of your cousin?'

'Of Rupert? Oh! we get on well enough together. That is his studio, through the door you see there. I wonder we have not seen him.'

She was busy drawing on her gloves, and did not answer for a minute.

When she did, her tone was almost pleading.

'Don't trust him too far,' she said; 'pray do not. Don't think I want to set you against him, I only wish to warn you. He is not to be trusted, indeed he is not. I should not say so if I did not know.'

It struck the young artist at once that his cousin must have jilted or in some other way behaved badly to Clara Wilmot's sister.

'Rupert and I have always hit it off pretty well,' he answered. 'But thank you all the same for taking enough interest in me to give me advice.'

Again a blush of pleasure tinged her cheek.

'Of course, I take an interest in the artist who is going to make me famous,' she exclaimed gaily. 'Remember, you are always to call me "Clara" for the future, and I shall call you "Charlie," as I used to at Monte Carlo. Ah! if we could only live our lives over again, knowing what we know! But it is no good repining. Now you may put me into my brougham if you like; and I shall come tomorrow at the same time.'

When she had gone, he stood before the portrait, looking at it.

'She is very beautiful,' he murmured, 'and very nice; but there is only one Iris in the world. Even this woman, with all her beauty, art and fascination, seems coarse and common. All the same I don't wonder at Rupert thinking himself in love with the sister. Of course, he could not have spoken of her in the way he did, and she dead, poor soul!'

'Clara is very bitter against him, that is certain. I wonder if there is any truth in what she said? Sometimes I think there is more under that lazy exterior of Rupert's than people think. One comfort is, Iris dislikes him. He is not the sort of a rival a fellow would like to have.'

With which reflection Charlie went out to lunch.

He saw little of Rupert, who never came near the studio when Clara was there.

It was a happy time for Charles Norton.

The mornings were taken up with his work, the afternoons were spent with Iris, from whom he hurried back, to paint by lamp-light pictures ordered at a ridiculously small price by Mr. Sol Davis and his brethren, for though art and love are divine, they often do not provide even two meals a day, and Charlie was always ready for three.

Iris was quite contented for her lover to devote his mornings to art, so long as he gave her the afternoons; but one day, when she expected him at the Lodge, there came a note to say that he could not come down; Miss Wilmot was giving him a long sitting as she was going away the next day.

Iris was vexed and hurt.

It was the first time Charlie had disappointed her, and the afternoon seemed dreadfully long all by herself.

There was some consolation in thinking the sittings were over for a while, and that Charlie would be able to take her on the river in the mornings; but the next day deprived her of this consolation—Miss Wilmot had changed her mind again, and had determined to stay on for a while longer, perhaps till the portrait was finished.

'I declare I shall end in hating her,' Iris exclaimed. 'What a wretched creature she must be, not to know her own mind for two days running.'

'We must excuse her, dear,' the artist answered. 'Remember what the portrait is going to do for us.'

'I should like to see it. I tell you what Charlie, I will get the dad to take me up to your studio.'

For a moment he felt delighted; then a fear lest the beauty of his model might cause her jealousy made him throw cold water on the project.

'Wait till it is finished, dear,' he answered. 'I should not like you to see my first great picture in an unfinished state. When the last touch is put to it, I will deck the studio, and we will have a private view.'

So Iris had to be content and wait.

CHAPTER VI. JEALOUSY.

Iris had seen but little of Rupert Norton since the day of the picnic.

Although it had cost him a severe effort, he had sedulously kept away till such time as he considered things were ripe for him to interfere.

Not for a moment, however, had he lost sight of the game, or of the players in whom he took such an interest.

In fact, unknown to either Clara or

Charlie, he had often made a third whilst the portrait was in progress, seated in his own studio near the door, which was never locked and rarely closed in summer.

At length, his plans being laid, he presented himself one morning at Loworth Lodge shortly before the luncheon hour.

As he expected, he found Iris in anything but a good temper.

She was too full of her grievance to keep it to herself.

'It is too bad!' she exclaimed. 'Charlie promised he would take me to the water-color exhibition this afternoon, and now he telegraphs that we must put it off till to-morrow. When once a thing is put off I lose all pleasure in it, and he knows that.'

'Very bad form on Charlie's part,' returned Rupert; 'but you must make allowances. You see, he has so very fair an excuse.'

'A fair excuse! I don't understand you, Rupert,' Iris exclaimed. 'I know who is detaining him. It is that horrid woman whose portrait he is painting.'

'Exactly, I said he had a very fair excuse!'

'But she is not good-looking. She is fat and old.'

Rupert laughed softly.

The girl's face flushed.

'Don't sneer, Rupert; Charlie told me himself that she was a big woman, and quite middle-aged.'

'Oh, if Charlie said so, I suppose she is!'

Rupert replied. 'Only, the majority of the British public consider Miss Wilmot the handsomest woman at present upon the stage.'

For a moment it seemed to Iris as if her heart ceased to beat, then she looked up her cousin's face defiantly.

'You wish to make mischief between me and Charlie,' she said indignantly. 'You are mean and wicked, Rupert.'

'Not with you,' he answered, and there was a sadness in his voice that touched the girl in spite of herself. 'I am speaking but the truth when I tell you that Clara Wilmot is a splendidly handsome woman, with the figure of a goddess. She has also great talent, and is very captivating.'

His dark eyes met the blue ones of Iris unflinchingly as he spoke, and with a sinking at the heart, she felt that he was speaking the truth.

'Iris,' he went on, 'let me once more warn you. Don't think that I am hard on Charlie; he is young and impressionable, and Clara Wilmot can make any man love her that she takes a fancy to.'

Iris went white to the very lips.

'Why do you torture me?' she cried.

'It is unmanly, ungenerous. Charlie loves me.'

'Yes; but he loves another as well, and more passionately. If I give you pain, it is only like the surgeon who has to cut deep to cure a mortal malady.'

The tears sprang to Iris's eyes, but she dashed them fiercely away.

'Oh, for the truth! she cried. 'I shall die if I cannot learn it!'

'Poor little thing,' he said compassionately. 'Well, why not? It may save you years of misery.'

She seized his arm.

'You will show me this woman?' she cried.

'I will show you them both together, and you can judge for yourself,' he answered; 'only, you must promise me faithfully that there shall be no scene, that having satisfied yourself, you will leave without making your presence known.'

'Yes, I will promise—anything!' she exclaimed. 'Anything rather than this doubt, which will kill me. And—and I was so happy!'

She sank into a seat, and covered her face with her hands, her slender figure shaken with sobs.

He stood by her quietly till the passion of tears subsided.

In his heart he was wondering what there was in the young artist that could inspire love and jealousy like this.

Presently Iris rose and wiped her eyes.

'Come,' she said, 'I will not keep you more than ten minutes waiting. And—and, Rupert, if I have misjudged you, forgive me.'

He took the slender hand she held out and pressed it.

'Courage!' he said. 'If I could bear the pain for you I would, but do not let anyone else see how much you feel.'

'Neither of them shall,' the girl exclaimed, her spirits once more rising superior to her grief. 'You can trust me, Rupert.'

'But we must lunch first. Never mind about having no appetite. Try and swallow a few mouthfuls, it will give you strength; besides, I don't suppose she will be at his studio before three o'clock.'

'As you will,' she answered; 'only don't ask me to eat.'

He looked after her with hungry eyes as, with drooping head, she walked back across the lawn towards the house.

'Mine!' he muttered to himself. 'The game is good as won, and by all the gods she is worth the trouble!'

Mr. Meredith was rather pleased than otherwise when he learnt that his daughter was going with Rupert instead of Charlie to see the pictures.

Little was said during the drive, for Rupert had driven down in his mail phaeton.

Stopping the phaeton at some distance

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from the entrance to Skidler's Alley, he assisted Iris to descend, and then led her through the archway that gave admittance to the narrow passage, off which the studios opened.

'Remember you must be very quiet,' he said, as he paused outside his own door. 'And when I touch your arm you must come out at once.'

She bowed her head to show she understood and would obey.

The lock was well oiled, and the key turned noiselessly.

As they entered the room their feet sank into the carpet and made no sound.

The studio was lighted from the roof, and as the blind was drawn across the skylight, it was in semi-darkness; but through the doorway which led into the adjoining studio, a ray of bright sunlight entered.

The sound of a soft, musical voice reached Iris's ear, and Rupert, who held her arm, felt her tremble.

Very cautiously they advanced till they stood close to the half open door, and could see the interior of Charles Norton's studio.

Clara Wilmot, looking bewitchingly beautiful, lay stretched amongst her gorgeous pillows, a tambourine on her knee, a bunch of yellow flowers in her hand.

Her side face was to the door, and a cold hand seemed to grasp Iris's heart as she noticed the soft, creamy complexion, the beautiful eyes with their long lashes, and the graceful, rounded figure of the great actress.

Charlie was standing before the easel, glancing from time to time at his model, and to the girl's jealous fancy it seemed that his looks were full of passion and admiration.

'And so, being poor, Charlie' you naturally want to be rich,' Clara said, toying with the flowers as she spoke. 'Now, what do you consider riches?'

'A thousand a year. I should ask no more,' he answered.

'You speak as a bachelor, Charlie,' Iris's hands clenched themselves as she heard her lover's name on the actress's lips. 'You will love some day, and then you will find a thousand goes but a little way.'

'A thousand a year and love, what more can a man want?' the artist exclaimed enthusiastically.