

Vox Populi, Vox Dei

Characters—Mrs. Cheyne, 30; Betsy, 26 and Sarah, 26.

Scene—Mrs. Cheyne's boudoir leading into her bedroom. Time—10:30 a. m.

Betsy (flourishing a feather broom)—Don't you waste your time so, Sarah! What's the use of sweeping under that rug?

Sarah—It's awfully dusty. It has not been up for a fortnight to my certain knowledge.

Betsy—And why should it? Who's going to look under the rug?

Sarah (pointing to bedroom door)—She might.

Betsy—Not she. She has far more important things than that to attend to.

Sarah—I suppose she has.

Betsy—What's the good of saying you suppose, when you know she has.

Sarah—You are right. She's had both of their photographs set up there on her writing table for half a year, and I don't believe she knows yet which of them she means to marry. Well, it is a pity.

Betsy—What's a pity?

Sarah—That some people should have so much choice and some so little.

Betsy—It's more of a shame than a pity! And when you think she has had one husband already!

Sarah (still looking at the photographs)—which would you take, Betsy?

Betsy—Why, the major, of course! He's a fine, handsome, commanding gentleman—a more military looking officer, I never set eyes on. My word! How everyone about him would have to be at a bidding!

Sarah—And his wife too.

Betsy—Yes, but think how proud she would feel to be able to walk into a room with a man like that!

Sarah—She might walk into rooms with him for hundreds of years without his ever being proud of anyone but himself; and let her look ever so beautiful, he would only feel it was only her duty to do her best to match him.

Betsy (looking at one photograph)—Perhaps, but you don't often see such a handsome man as that, and how can he help knowing it?

Sarah (looking at the other)—Mr. Austell is very handsome too, when one comes to look at him.

Betsy—So he is, but one scarcely ever does come to look at him—that's just it, Sarah, and one can't help looking at the other; and then he is always so spick and span. Many a time I have given a little brush to Mr. Austell's great-coat out of pity, but you can't make old clothes out of new ones.

Sarah—I think she feels that he ought to be better dressed. I have sometimes seen her run him over with her eye in a kind of sorrowful manner, when they were going out of doors together, but let him dress how he will, he always looks the gentleman—you must own that.

Betsy—All the same, he is not to be compared to the major. Mr. Austell writes books, and I daresay she likes him to come to see her, for he keeps her interested in his clever talk, but that's all—she has never once asked him to dine here—that's plain proof she would not marry him.

Sarah (impatiently flicking away some dust)—Well, I suppose it is.

Betsy—Don't be so silly, girl. Let me just ask one thing, and that is, which of the two gentlemen would you like to show off to your most particular friends as him who was about to lead you to the high mental altar?

Sarah (unwillingly)—Why, the major, of course—there's no denying he looks grandest; but which would you like to take to see your poor old aunt Martha in the Mile End Road?

Betsy—Oh, Mr. Austell, if I didn't want to have her feelings hurt. But what a poor match Mr. Austell would be for Mrs. Cheyne with all her money.

Sarah—If I was her I'd be glad to have enough of it for two; besides, just look at his cleverness! He is twice as clever as the major. Mr. Austell's notes are desperately dull.

Betsy—His notes may be dull, but he is a good hand at a letter.

Sarah (reprovingly)—I've never had a chance of reading anything better than a note from either of them. She scarcely ever leaves real letters about. How do you manage to get hold of any, Betsy?

Betsy—Why, if you ever hold letters that's either coming or going to the spout of a boiling kettle, you'll very soon know what's in them.

Sarah—Good gracious! If she did but know.

Betsy—But she doesn't, and she won't. Have you dusted them things on the shelf? It's getting late.

Sarah—No. I'm just a-going. (a cup falls)

Betsy—Heavens! What's that you've been and gone and done for?

Sarah—Only a bit of her eggshell china, and she has ever so much more.

Betsy—It's well named. It's my belief that people fill their rooms with flimsy stuff of that kind on purpose to plague their poor servants.

Sarah—Hush! She'll hear you if you talk so loud.

Betsy—Not she! She wasn't in bed until 2 o'clock this morning. Louise told me that, and that the major brought her home from the ball, and that she was so gracious to him and lit his cigar for him, and told him she rather liked the smell of cigars. Oh, my! Wasn't that a big one?

Sarah—Yes, but doesn't it show how the land lies?

Betsy—I don't know that. She may make him fine speeches, but she has a kind of way of looking at Mr. Austell as if she'd like to take and set him up above all chance of poverty for the rest of his days, and the parlor maid says she listens with all her ears when he reads her some new bit of his poetry, and looks at him when he can't see her, with all her eyes.

Sarah—I say, Sarah, I do wish you would talk less, and get on with your work more. She'll be up long before we are done.

Betsy—That's said because I am praising Mr. Austell.

Sarah—Praise away as long as you like. She's not one to throw herself away on a poor author, who can't even keep himself to hats. I don't suppose he knows what it is to have a spare copper.

Betsy—He had five shillings for me once, at any rate. It was one Sunday when the parlor maid and you and Mrs. Cheyne were all out. He came and said he would wait for her, so I showed him into the drawing room, and what with my stopping a second or so to watch him standing and looking as if he could eat up every stick of wood in the room for love of her, and what with my own awkwardness, I knocked down a plate she liked and broke it, and being young then, I felt breaking things, and turned first red and then white, and then the tears rushed into my eyes. He saw them and put his hand in his pocket and pulled out five shillings, and told me not to cry, but to find another plate.

Sarah (contemptuously)—Was that all? The major gave me half a sovereign without my having to break any china to get it, and a kiss, too.

Betsy—Mr. Austell's not a man of that sort. He worships the very ground she walks on. I have known him to give a kiss, though. What's that?

Sarah—What's what?

Betsy—A noise I heard, just as if she was getting up.

Betsy—Why should she get up? It's her time yet. Who did Mr. Austell kiss? You?

Sarah—Her little Bertha, and he said she had mother's eyes.

Betsy—What a silly twaddling way of going on that man has. I can't abide him, really. Unless it is something about her or her eyes, he has never one word for you or for me or any one. He is thinking of nothing but the quickest way of getting upstairs to her. Now, the major has always a civil word or a nice little compliment for me. (Hears a sudden sound, and knocks the major's photograph down on the floor.) Oh, I say! You shouldn't give one such starts, Sarah; if you haven't made me go and break this glass.

Sarah—Sh—Sh!

Mrs. Cheyne (pushing the half closed open)—Never mind picking up that photograph, Betsy. Please take this telegram at once to the nearest telegraph office.

Betsy watches her return and then reads:

"Austell, Pump Court, Temple. Will you dine with me at 8 to-night?"

ROSALIND CHEYNE.

Betsy—My word, Sarah, I do believe we have done it.

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