

IN AFTER YEARS.

Mrs. Callender was "at home." Randall Stacey was at the door of the music room, feeling unutterably tired as the whole thing. He sat down listlessly, wondering why upon earth he had let his volatile cousin drag him with her to such a beastly crush. Then suddenly he became conscious that he was not so alone and unobserved as he imagined.

A girl was sitting in a low chair nearby, looking at him, a terrible amusement in her eyes as they met his own.

"Stephanie! Is it indeed you?"

"It is indeed," she returned. "I have been watching you for the last ten minutes, feeling so sorry for you."

"I was bored to extinction," he allowed, smiling back at her.

"Indeed," she pondered reflectively. "It all depends how one looks at it, don't you know. For instance, Mrs. Callender usually has a lot of celebrities, and then, too, one may always be certain of hearing really good music."

"Do you still sing, Stephanie?"

"Yes, indeed. I am going to sing for Mrs. Callender presently."

"It is so long since I heard you," Randall Stacey went on dreamily. "Do you remember those summer evenings when you used to play and sing to us between the lights? You are very little changed, Stephanie, since those old days. How long ago it seems! Is it four or five years? Where have you been all this time, and what have you been doing?"

"Didn't you know where I was?" she asked quietly.

"Yes, I heard at the time, but—"

"But you thought it best not to go and see for yourself," she put in, with a tinge of mockery in her clear, sweet voice.

She lifted her eyes to his and met his gaze in silence—a silence that made him vaguely uncomfortable.

"I was young and foolish," she said presently, speaking in a calm, matter-of-fact tone, "and at the time I did not understand what was perfectly plain to me afterward. It was extremely dense of me, I admit."

"You are speaking in enigmas," he rejoined a trifle brusquely and awkwardly. "I wish you'd be a little more explicit."

"There was a game, during which the thoughts of each had flown back to that past he had conjured up."

"Five years ago—how long it seems! Much can happen in that time, and much has happened. You are changed, for instance. You have grown visibly older by those five years."

"This was not the Stephanie he had known in "those old days," and yet how sweet and altogether desirable she seemed!

"Yes," she went on, "you were different then, or else a plan over you that I was too infatuated to see through. Remember how I worshipped your beauty, how I believed you to be all that was grand and noble"—the laughing mockery in her tones made him wince—"so painfully youthful and foolish of me, was it not? You told me a fortune lay in my voice—do you recollect?—and you were inclined to give over my little sketches of character, but still, when I was left alone in the world, to sink or swim as best I might, you refused from holding out a helping hand to me, when a word from you, who had already won your way in the literary world, might have saved me many a forlorn, heartbroken hour, and—"

"I didn't know!" broke in Stacey eagerly. "Believe me, I know nothing, or I would have helped you. I would have done anything for you, Stephanie."

"You didn't know!" she echoed. "But you yourself pointed out my capabilities of which I was ignorant."

"Yes, yes, I know," he protested. "One says what one can to encourage, of course, but I saw nothing to make me suppose you would do more than others are trying to do. There is no royal road to success, either in writing or singing, Stephanie."

"You spoke differently then, but I suppose your words had no meaning, any more than the other things you said."

"Stephanie, you are hard on me, but hear me before you condemn. Justice at least should count for that much. I did care for you in those old days. I don't think you have ever been long absent from my thoughts, but I was a struggling author and I had no right to ask you to share a vague a future, so I took the wisest course, in going away and leaving you free."

"Still," she persisted in the same cold, sweet voice, "you might have shown me how to use the literary or musical power you told me I possessed, might you not?"

"My dear Stephanie," he expostulated, "what would you have done? You had a certain aptitude for saying clever things, and you had a pretty, fresh voice of the average quality, but countless other people have both too. Where would have been the use of putting out your poor little efforts against some of our literary and musical giants? Did you aspire to be a brilliant authoress like the celebrated Mrs. Vavasour, for instance?"

"Perhaps I did," she allowed, with an odd smile. "I was very ambitious in those days. I am still. I should like to be greater even than Mrs. Vavasour."

The group at the end of the room had been broken up and Mrs. Callender came toward them. Stephanie rose and followed Mrs. Callender into the music room.

Stacey watched her disappear through the door. What a fool he had been to let Stephanie Craven pass out of his life in those past days! He had not realized it before. He had been a miserable fool, but he would do better now. And then across his musings came the sound of a voice so rich and full and sweet that he started to his feet.

"A pretty, fresh voice of average quality!" So much for the keen penetration on which he had prided himself.

An eager crowd surrounded her when she ended her song, and Randall Stacey could not reach her just then.

A tall, fair man was leaning over her with open admiration, and Stacey felt vaguely annoyed with him.

Mrs. Callender was standing near. He turned to her.

"Who is that fellow talking to Miss Craven?"

"Miss Craven?" she inquired. "Where?"

"There," he returned, "by the piano. Don't you see?"

"She! That isn't Miss Craven. She was a year ago, but now she's Mrs. Vavasour, the authoress, and that is her husband, Archie Vavasour. He brought her out and gave her genius to the world."

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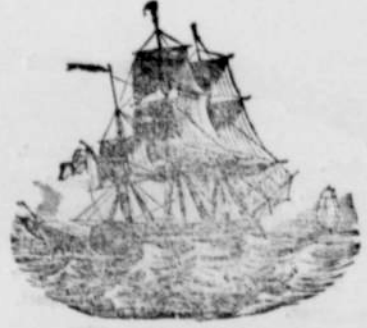
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