

A QUESTION OF PEARLS.

It was a first evening at dinner at the exclusive New York boarding house. Most of the guests kept the same rooms year after year, and only during their absence in the spring or summer could the ordinary stranger find admittance. Two large houses were thrown together by a door cut through the partition on the first floor. The dining room seated about forty people, most of whom were in their places when we were shown to our chairs at a small table. At a glance I noticed the ladies sitting opposite to us, evidently a mother and daughter, and that fleeting look left an instinctive distrust of the daughter. She was a self-possessed young lady of pleasing appearance and apparent decision of character. Pretty soft brown hair waved slightly over her forehead and matched the shade of her neat gown. Her jaunty jacket of rather masculine cut suggested by its chic appearance the aid of a skillful tailor. For the rest her ease of manner betokened an unusual knowledge of the world and its ways. As she sipped her coffee, a gentleman about to leave the room stopped at the table.

"I hear, Miss Harney, that you are flitting across the water again," he said.

"Yes," she smilingly replied, "you know I only came over for mother and I would like to return in time for the London season." She raised her cup of coffee in her hand. "How long are we to be away? Oh! Possibly two or three years this time. What do you say mother?"

The older woman had taken no part in the conversation but now rejoined. "Julia is never contented in this country."

Mrs. Harney was a woman of striking elegance of mien. Beautiful grey hair and a delicate complexion combined with a patrician cast of features would have rendered her of notable distinction in any gathering.

The distrust of the daughter, however, deepened to an unconquerable repugnance for the mother. Yet but one trait of character had left a legible mark on those delicate and refined features, and that was indomitable pride.

The next evening I met the landlady in the hall. She asked me to return to the drawing-room later. "We shall have some good music, she said, "Miss Harney will play some of her own compositions. She published a number in Germany lately. I hope you will come for she has expressed a desire to meet you."

When I entered the room the young lady was playing a bit of Chopin to half a dozen persons. Her admiring audience failed to note that her performance was superficial and inaccurate. Her fingers lingered on the closing chords as she glanced up. "I will now give you a little waltz of my own," she said, and dashed into a gay, soulless air. At its close her group of acquaintances crowded about her with flattering words and then some one brought her to me.

"I want to know you," she said, "I took a fancy to you when I saw you yesterday, and I am sure I shall like you." I said nothing, as there was nothing truthful to say; but she smilingly chattered on. "I am going abroad next week so you won't mind an unceremonious call in the morning? My room is upon the same floor as yours, the little sanctum at the end of the hall, and mother's is the large front room. Drop in to see us at any time, my dear."

With a gay nod and a hand clasp she turned away, unconscious of my total silence. In the succeeding days

we often met. I learned she was highly connected in the city and had a host of friends and relatives. She was often out making farewell visits and her little room became a bower of roses from the gifts of these friends. In all her hurry she found many a minute to devote to me and yet my distrust remained.

Her affectionate manner and intellectual brilliancy could not obliterate that first impression.

The people in the house did not mingle in the least and the Harney's were our only acquaintances. Julia gave me a photograph of Mozart purchased in Dresden and won a promise that I would accompany her to the steamer. Nothing had been discovered to her disadvantage, nothing unpleasant had happened and I began to think my intuitive faculties were diseased and tainted with the canker of unjust suspicion.

Julia had a married sister, Eugenie, living in a suburb of New York, who often came to the house.

On the day preceding their departure, Mrs. Harney came nervously to our door. She had not been in our rooms before. "I want to ask a favor of you," she said, "it is a little family agreement, which perhaps you would be willing to sign."

"We are soon going west," my mother replied, and you may be unable to find us again."

"So Julia told me, but it is really a matter of no consequence—better so perhaps. I will explain. Julia is very anxious to take my pearl necklace with her to wear in England, but I have loaned it to Eugenie. Really, Julia ought to have the necklace, but Eugenie, being the elder, feels that she has the first right to it at my death, and now she is unwilling to give it up—of course she would give it up, but she will be better satisfied if we sign an agreement that the necklace shall be restored to her on our return."

We were dumbfounded. This was our first knowledge of a daughter who would require not only that her mother's promise should be in writing, but that it must be signed by witnesses. The slip of paper stated that the pearls were borrowed from Eugenie for the English trip, but the words relating to their return were a marvel of ambiguity.

Did Julia write them, I wondered. Feeling for Mrs. Harney's embarrassment in exposing her family disputes, we silently attached our names.

"If you should need us at any time," I began, "perhaps you could reach us through—"

"No matter," she indifferently interrupted me, "Julia will know best what to do and will no doubt be able to find you. Besides the paper is but a form."

This little affair was unmentioned by Julia. She had the pearls and intended to keep them. She was one of those rare persons who find fullest pleasure in the joy of possession. If the treasure were but hers, no attendant disagreeables would be remembered.

Reluctant and rebellious. I was added to the pearls in her chaplet of friendships. What cared she that the soul was unwilling? It was not its real attributes that she wanted, but those with which she endowed it.

"You won't forget me, dear, for we are sure to meet again," she said, with the farewell kiss at the steamer—and I have not. But mingled with her memory comes first, not the thought of her flattering preference, but of the satiny gleam of the pearly strands of an antique necklace.

Wherever she is, there, too, are those pearls.

But Eugenie has the contract.

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