

Mordecai-in-the-Gate

WELL," said Miss Strong, standing in the latticed window of Lavender cottage, where the Miss Pratts had been descending gently, and reluctantly, according to individual temperaments—from middle-age for the past ten years. "Well, one man's meat is another man's poison. There goes the parson's pig; and I really can pray better in church since that child Joyce Quinn looks well-fed."

Miss Prudence glanced dubiously into the face of her caller, whose train of thought she failed to follow.

Happily for Miss Prue, Miss Strong had a habit of repeating herself. She stared again after the two youthful figures emerging from the bare arched door in the vicarage wall, and said briskly, "One man's meat is another man's poison. If Miss Verity, the paying guest, hadn't fallen ill in her case after London pleasures, Miss Quinn would still be sitting opposite me in St. Ethelbergan's like a death's head at a feast. They only had meat twice a week at the vicarage. Rebecca tells me the paying guest appeared, and the amount of butter dolled out to the house-keeper wasn't enough to fry a pancake."

"Servants!" began Miss Prue, tentatively.

"No man is a hero to his valet," allowed Miss Strong vaguely. "But Rebecca's testimony is valuable, a quite reliable woman. Miss Verity has changed all that. And Mrs. Fuller has had two new bonnets in less than a month or so."

"Such beautiful bonnets, too!"

Miss Strong collected her belongings, and moved from her point of vantage to the hall.

"They cover some complications in plans. Who aims at the moon will get over the garden-wall. And though our adopted daughter Joyce comes in for a fortune one day, she doesn't know it, and is kept like a charity case, that Mr. Richard may have the ground to himself—well, Miss Verity, you see, her note. A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush. Yes, Davinia's brain must be busy."

Miss Prue's hands closed in sudden restlessness on a cushion through the wall, a faint colour crept up her cheek.

"But Mr. Richard himself! Surely he will know his own mind. A parent in such cases—"

"Knows better than hot-headed youth and men! At the bishop's garden-party yesterday Mr. Dick was quite dazzled by Miss Verity—could look at no one else last week it was Miss Joyce Quinn. The sorrow—the weatherous, affectations of men! We know better than to trust them."

"There are exceptions," started Miss Prue bravely. "I know there are exceptions. And though Aunt Maria—"

Miss Strong held out her hand demurely, she was too prudent of the sanctity of her friends' family relations.

"I am busy at a committee. Remember me to Constantia, and tell her I am sorry she was out."

Miss Prue's farewell was an absent one; she was busy over all mind's things, and for a season she passed her days, not among all cheeks, sandal-wood and peonies, and walked in the fields as long ago.

A voice—a young and cheerful one—

recalled her; and to it she turned readily.

"How kind! How very kind, my dears! Come in! and mind the step!"

"Not kind at all!" laughed Miss Verity, bringing all the bravery of her summer muslins up the path. "We come to you for a restorative, worn out by utilitarian modernity."

Miss Prudence eyed the pair of girls, who stood like white roses among her blossoms; and then she laughed deprecatingly.

"You mustn't be clever with me, dear. A restorative! I couldn't do it."

"Clever! Oh, charming euphemism! 'Clever' is the true adjective. Now,

Joyce, speak up and explain how our mood is not angelical, and that sheer unadulterated sentiment—"

"We won't laugh at sentiment to-day."

"Indeed not. We ask it of you in large doses."

"We went over a factory this morning," said Joyce, lifting serene eyes upon the figure in grey, "and the whirr is still in our brain."

"We called on Mrs. Blandford this afternoon," appended Pamela, "and her war-cry is still in our ears."

Miss Prudence led the way to her parlour, and sat down opposite her guests.

"Now, tell me everything," said she.

For a moment Miss Verity hovered among the faded treasures that pleased her.

"Your pot-pourri jars! And your miniatures! We were right in coming,

Joyce. The grace of this old room revives me."

Presently she subsided into a chair.

"You like it?" said Miss Prue, wistfully.

"In a normal mood I love it; in an abnormal one, I adore it."

"Yet Constantia finds it shabby."

"It is a benediction to-day." "For me it speaks of the best."

"And as for us, it obliterates the present. Mills and modern reforms are detestable. As for child-study and Sanitary Developments—"

Mrs Blandford rides her hobby with enthusiasm—a deplorable enthusiasm in summer."

"She is so eloquent, so clever," mused Miss Prue.

Miss Verity's lips opened and closed; her eyebrows expressed dissent; the estimates of Dalhampstead confounded her, unaccustomed to the worship of mediocrity.

"She can do something of everything," ruminated the elder. "And her paintings—such lovely paintings! You can count the leaves on the trees. Ah, I wish she had shown you her paintings. And her room all upholstered in art colours! Constantia was very anxious. Yes, Minnie, we will have tea here."

Pamela crossed to a cabinet, and stood looking into its recesses.

"What charming vases!" she said presently.



"- Pamela among the prophets?"