

The Storyteller

HUMBLE PIE

There are some people who never during their whole lives awake to a consciousness of themselves, as they are recognised by others; there are some who awake too early, to their undoing, and the flimsiness of their characters, there are some who awake late with a shock, which does not dethrone them from their individuality, but causes them agony, and is possibly for their benefit. Maria Gorham was one of the last, and for the first time in her life she saw herself reflected mercilessly in the eyes of her kind one summer in a great mountain hotel. She had never been aware that she was more conceited than others, that she had had on the whole a better opinion of her external advantages at least, than she deserved, but she discovered that her self-conceit had been something which looked to her monstrous and insufferable. She saw that she was not on the surface what she had always thought herself to be, and she saw that the surface has always its influence on the depths.

Maria Gorham was an old young woman in her early thirties. She had taught school in her native village in one of the New England States since she was seventeen. She had been left quite alone in the world five years before, when her mother died. She lived entirely alone in the house in which she had been born. It was one of the cottages prevalent in certain localities. She was entirely fearless. So quietly poised was she in her own self-esteem that it had never occurred to her that anybody could possibly have any ill-will, or even any uncomplimentary feelings towards her. She had always heard herself called good-looking, and it had never occurred to her to doubt the opinion of others. She had also heard herself called industrious, capable, and more than ordinarily clever, and she acquiesced with that opinion also. She had also heard her taste in dress extolled, and she had packed her little trunk with entire confidence. Dexter Ray's sister Emma had run across the street, and was watching her. 'I thought I'd like to see you put all them pretty things in, I suspected you was packin',' said Emma, with a gentle admiration, and not a suspicion of jealousy. Maria noted Emma's faulty English with a superiority which gave her a certain pleasure. 'Poor Emma,' she thought, and replied all the more sweetly. 'Yes,' said she, 'I am going on the eight o'clock train to-morrow morning, and I must have my trunk all ready to-night.'

Emma watched Maria fold her blue foulard gown daintily. 'Well,' she said, 'I guess there won't be many to that hotel where you are goin' that has any prettier things than you.'

Maria laughed. 'Nonsense,' she replied, but in her heart she quite agreed with Emma. She had entire faith in her wardrobe, which she and the village dress-maker had prepared.

'I suppose you'll wear that handsome pink wrapper mornin's,' said Emma.

'Yes, I have planned to,' replied Maria. Just as she spoke there was a ring at the front door bell, and Emma started and blushed, although she had herself nothing for which to blush. 'I rather guess that must be Dexter,' she said.

Maria frowned.

'Dexter said he guessed mebbe he'd jest run in and say good-bye,' said Emma timidly, and with even more embarrassment.

Maria herself blushed, but, as it seemed, with anger rather than embarrassment. However, she tried to speak politely. Dexter Ray was the only man who had ever wanted to marry her, and while she thought herself too good for him, she considered that he was to be rewarded at least with politeness for his pretensions.

'I really don't see how I can stop my packing,' she said. 'I wonder if you wouldn't just run downstairs and tell your brother that I am real sorry, but I am packing.'

Emma stood up with dignity. She had at times a little sense of injury on her brother's account. 'All right,' said she.

'I have been working very hard all day finishing up some sewing and getting the house ready to leave, if I stop now, I don't know when I would get to bed,' Maria added, with more conciliation in her tone.

'All right,' said Emma, and went out. Maria heard her tell Dexter. 'She says she's real sorry, but she's awful tired, she's been workin' so hard all day, and she's got to get her trunk packed to-night.' There was more sorrow in Emma's voice than there had been in

Maria's. Maria stole a glance out of the window, and saw Dexter going nicely down the path between the flowering shrubs after his rebuff. He was quite a tall man, a little older than she, and there was an odd faithful bend in his shoulders. Maria sighed, she could not have told why. Sometimes she wished that Dexter had been a more fitting match for her.

Sometimes she had actually felt angry with Dexter Ray that he did not try to make more of himself, but he spoke no better English than his sister. He also, in her opinion, had no ambition. He kept the village drug store, and several times he had had an opportunity to be sexton, and once town clerk, but he seemed to have no interest except in measuring out drugs and dispensing soda water. It would have puzzled Maria had she been required to mention by what right in view of her own antecedents she regarded herself as on a higher social scale than Dexter Ray. Her father had been a small farmer, and his father before him. On her father's death she had sold all the farming land, and that made her little nest egg in the savings bank. She had never saved much from the money she had earned teaching. She had a weakness for pretty things, both for her own person and for her house. She had had a bay window and a piazza put on the house since her father's death. She had also a very splendid carpet in parlor and a set of plush furniture. She had never travelled. There was in the depth of her soul a feminine timidity about setting forth alone on strange paths, in spite of her steady egotism. It was almost as if she feared lest her faith in herself would desert her, if she were deprived of the accustomed support of admiring friends and subjected to the cold scrutiny of strangers. However, nothing could have made her admit the slightest hesitation, and the next day she was to set out alone to spend a whole month at a great mountain hotel.

'I declare,' Emma Ray said when she returned, 'I should think you'd sort of dread startin' out all alone to-morrow, Maria.'

'I don't know why,' replied Maria, calmly.

'I should think you'd sort of dread goin' into the dinin'-room all alone.'

'I don't know why.'

'Of course I know you'll look as fine as anybody,' said Emma in a conciliatory tone.

'I don't know why I should dread it, however I looked. This is a free country.'

'I suppose there's a lot of rich folks at that hotel.'

'Well, riches don't make any difference in a country like this, do they?'

'I don't know,' replied Emma.

'They ought not to, anyway,' said Maria, firmly, substituting the principle for the fact with a fairly great loyalty.

'Mebbe they don't,' said Emma.

Presently Emma added 'Of course, it ain't as though you wasn't educated. Of course you have been school-teachin' all your life, and I s'pose lots of them rich folks couldn't teach school any more than they could fly.'

'They haven't been obliged to,' replied Maria.

'They couldn't, anyway.'

Maria made no dissent to that. In her heart she agreed with Emma. She folded carefully a white lawn sacque trimmed with frills of embroidery, and laid it in one of the top trays of her trunk.

'That will be real pretty to wear with your black silk skirt,' said Emma.

'Yes, I thought it would,' said Maria.

'It looks as if you might have a dreadful hot day to-morrow,' said Emma, glancing out of the window which faced the west. The sun was setting like an awful ball of fire for the ultimate consumption of the world.

'Yes, it seems as if it might be hot,' assented Maria.

'What are you goin' to wear travellin'? You'll have quite a long journey, most nine hours,' Dexter said. He studied it out on the time table.

'I'm going to wear my gray mohair I had last summer.'

'Well, that sheds the dust fine.'

'Yes, and I'm going to put my black silk skirt in the top of the trunk where I can get it easy, and put it on with this cambric sacque to go to supper in, if it's a warm night,' said Maria.

'That will be a real good idea,' said Emma approvingly. 'It won't be so much work as getting into a dress, and you'll feel tired.'

'That's what I thought. I'll wear this cambric sacque to supper, and then I suppose I shall sit in the parlor and listen to the music. They say there's music and dancing every night.'

'Well, there ought to be something when they ask such prices.'