

A Question Of Caste

...By MARTHA FISHEL

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IN the florist's window a bunch of orchids of a rare green gray hue flaunted their imperial beauty in the face of a family of roses of different complexions, white tulips and yellow jonquils. Every head nodded attentively on its stem. It was evident the orchids had something important to impart.

"We've just been bought for Ruth Delorme. She's the only American we would care to have own us," they drawled. "She's the season's beauty, which is the best we can expect in this parvenu country, where there's not a title in sight unless it's borrowed. We will say goodbye to you all very soon. No doubt we'll be taken to a dinner and the opera and perhaps look in at a couple of dances. That's the life we are meant for. It's so stupid here, ogled at through the glass by people one couldn't really know."

"Oh, how lovely! And we are so glad for you. But we wonder who will buy us."

The orchids could not imagine for a moment where the little sighing whisper floated from, but after a surprised circular gaze they saw resting against the base of the jade bowl which held them a bunch of wood violets in a goblet.

Offended surprise made them gasp, and, leveling the insolent stare which only the socially secure permit themselves, their petals assumed scornful curves.

"Well, upon my word! So much for your moth eaten reputation for modesty! If this isn't unbridled familiarity, what is it? Wild, untrained creatures without a cent."

"Some well meaning, badly groomed clerk will doubtless take you home to his dowd of a wife," the aristocrats continued.

"That will be nice if we can make her happy." And the drooped blue heads nodded wistfully.

"A plebeian ambition rightly suited to your station," said the orchids. "We'll be glad to leave this place," they whispered to an American Beauty rose in a tall cut glass vase. "The society is so mixed! Think of them daring to address us! We're not at all in the same set! Those weeds are not even of the English species or the double sort."



"OH, BUT, I SAY, WHAT'S THIS?"

They're not even distantly connected with the Italian family. We know the Parmas well."

"No, we make no claims at all," the violets replied. "We were plucked this morning on the banks of the Bronx."

"The Bronx! Heavens! It sounds so bourgeois, suggestive of cheap table d'hotes and suburban villas!"

"Oh, we know we're cheap," said the violets, stung to revolt.

"Cheap? Well, rather! Twenty-five cents for how many of you?"

"A hundred."

The orchids laughed.

"And not very particular about the counting, eh? There are only six of us, and we cost \$8. Well, here's the clerk coming for us. We're off, thank heaven! Goodby, Miss Bronx."

"Petit proud things, I'm glad they are gone," said one violet, angry dew in its eyes.

"So are we," said the tallest American Beauty in the jar. "Far be it from me to decry family. I'm proud of my own branch, but those orchids talk too much. Thank heaven, we can all get

an afternoon nap now."

They were roused by the door opening as a man entered. He was handsome and young, though somewhat haggard, as if from loss of sleep. His clothes were somewhat shabby they were well cut, and he carried them with easy grace.

"I like his face," said each little violet to the other as they preened and prinked their petals while eying the stranger, who was fingering some loose change in his pocket, a quizzical smile on his lips.

"You florists are a species of highway robber," he laughed to the clerk. "Have you any violets not worth their weight in gold?"

"Not a violet in the place. Every one went before noon. The matinee girls just made a raid on them."

The violets felt their hearts sink.

"I wonder what he calls us—cabages?" murmured one of the little bunch, still sore from the orchids' taunts.

The young man regarded with a dubious air the flowers heaped about so prodigally.

"Oh, but, I say, what's this?" as he caught sight of the violets that seemed to have deepened in hue in their efforts to be seen.

"Oh, would you want those—that is, we hardly expect to sell them to our patrons. We bought a lot of them as a sort of charity from a little lame girl in Bronxville and should probably have given them away to a footman or other servant of some customer—just give them away as a grocer does a chromo with a pound of tea. If you want them a quarter will pay for the lot."

When the violets saw the coin given and felt themselves lifted from the glass they breathed a sigh of content, and when the clerk, wrapping them in tissue paper, placed them in a pretty box a fragrant breath of excitement escaped them.

"This must be the padded brougham the orchids spoke of to the roses. Think how we were heaped in the corner of a basket this morning! Oh, exclusiveness has its charms!" And they winked contentedly in their soft wrappings.

The crackling of a wood fire—for the spring day was damp—was the next thing the flowers heard as they were lifted out and put in water. At first their eyes were dazed, but after a few moments they absorbed the details of the place.

The big, bare studio looked rather eerie in the approaching dusk, and with its half finished canvases, its walls covered with studies in glowing color. It looked more a workshop proper than a home. But it was the home of youthful, ardent and dominating dreams, and as Robert Dorset looked about it in his eyes was a blending of the enthusiasm of genius and the steadfast fixity of purpose that annihilates all obstacles to reach a goal.

"I've always felt I must succeed, even when the impolite and intrusive wolf sat grimly on my door mat," he thought. "And now that Marchmont, the magnate, has just ordered his portrait, I have little to fear."

He walked over to where an unfinished canvas on an easel showed a girl's charming face.

"How different this winter is from last!" he mused. "Then you were my companion at the art classes, my little friend from the country, studying, oh, so faithfully, but painting so badly; this year the protegee of your rich aunt and chronicled in the papers as Miss Delorme, the new beauty. I can understand her ideas when she decided you were worth chaperoning. Her own girls are placed—one the wife of a consumptive lord, the other of a banker close to seventy. Now you are on the auction block, going, going, but not yet gone—not yet, thank heaven!" And the eyes in his pale face had the expression of a soldier in battle. "I've taken Aunt Mary's polite and unmistakable hint that I am to her an unwelcome worshiper at your shrine—'no beggars or artists allowed'—but I may win yet."

He took a letter from his pocket. It showed signs of many readings. Now, with his head thrown back as he lounged in a big chair before the fire's blaze, he read it again:

"This is the last night of the opera, my friend. Why don't you go? I've discovered the ethics of Aunt Mary's campaign, and I know why you come no more. In fact, my visitors are now narrowed exclusively to those who know the merry clip of the scissors as the coupons fall. If I'm right, let's have our vengeance. Go to the old place in the gallery tonight, where I've so often sat with you and Ted and Mabel and will again. We can make eye notes about Melba, with the horseshoe sweeping between us. What fun to cheat Aunt Mary! She thinks, foolish woman, I'm easy to mold because I'm little; but, although I've made no fuss over her treatment of my old friends, I've my own way of getting my own way. I've given aunt her fling with me this winter to please mother, so for the nonce I'm pleasing myself."

RUTH.

"Does this mean anything more than chumship? I'll find out tonight."

He took pen and paper and, having written and destroyed several sheets, finally appeared fairly satisfied with one, which he kissed before folding it, his eyes heavy with love.

He put the note, with the flowers, back in the box, while the violets, scenting a romance, fluttered excitedly as they were taken from the studio.

ing of Ruth Delorme.

"We beg your pardon," drawled the orchids after a long stare, "but did you come from Brighton's? Are we mistaken, or did we see you there today? It's so hard to tell exactly; you lack individuality, you know."

Rustling with excitement at the meeting, the violets nodded their fragrant heads.

"The same," they answered bravely. "Well, of all the luck!" broke in the winged aristocrats. "But you'll be sure to make some break and queer yourselves. That's one comfort."

Just then Ruth entered.

She was so daintily lovely in her gown of white, filmy lace. The violets were sure they saw an angel at last. Her eyes were just like themselves, they thought, or as they might look if a star lurked in the heart of each.

In the gloom of the firelit room she did not see the little blue worshippers and carelessly picked up the small envelope beside the orchids.

"A small thing to secrete such weighty, apoplectic adoration," she thought, with a mutinous look, and rapidly glanced over the lines, mumbling them half angrily:

"My Dear Miss Delorme—Your aunt—um—um—given the privilege of speaking to you tonight. You know—um—um—I would say. Will be there at 8. You will be alone—um—um—before we leave—opera. Hope you will wear the flowers—um—um—"

"JAMES ARMSTRONG."

"Well, Jeemes," she mocked, "come an you will. No doubt you will have fortified your usual brilliance with an extra glass for the occasion. Your burgundy blush will present the deeper hue of the plum when you get my answer. Ugh! Why can't they let me alone?"

The maid entered, bringing Ruth's carriage shoes, and before putting



"HE DARED DO IT! THE DARLING—OH, THE DARLING!"

them on she turned on the electric light, which revealed to Ruth the violets in the shadow of the orchids' vase.

"Where did these come from, Aunt?" she asked.

"Oh, Miss Ruth, they came while you were at dinner, not long after the orchids. I hope you'll excuse me. I quite forgot them after putting them in water."

"Where is the card that came with them?" the girl asked more imperiously than she had ever before spoken.

"Why, there was a note. Oh, here it is on the floor."

At sight of the writing Ruth's face grew radiant. She dismissed the maid, and, with lips trembling slightly and fingers not quite steady, she broke the seal and read:

"Ruth, you know all I would say to you if I dared. The words 'I love you' and 'Will you marry me?' so poorly express all I feel, but perhaps your own heart can put the witchery upon them. Tonight I will be in the old place in the gallery and look for my answer. If you wear these little flowers it will tell me that I have not been a mad, rash dreamer and that you love me. If you do not—well, God bless you, anyway—but God help me."

"ROBERT."

Ruth gave a little shiver of delight as she raised the note to her lips.

"He dared do it! The darling—oh, the darling!" she whispered as she caught the violets to her heart.

"Will I marry him? Ah, will I not? And now, my dear aunt, trot out all the eligibles you wish. I'll scan them with comfortable composure. Bob loves me—loves me—loves me!"

Her fingers trembled as she pinned the flowers securely upon her breast, and the orchids looked at them with a furious sneer, scarcely believing their eyes.

"It's rank socialism, putting you out of your place like that," they said spitefully.

"You'd like my place, I dare say," crowed a violet from its vantage point.

"What could one expect from a mere ex-art student?" they retorted. "She's not like us 'classy' people. What does she mean to do with us, I wonder?"

As if in answer Ruth called in the maid.

"Tell William to take these orchids to my little sick girl on East Seventeenth street, near the river; he knows the place. Say I'll be in to see her tomorrow. They will cheer her tonight in that awful tenement."

The clock struck 8, and a few minutes later Mr. Armstrong was announced.

"Goodby!" cooed the violets as Ruth was leaving the room. "So sorry you're going to miss the opera. You'll be gone before we get back or we'd tell you all about it."

"All about what?" snapped the orchids.

"Why, the music, of course."

"That shows what country things you are. No one listens to the music. It's bad form. Besides—"

But the violets lost the rest of the sneer as they went down on Ruth's white bosom to witness the discomfiture of the man of millions with the bibulous flush.

The orchids, left alone, learned the lesson of humility hard.

"We'd rather be dead than lose caste!" they groaned. "A tenement house! Horrors!"

Had they been able they would have given a human shriek when the footman, after tossing one to Ann, flung the rest into a box.

In the morning as they looked at the sick child, felt her hot fingers, saw the expanse of factory roofs and clotheslines beyond the windows, they grew very blue. As the days went by they grew bluer and bluer.

But the little girl laughed as the stems were clipped every morning and they were put in fresh water.

"Ain't they changed a pretty color, mother?" she said. "They look almost like violets now."

Virtue may be its own reward, but some people make a trademark of it.

Just a Hint.

"John," she said softly, "have you been saying anything about me to mother lately?"

"No," replied John. "Why do you ask?"

"Because she said this morning that she believed you were on the eve of proposing to me. Now, I do not wish you to speak to mother when you have anything of that kind to say. Speak to me, and I'll manage the business with mother."

And John said he would.

Not an Episcopalian.

When Bishop Codman was appointed to the Episcopal diocese of Maine he made a tour of his diocese and happened to stroll into a woodman's cottage. Asking the woman of the house if there were many Episcopallians around there, she replied: "Well, I don't know. They caught some wild thing out here in the woods a couple of weeks ago, if that's what you mean, but I think my husband said it was a woodchuck."

The Kicker.

"Music hath charms to soothe the savage breast," quoted the young lady with a slumber as she seated herself at the piano.

"That may be," muttered a savage bachelor, "but there are some of us in this crowd who are civilized and deserve a little consideration."

Practical.

He—Do you think you could love me in a cottage? She—Possibly not, but I might be able to put up with you till you could make money enough to buy a larger house.—Detroit Free Press

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