

into the small hours to make up for lost time, but that mattered little; the evening was sure to be a pleasant one—Mrs. Dewbury's parties generally were.

'He leaves to-morrow night,' said Mrs. Dewbury, regretfully, 'and we shall miss him more than I can tell you, for he is always the life and soul of our gatherings.' 'You seemed to get on famously together, Silvia, as he never turned his eyes from your direction during dinner, and it's your own fault,' she added significantly, 'if you didn't meet him ere this. On both the previous occasions of his dining here you were asked to join us, but you wrote each time that you couldn't leave your work. I wish, child, that you were not so horribly conscientious,' Mrs. Dewbury continued, pinching Silvia's peach-like cheek. 'You are too young to give up all the pleasures of life for that monotonous writing, writing, writing.'

'But I have no pleasures in life that I prefer to my work,' said Silvia, warming to her subject, 'excepting, of course, visiting a few old friends like yourselves. And besides, dear Mrs. Dewbury, I have my living to earn. No one can do that but myself, and so I ought to be grateful for small mercies and take what the gods give me and be content.'

'Fiddlesticks!' said Mrs. Dewbury, emphatically. 'You ought to marry. I call it perfectly disgraceful that a pretty, accomplished girl like you should not have been snapped up long ere this. How old are you? Twenty-two. Well, I call it disgraceful! I don't know what the men are about!'

Silvia laughed in a pretty, amused way, and took her hostess' hands between her own. 'You dear, kind, sweet enthusiast, I don't want to marry; I am quite content,' she said. 'I feel sure I'm destined to be an old maid.'

'Why?'

'Oh, because I have never seen anybody I could like sufficiently to care for always.'

'That's nonsense, my child; wait till Mr. Right comes. Good gracious, John, how you startled me!' for Captain Denvers had walked up to the ladies so quietly that they had not heard him, and he stood looking at them without speaking.

'Aren't you going to smoke?' Mrs. Dewbury inquired, rather ruffled at having been taken unawares.

'Of course I am,' he answered complacently, after a pause. 'And that's why I thought I would ask Miss Clarke to come for a stroll in the garden and keep me company. Will you?' he added, stooping over the girl. 'It's such a lovely night, and if you put on a wrap you can't possibly take cold.'

'By all means, go,' said Mrs. Dewbury, with alacrity, as she rose and answered for Silvia, who was hesitating. 'Take her for a turn, John, but don't let her take cold.'

Silvia rose in a half-shy, half-fearful way and silently took the arm that was proffered her.

Since the year in which she had been robbed of both parents, and had existed under the immediate guardianship of a deaf old maiden aunt, Silvia had passed through life with a sort of inanimate indifference. She had tried with passionate vehemence to bury her grief in her work, and had so far succeeded, inasmuch as her life had become a calm, uneventful one, neither joyful nor sorrowful, but just impassive.

Her daily occupations did not permit of her overstepping the confining poverty and narrowness of her surroundings, and so she just plodded on, trying to cheer the old lady with whom she lived from her state of muteness and lethargy, and working with might and main to keep her tiny household from actual want.

But to-night, it seemed as though, for the first time, she was living again purely for the sake of living. The warm night air out in the garden fanned her cheeks; the sweet scent of the flowers instilled her with a new thankfulness, and her senses seemed to have become possessed of an unknown, unexpected joy. And yet there was nothing strange, nothing unusual in a man whose dining companion she had been asking her to stroll with him round the grounds of a friend's house while he smoked a cigar.

They were seated below a verandah, the roofing of which was festooned by trailing vines which hung down almost to their feet. Silvia sat against a background of huge vine leaves, and the shadows between her and a brilliant moon cast great patterns over her delicate form. Her head was uplifted, and the dark, luminous eyes, mysterious, intent, and searching, impressed John Denvers with marvellous possibilities. He watched her carefully through the drifting smoke of his Havana, and again wondered why, in the name of Fortune, he had never met her before. Silvia's mood alternated between enthusiasm on one point and seriousness on the other, and she chatted on from subject to subject, generally dealing with her work, her hopes, her aspir-

ations, but with all that charm of gentle docility which a man so indisputably likes. Her simple frankness and naturalness was fast adding new forces to her power of thrilling and fascinating him. Presently, Denvers laid his arm on the back of the seat, and, looking at the girl intently, he said: 'Do you believe in love at first sight, Miss Clarke?'

Silvia was not in the least taken aback at the strange abruptness of her question from a comparative stranger, and mused for a while, collecting her thoughts.

'Curiously enough,' she answered, presently, 'I myself was wondering whether such a thing really exists when you asked the question.' She turned her well-poised head with its wealth of hair towards him and looked him full in the face. It was Captain Denvers' turn to be surprised, and yet that there was not one iota of *arriere pensee* in the girl's mind was obvious by her perfectly natural way of expressing herself. 'I will tell you why I wondered,' she continued. 'I have a story to write to-night, and am rather fluctuating between two plots. The one embodies the idea that a girl loves the man who is engaged to her sister, and that he, although he, too, has ceased to care for his fiancée, is too much of a moral coward to confess to both girls; and the other—well, the story of a wonderful reciprocity of love at first sight. Now, such suggestion do you prefer? I don't believe I could make a hero out of a coward. A man must be noble, honorable, straight, reliable—in fact, everything that is upholding good and worthy of reverence in a woman's eyes. These confidences were spoken in a low voice, broken by swift catching of the breath, with her hands characteristically clasped across her bosom—it was a way of hers in moments of intentness—and an eagerness of purpose which was augmented by the subject of their discussion.'

'I like the suggestion of love at first sight,' said John, letting his eyes feast upon the idealistic face, 'and I do honestly believe that it exists. Come, will you let me help you with your story? Let us put our heads together, metaphorically speaking, and see what we can concoct.'

'Will you really?' The girl flushed, and her eyes shone mysteriously. 'You are very kind, considering we have only just met.'

'Don't say that, Miss Clarke. I feel as if I had known you a lifetime. The moments have been weeks, the hours years. You interest me. Your work, your life, your pluck, everything about you appeals to me tremendously, and make me wish—you'll think me mad for talking like this—that I were not going away, or that, at least, I were not leaving to-morrow.'

'To-morrow?' echoed Silvia vaguely. 'I, too, wish that you could stay.'

'Do you?' cried John, clasping her trembling hand in his, but only for a moment, for the girl withdrew it and turned away. 'Ah, forgive me; I have offended you. I have no right to speak like this, and you have every reason to be vexed.'

The tender face, with uplifted brow, was full of forgiveness as she turned to him again. The deep shadows of the rustling vine leaves played over them, and the moonlight filtered gently through the tendrils of her dark warm hair as she held out her hand in gentle remission.

'There is nothing to forgive,' she said, almost in a whisper, 'and I'm sorry you are going away.' She spoke her words with great simplicity, while John Denvers pressed her fingers to his lips and then released them.

Then Silvia started up from her reverie and came back with a rebound to the matter-of-fact realities of the situation.

'It is getting late,' she said, almost regretfully, looking down upon John. He was very handsome. The magnificently bronzed face, with a slight curving moustache of brown hue, which softened without hiding the fine mouth beneath, and the strong, dark glance, which embodies a look of splendid resolve, took her fancy.

'I like him, but he is going away,' is what she thought. 'But still I shall remember that he kissed my hand and told me he wished we had met before. No matter what happens, nothing can rob us of this secret night, these few happy moments spent in absolute harmony and sympathy together.'

'Don't go yet,' he pleaded anxiously. 'There is still our story to finish,' he added, 'and you know we agreed to compose it together.'

'It is not yet begun,' the girl answered with a tender smile; 'but I think now that I know how it will end.' Then a new firmness of manner took possession of her, and she said with decision, 'Will you take me back to the house, Captain Denvers? I must go. Remember, I have a long task before me, and—it is getting late.'