

A Marriage Below Zero

A Novel by Alan Dale

Edited with an Introduction by Matthew Kaiser

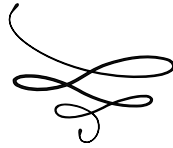
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- Copyright Page
- Table of Contents
- Excerpt of Chapter 1

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Sneak Preview

A
MARRIAGE
BELOW ZERO



A Novel by Alan Dale

Edited with an Introduction by

Matthew Kaiser
Harvard University



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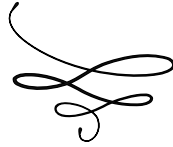
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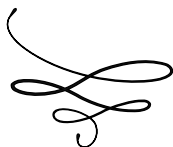
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Contents



Editor's Introduction.....	vii
A Marriage Below Zero	1

EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION



I N 1889, New York publishing house G.W. Dillingham had high hopes for their latest paperback, *A Marriage Below Zero*, a “sensation novel” in the tradition of Wilkie Collins’s *The Woman in White* (1860) and Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s *Lady Audley’s Secret* (1862). Sensation novels were plot-driven Victorian thrillers set in that most dangerous and mysterious of locales: the middle-class home. Forget those foggy London streets, or that cliff-top Gothic castle. Parlors, bedrooms, and suburban gardens were the new crime scenes. No longer a refuge from life’s horrors, the home was their very source. Ripping the mask from domesticity, sensation novels titillated audiences with accounts of family secrets, double lives, bigamy, adultery, domestic violence, drug abuse, illegitimate children, murderous spouses, in short, with the sordid underbelly of middle-class respectability. In these tales of surveillance, men and women acted as private detectives in their own homes, spying on spouses, parents, servants, and children, who, in turn, spied on them, searching for clues, the slightest trace of abnormality.

Writing under the pseudonym “Alan Dale,” drama critic and novelist Alfred J. Cohen attempted in *A Marriage Below Zero* to up the ante in the “sensation” game by shining a light on a phenomenon that had been

explored only obliquely or cryptically in English-language novels. Dale's subject was homosexuality. Less constrained by censorship laws than their British counterparts, editors at Dillingham sensed they had a bestseller on their hands. *A Marriage Below Zero* is the first novel in English to depict in unambiguous terms a male homosexual relationship. Narrated from the point of view of a neglected and jealous wife, *A Marriage Below Zero* is a tragicomic account of a clueless young woman's disastrous decision to marry a pretty bachelor, a man whom everyone but the woman herself intuitively (or at least suspects) is sexually attracted to. To the disdain of London socialites, Arthur Ravener seldom appears in public without his male companion, Jack Dillington, a misogynous military officer ten years his senior. With Hellenistic insinuation, West-Enders dub the male couple "Damon and Pythias." *A Marriage Below Zero* is a novel about open secrets, a frigid marriage, erotic miscommunication, about the paradoxical nature of sexual consciousness at the end of the nineteenth century. On the one hand, society has become increasingly knowledgeable about sex, priding itself on detecting its subtle "truth," grasping its nuances and complexities; on the other hand, that same society is blinded by its own sense of moral superiority, its naïve belief in the wholesome stories it tells itself about itself. Like the society it describes, *A Marriage Below Zero* views homosexuality—and sex more generally—with a contradictory mix of urbanity and paranoia. Dale's clueless young heroine is both a victim and a buffoon. A neurotic novel about neurosis, *A Marriage Below Zero* struggles to make sense of the very sexual paradox of which it is a symptom. It brims with irony. Indeed, *A Marriage Below Zero* is surprisingly funny: an erotic comedy of errors that ends grotesquely, horrifically, in death. To Dale's disappointment, reviewers, by and large, attacked the novel on moral grounds, recoiling from its subject matter and its inappropriately frivolous tone. For a short time, Dale's reputation suffered. He shifted his energies to other projects, becoming the most famous drama critic in America. As the years passed, this peculiar, groundbreaking novel faded from memory. By the early twentieth century, it was all but forgotten, dismissed as homophobic and overly sensational by the few gay and lesbian intellectuals who remembered it.

Dale's risky choice of subject was motivated primarily by opportunism, by a desire to capitalize on the public's growing curiosity about

homosexuality, its fears that latently gay husbands were undermining the institution of marriage from within. There is no evidence to suggest that Dale was same-sex-oriented, though of course his sexual orientation is impossible to verify. Editors at Dillingham initially hoped the controversy generated by *A Marriage Below Zero* would boost sales. Set primarily in London, Dale's novel was certainly timely, for in the late 1880s British authorities—and the newspaper-reading public at large—were experiencing what can only be described as successive waves of collective homosexual panic. Despite the fact that sodomy was still a felony in Great Britain, and despite the fact that those found guilty of the offense were subject, in theory if seldom in practice, to life in prison, governmental efforts to persecute gay people had abated slightly in the mid nineteenth century, the last public execution for homosexuality having taken place in 1836. Sodomy was officially declassified as a capital offense in 1861. The mood shifted in the mid 1880s, however, a result of the increased visibility of gay or “Uranian” men, as they called themselves. In 1885, Parliament passed the draconian Labouchere Amendment to the Criminal Law Amendment Act, which criminalized all non-penetrative sexual contact between men, including ambiguous acts of overly physical homoerotic affection, assigning such activity the vague label “gross indecency.” Thus, Section 11 of the Act, as the Labouchere Amendment was officially known, had the effect of criminalizing same-sex desire itself, in addition to intimate homosexual acts. Ten years later, Oscar Wilde would be prosecuted under this same law and sentenced to two years hard labor. Dale's timing could not have been better, or so he thought. In 1889, the year *A Marriage Below Zero* hit shelves, details of the so-called Cleveland Street Scandal were splashed across the pages of English and American newspapers, when police raided an upscale male brothel in central London. Its clientele consisted of aristocrats, prominent professionals, and even—or so rumors flew—Queen Victoria's grandson, Prince Albert Victor. Unfortunately, Dale had misjudged the public's interest in and tolerance for fictional accounts of homosexual lives, even if those lives ended, as they do in *A Marriage Below Zero*, tragically, as punishment for their unconventionality.

Though some reviewers praised Dale for writing an entertaining and edifying tale of modern marriage, most were distressed by his decision to make his ingénue-narrator—the self-declared victim of male

homosexuality—a fool. Self-justifying and self-loathing, desperate for male attention one minute, recoiling from it the next, Elsie Bouverie, whose name echoes that of the adulterous heroine in Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1856), is a classic female hysteric. She bemoans the frigidity of her husband, pounding on his locked bedroom door like a Richardsonian rake, even as she expresses disgust at public displays of heterosexual affection, rejecting suitor after suitor. No one appears to take her very seriously, in part because she does not seem to know what she wants. Like Emma Bovary, she is an avid reader of bad novels, which have distorted her view of the world. Elsie accuses everyone around her of being a fool or a hypocrite, mocking (in an aside) an overweight woman on a train, harrumphing at a matron's plunging neckline, even as she admits that she herself is the biggest fool of them all. Elsie is the butt of her friends' private jokes. She is an inept heterosexual. Though she presents herself as a spokeswoman for insulted femininity, for besieged domesticity, she begins her narrative by attacking her own mother as a social-climbing fraud. Elsie is an unreliable narrator and an unreliable authority on sex. She is what makes *A Marriage Below Zero* so delightfully complex.

Even as Dale encourages readers to identify with his heroine by presenting her narrative as a confessional *cri de cœur*, he mischievously undermines that identification by making Elsie painfully—comically—slow to discover the truth: a truth so glaring that even the most sheltered reader will discover it five or six chapters into the novel. That the secret of her husband's homosexuality is not nearly so stubborn or so surprising as Elsie repeatedly professes, indeed, that even her maid seems to view her as a bit of a fool, means that her efforts to portray herself as a melodramatic damsel in distress fall—if not exactly on deaf ears, for her story is certainly pitiable—on ears that are more knowing and jaded than her own. Humorous though it may be, Elsie's extreme ignorance alienates readers, who come to view her perspective as flawed, a bit delusional, biased. If *A Marriage Below Zero* fails to provide sufficient moral clarity on the question of homosexuality, as reviewers complained, it is because the couple's frigid marriage is as much a result of Elsie's hysteria as of Arthur's quasi-secret life. Arthur asks Elsie to marry him precisely because he assumes, after listening approvingly to her rants against heterosexual men, that she has no interest in consummating their marriage. He assumes they are on the same page. Elsie's rage at him, then, is displaced anger at herself for

not being honest about her sexual needs. Thus, to the consternation of outraged reviewers, Dale equates anti-homosexual political grandstanding—articulated most overtly in the novel by a Bible-thumping preacher in New York City—with female hysteria, with the epistemological unreliability and critical blindness that results from the unholy union of self-righteousness and sexual repression. *A Marriage Below Zero* is a tragicomic novel about the difficulty of achieving critical distance from one's own sexuality, from the objects of one's desire, even as knowledge of sexuality seems to proliferate at a dizzying rate in modern life. Though the novel is not pro-homosexual by any means, nor particularly sympathetic toward same-sex-oriented people, who come across as tortured, furtive, and self-absorbed, Dale's satirical firepower is reserved almost exclusively for the hypocrisy and self-delusion that underlie middle-class married life. Homosexuality is a pretext. Marriage is Dale's true target.

Extensive biographical information about the man called "Alan Dale" is limited. In his novels and theater reviews, Dale presents himself as a witty outsider laughing at the pageant of modern life. He writes with the ironic detachment of the practiced cynic, embracing his marginal status as the source of his insight. By the early twentieth century, he had become the most popular theater critic in the United States, the scourge of New York producers, directors, and managers, who sometimes barred him from their theaters and regularly implored his bosses to fire him. A pioneer in developing a more populist, sarcastic, and gossipy brand of theater review, Dale loathed what he felt were the literary pretensions of mid-Victorian drama critics. Alfred J. Cohen was born in 1861 to an Anglo-Jewish family in Birmingham, England, where the increased visibility and economic clout of the local Jewish community was a growing source of tension between it and Birmingham's Christian majority. Cohen was educated at King Edward's School and later, or so he claimed, at Oxford University, though no evidence exists that he attended the university. In the early 1880s, he worked in London as a stenographer for American journalist Leander Richardson, who brought him to New York City, where Cohen soon made a name for himself as a feisty and ambitious reporter. In the mid 1880s, Cohen took the *nom de plume* "Alan Dale," after the mischievous songster Alan-a-Dale in Robin Hood's merry band of outlaws. He married Carrie Livingston Frost in 1886 and settled down to married life. From 1887 to 1895, Dale worked as drama critic

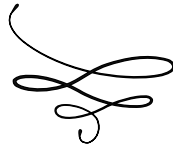
at Joseph Pulitzer's New York *Evening World*, before William Randolph Hearst recruited him as drama critic for the New York *Journal*. By the early twentieth century, Dale's flippant reviews and jaunty articles were appearing nationally in all Hearst newspapers, as well as in *Cosmopolitan*. Dale had become a minor celebrity, a happy curmudgeon, railing, on behalf of commonsensical America, against Shakespeare, Ibsen, and Shaw, against cultural snobbery. Though Dale regularly chastised playwrights for their gratuitous profanity, he also mocked them for their sexual squeamishness, their prudish or overly dramatic representations of human sexuality. Dale viewed life as an amusing spectacle, an endless parade of bad actors, which he critiqued from his free aisle seat. In addition to his various novels, which included *Jonathan's Home* (1885), *An Eerie He and She* (1890), *My Footlight Husband* (1893), *A Moral Busybody* (1894), *A Girl Who Wrote* (1902), and *When a Man Commutes* (1918), Dale was the author of *Familiar Chats with Queens of the Stage* (1890) and *The Great Wet Way* (1910). Though his attempts at playwriting were less successful, two of his plays enjoyed productions. In 1918, police shut down *The Madonna of the Future*, Dale's comedy about an unmarried woman of means who decides to become a mother, claiming the play was immoral. In 1928, on vacation in England, Dale died of a heart attack on a train headed to his native Birmingham. He was sixty-seven.

Much of Dale's fiction focuses—often to amusing effect—on the seemingly intractable emotional, sexual, and political tensions between modern men and women. Heterosexuality is difficult. Marriage—even a strong one—is no walk in the park. Men and women see each other, Dale suggests, through veils of delusion. Pity them, then, when those veils fall apart. While gender conflict has been a compelling literary theme since time immemorial (some would argue the *most* compelling theme), Dale is one of the first novelists writing in English who had the audacity to declare the obvious: heterosexuality is not for everyone. It leaves some people cold. One of the historically noteworthy aspects of Dale's groundbreaking representation of male homosexuality, an aspect that flies in the face of homophobic stereotypes that persist to this day, is his depiction of gay men as intrinsically—obsessively—relationship-oriented, as bound by a masculine intimacy, a Hellenistic friendship, that no proselytizing maiden can break, no gaggle of disapproving dandies can sever. Arthur Ravener and Jack Dillington are in love. They are inseparable. Dillington

pursues Arthur across the Atlantic. They cannot live without each other. Alas, they don't. Of course, jealous Elsie portrays the men's powerful bond as creepy, insinuating that Dillington exerts a Svengali-like influence over young Arthur. In her eyes, their inseparability smacks of addiction more than ardor, servitude more than devotion. The men are nevertheless defined by their union, by their overlapping photographs in one frame, which Elsie discovers at the end of the novel in a paroxysm of hysterical rage. Her paroxysm coincides with her long-anticipated realization, her journey from innocence to experience. Dale's decision to equate male homosexuality with love, with a quasi-public long-term relationship, howsoever threatening to middle-class domesticity that love may be, represents a radical departure from the Victorian convention of portraying gay men as lonely monsters, effeminate clowns, or decadent antisocial rebels. Elsie's vilification of Dillington is understandable. The two are rivals for Arthur's hand. He wins; she loses. Just as Dale humiliates her for her loss, he makes sure to punish Dillington for his victory. Modern sexuality, however, not morality, has the last laugh—it is a bitter, neurotic laugh. Like *A Marriage Below Zero*, sexuality's laughter is sardonic and unsettling.

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A Marriage Below Zero



I seek no sympathies, nor need;
The thorns which I have reaped are of the tree
I planted,—they have torn me,—and I bleed:
I should have known what fruit would spring from such a seed.

—*Byron*¹

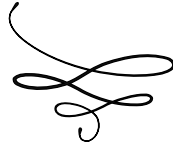
Soft love, spontaneous tree, its parted root
Must from two hearts with equal vigour shoot;
While each delighted and delighting gives
The pleasing ecstasy which each receives:
Cherish'd with hope, and fed with joy it grows;
Its cheerful buds their opening bloom disclose,
And round the happy soil diffusive odour flows.
If angry fate that mutual care denies,
The fading plant bewails its due supplies;
Wild with despair, or sick with grief, it dies.

—*Prior*²

1 *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (Canto IV, stanza 10) by George Gordon Byron (1788-1824), English Romantic poet.

2 *Solomon on the Vanity of the World, A Poem* (Book II, 246-255) by Matthew Prior (1664-1721), English poet and diplomat.

INTRODUCTION



I SUPPOSE I am rather frivolous. I believe in the voice of the majority, to a certain extent; and it has announced my giddiness and superficiality so frequently, that there is nothing left for me to do but succumb to this view as pleasantly as possible. I never listen to the minority in any of the social questions with which I am confronted. It would therefore be inconsistent to pay much attention to its estimate of myself.

Butterfly-like I flutter about in society, living in the all sufficient present, reckless of the future, and absolutely declining to recollect the past.

I have a mother who loves me a great deal more than she did some time ago, when I seemed to tacitly insist that she should grow old decently and gracefully. Now I do my best to assist her in her vigorous struggle for perpetual youth, and she is thankful to me; she appreciates my efforts. Ah! it is good to be appreciated, sometimes.

“I really don’t know what I should do without you, Elsie,” she says, in an occasional outburst of good nature. “You are such a comfort to me; you make me feel as though I were your sister. Sometimes I think I am.”

So you see that her affection for me is by no means maternal. I call her “mother” from force of habit, though, accustomed as I am to the word, it often sounds rather ludicrous in my ears.

Conventionality forbids me to use her Christian name. People have always had pronounced prejudices in favor of what they call filial respect, and a quarrel with conventionality is generally fatal, as I have learned. So we trot around to receptions, and kettledrums,¹ and dinners and dances as mother and daughter. I would willingly pass for the former if it were possible to do so, but it is out of the question, unfortunately for dear mamma.

I shall never leave my mother. We shall continue our trot about the social world, until one of us is obliged to give in. I hope I shall be the first to fall, because, like the little boy in the song, I could not play alone. I am convinced that my mother also hopes that she will be the bereaved one. She enjoys life so much, that I cannot blame her.

My demise would necessitate her withdrawal from society for a year or so, but Madame Pauline, in Regent Street, really furnishes such delightful mourning, that, as Mrs. Snooksley Smith said to me the other day: “it is positively a pleasant change to wear it.” Mr. Snooksley Smith had been gathered to his fathers a few months previously, so that I know she spoke from experience, poor lonely widow.

I wear a wedding ring. It is concealed beneath a scintillating cluster of diamonds which I have purposely placed on the third finger of my left hand, but it is there. I hate it. It is in the way. If I thought I should ever marry again, I would make it a point of insisting that the lucky man should despise those little golden badges as much as I do.

I must wear mine until I die, I suppose. You see everybody knows that I am Mrs. Ravener; all my friends seem to take an ill-natured delight in emphatically using my married name. I may be as frivolous as I choose, as recklessly flippant as I possibly can, but my wedding ring must remain. It does not upbraid me for my conduct. Not a bit of it. I have a perfect right to do everything in my power to forget it. I would fling my ring to the bottom of the Thames, and still maintain my unquestioned right to

1 Parties; the term derives from the English practice of using drums as tables at military fêtes in colonial India.

do so, but,—ah! there is always one of those detestable little conjunctions in the way.

I hope I am making you wonder what all this means, dear reader, because I intend tearing myself away from mamma for a little and devoting some time to you. You say you would not like to inconvenience mamma? Oh, you need not hesitate. I shall tell her that I need a little rest, and shall interpret her surprised “What nonsense, Elsie!” into a motherly injunction to take it. She is still a little afraid of me, you see. She remembers that, like Mr. Bunthorne,¹ I am very terrible when I am thwarted. Though nothing in my behavior nowadays indicates that I have the faintest suspicion of a will of my own, mamma knows better. Perhaps in the solitude of her chamber she wishes that dear Elsie were the sweet little gushing nonentity she appears to be. In time I may make her forget that I have ever been anything else. Perhaps as she grows old (if she ever does) her memory may be dulled. It is just possible that she may pass away in the fond conviction that her only daughter has never crossed her will. Who shall say that I am not charitable?

I am going to write the story of my married life. I intend to open old wounds by confession which, it is popularly said, is good for the soul. The task may do me good. A little taste of bitter recollection can but enhance the value of the sweet vapidness of my present life. I can pause while I am writing, if I feel at all overwhelmed by the flood of reminiscence, which will pour in upon me by the gates which I voluntarily open, to congratulate myself that it is all over forever.

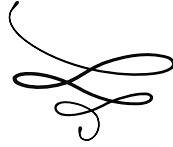
Like the little girl who used to get out of her nice warm bed, and make her sister call out, “There are mice on the floor,” so that she might have the pleasure of rushing back again and huddling up under the clothes in an ecstasy of comfort, I will recall the past, in order that I may enjoy the present all the more.

Perhaps that present palls upon me sometimes, though no one guesses it, and I hardly suspect it myself. Possibly it needs all the contrast with the past that I can give it, to render it endurable. I say “possibly” you know. I wish to be consistently frivolous.

1 A reference to the poetry-writing buffoon, Reginald Bunthorne, in Gilbert and Sullivan’s comic opera *Patience; or, Bunthorne’s Bride* (1881), who informs his rival: “Take care. When I am thwarted I am very terrible.”

You will be able to remember these remarks when you have read the record of the events which I am about to chronicle, and when you close the book, say with a sigh of relief: “Well, in spite of all, she is living happily ever afterwards.”

CHAPTER 1



NO, I shall not weary you with a long account of my childhood, and all that sort of thing. When I read a story, I always skip the pages devoted to a description of the juvenile days of the hero or heroine. They are generally insufferably uninteresting, or interesting only to the writer, and I can find no excuse for selfishness, with such a weapon as a pen in one's hand.

My mother was left a widow when I was a baby. There is a mournful sound about that piece of intelligence, which is absolutely deceptive. In reality it was a most satisfactory outcome of what I was always told was an extremely unhappy marriage. I heard that my father was a charming man, well read, intellectual, courteous and refined. His death was a happy release for both. Poor papa could not tolerate the shallowness of his spouse's hopes and aspirations; while mamma looked upon her husband as an encumbrance, and an obstacle in the way of her social ambition. A husband is very often unnecessary when you are once in the swim of society. When he has given you the protection of his honorable name, and endowed you liberally with the goods of this world, why, the most delicate thing he can then do, is to cease reminding you of these facts, by taking himself off. At least that is the way a great many people look at the matter, I am told.

I was a year old when papa died. What I was there for, I cannot imagine. There was absolutely no reason for my existence. My mother despised children from the bottom of her heart—or, I might more aptly say, the place where her heart was supposed to be. But I thrived on my bottle. I grew disgracefully fat, and outrageously healthy, and it soon became apparent that there would be no difficulty in rearing me. The only person who could have felt any satisfaction at this was my nurse, who, without me to take care of, would have lost a good situation.

I have promised to say little about my childhood, and I will respect my promise.

I was packed off very young to an extremely aristocratic school, where for years dear mamma left me to myself, pursuing her own sweet course in the labyrinthine mazes of society. She paid my bills regularly, and they were pretty big ones, for nothing that could make me subsequently interesting among mamma's dear friends, was neglected. I was to go into society very young. I think she wanted a little excitement, and imagined that she might get some entertainment from a nice, accomplished daughter. Everybody was aware of the fact that she had one, you see, and also cruelly remembered her real age; so why not use the girl to as much advantage as possible? So, I presume she reasoned.

I was “finished” in the most approved manner. I was taught to play the piano with the most provoking persistence, and made day and night hideous with my frenzied interpretations of things in variations, of pyrotechnical *morceaux*,¹ and of drawing-room “selections.”

I sang songs with *roulades*² which would have frightened Patti,³ and effective little *chansons*, with plenty of tra-la-la and tremulo about them. Creatures on whom the education I received would be likely to take effect, ought to be caged up, as dangerous to the community, in my opinion. I spoke villainous French, in order that I might vulgarly interlard my sentences with an occasional Gallic expression. I have done so above. You have Mme. Bobichon, instigated by mamma, to thank for it. A long haired, beery German was going the rounds of the drawing-rooms at this time (I ought to say *salons*, I suppose), and talking the

1 Short musical compositions.

2 Musical embellishments consisting of a rapid run of several notes.

3 Adelina Patti (1843-1919), famous opera soprano.

gullible Londoners into the belief that he was a musical prodigy. I was taught German, I presume, in order that I might be able to tell him, in his own language, how much I adored him. I was very accomplished, in a word—desperately so. I will say this, however: I despised my education. I could see through its superficiality even then.

I enjoyed my school days thoroughly. I liked the society of the merry, laughing, giddy girls I met. Towards the end of my “finishing” period, I went home for a holiday, and the return to school was simply delightful. I dreaded the idea of leaving it for a home which I knew I should detest, and for a mother in whom I had not the faintest interest. At seventeen, however, I was taken into the bosom of my family, and the happiest period of my life came to an abrupt end.

I remained quietly at home for three months before I became that silliest of human beings, a blushing *debutante*. (She doesn't blush long, poor thing.) I had one dear friend whom I regarded as a sister. Letty Bishop had left school two years before I emerged, so that when I was ready to burst upon the social world, she was already a full-fledged society girl.

I shall always remember the ball mamma gave to introduce me to the world. It was a great event for me, an absolute and utter revelation. I rejoiced at the idea of meeting my old school friends, and of resuming the pleasant relations we had enjoyed, without restriction. I was also particularly anxious to become acquainted with members of the male sex, of whom I had heard so much from my friend. I knew none, except John, the butler, who I cannot say impressed me very favorably.

I supposed that men were nice, sensible, jolly beings, immeasurably superior to girls, and with so many more privileges. They could marry whom and when they chose—I thought it, at least—and had unlimited power over creation in general. I hoped in my heart of hearts, that I should soon be chosen, and that some young man would carry me away from mamma to a life which would be more endurable.

As I just said, that ball was an utter revelation to me. I was going to rush at the dear girls I knew, gushingly glad to meet them again after such a long separation, and burningly anxious to take them off to indulge in those nice long talks we had at school.

But when I saw them in my mother's house I hardly recognized them. Could it be possible that these affected, fragile creations, were really the

same girls who, only a few months ago, had surreptitiously purchased indigestible cakes, openly read sentimental novels, and enthusiastically sworn eternal friendship the one for the other? Why, they had no eyes for anything female now; all their attentions seemed turned in the direction of the men.

They greeted me with chilling politeness, and turned from me with ill-concealed haste to salute members of the other sex. Of course I had no doubt that they were as eager to meet men as I was. Still, I was not prepared to be treated in this way.

If the behavior of my feminine friends surprised me, I was completely astounded, before the evening was over, at that of the other sex. Why, it was impossible to talk sensibly to these men. They made silly speeches, and showered compliments upon me in a manner that simply caused me consternation and hurt my self respect. I could not imagine what they meant by being so personal. It would have only been after years of familiar intercourse that a girl would have ventured to talk to me as did these men, whom I had never seen before, and with the utmost assurance. It seemed to me that when strangers gave utterance to such ridiculous remarks, they were guilty of nothing less than impertinence.

When they were not unpleasantly self-satisfied, they were absurdly bashful. No girl is ever so contemptuously ill at ease as a bashful man, for whom I have never been able to feel any compassion.

One of our young hereditary legislators asked me to dance, and willing to put him at his ease, for his arms seemed to embarrass him, and his blushes amounted to a positive infirmity, I consented. He seemed to me to be a foolish young peacock, one of those men who Carlyle¹ says attain their maximum of detestability at twenty-five, and ought to be put in a glass case until that period, after which they are supposed to improve. He danced well. I have since learned that most social peacocks do. The poetry of motion seems to accompany lack of brains. When once my lord had disposed of his arm around my waist, he was another being, oh, so much improved!

When the dance was over, he led me into the refreshment room, and brought me an ice. I needed it. I had danced boisterously because I was

1 Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881), Scottish essayist, cultural critic, and historian, who viewed the dandy as a symptom of the superficiality of modern life.

young enough to enjoy the exercise for itself alone. I could have passed a much pleasanter time, however, had my partner been my one friend and *confidante*, Letty Bishop, than I had done with the gawky arms of young my lord encircling my waist.

“What a delightful waltz,” sighed my lord, as he watched me greedily eating my ice. He was no longer embarrassed, my efforts had been successful.

“Yes,” I replied, “I love dancing, and I think you waltz nearly as well as even Miss Bishop, that pretty girl sitting over there.”

I pointed to a chair where Letty was reclining, surrounded by, I believe I counted seventeen young men. I thought I had paid him a great compliment. I had enjoyed my dance, and felt in a better humor. My lord did not seem at all elated, however. He became silent, and eyed me sentimentally.

“Why don’t you have an ice?” I asked, presently, feeling annoyed at his stupidity. “This pineapple is very good—there are real pieces of fruit in it.”

“Ah, Miss Bouverie,” said he, “I am not in an ice humor.”

“Ha, Ha! what a good pun!” I laughed flippantly, wishing he would remove his eyes. “You ought to keep me in countenance, though. I always think people look so gluttonous eating by themselves.”

My lord took a chair and an ice at the same time, and sat down beside me. He spoke very little, which I ascribed to the fact that he was enjoying his ice. When he had finished, he asked me if I had any more dances to give him. I looked at my programme. I had none. My lord scowled.

“Miss Bouverie,” he said, “you are the only girl here I care about dancing with. All these belles of sixteen seasons weary me,” languidly, “and you give me only one meagre waltz.”

“I think you are very rude to my guests,” I answered, vexed. “They are nearly all young girls, and most of them are nice ones, too. I would as soon dance with you as with anybody, but as this is my mother’s party, I believe I am not allowed to choose. I must take everybody who asks me, I suppose. Not that it matters much, however,” I added indifferently. “I can’t see that a partner makes much difference as long as he dances well. One has no time to talk.”

My lord looked surprised. “You are too young,” he said, with what I considered unpardonable frankness. Then in a low tone, “Miss Bouverie,

I am so glad you are now 'out.' I shan't refuse any more invitations. I've been sending refusals to everybody lately, you know."

Lucky people, I thought. I rose in disgust, and left him. I felt sick at heart. I had been dancing all the evening, and all my partners annoyed me. They appeared to imagine that I was a doll, and condescended to play with me. Was that the way men always treated girls, I asked myself? A long time has elapsed since that evening, but though I have since learned that a man who never says a pretty thing, is an abnormal being who will ultimately sink into obscurity, I wonder that it should be so.

I was completely disappointed. Even Letty Bishop seemed to view me with less interest, while the men were around. She had known me longer than she had known them, and surely I ought to have been considered first.

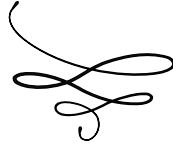
I felt that I could never like the other sex if it were composed exclusively of creatures like those with whom I had danced, under the most favorable circumstances too, namely, in my mother's house. From what I had seen, I judged that in the social world, women must be the sworn enemies of women, and men the everlasting foes of men. Girls I had heard declare themselves to be eternal friends, never spoke to each other during the evening, and I failed to notice a man address a word to one of his own sex, which would indicate any friendly interest in it.

I wept bitterly as I cast aside my fine feathers that night. My self-respect was wounded. Men had treated me as though I were a silly toy, and I had expected so much from them, and had thought they would be even more companionable than women.

Companionable! Great goodness!

You will probably have arrived at the conclusion by this time, dear readers, that I was a fool. If, however, I possessed no peculiarities, I should not venture to be sitting here. Indeed, I suppose I should be a respectable British matron, with half-a-dozen sturdy children, and—let me see, it is ten o'clock—I might now be ordering a boiled leg of mutton with caper sauce for my little olive-branches' dinner.

CHAPTER 2



MISS Bishop lived in that terribly respectable quarter of London known as Colville Gardens, where the rows of houses look as though they are pining to be allowed a little architectural license, or an escape of some kind from the exhausting restrictions of the prudery in which they have been designed.

Letty was a strange girl, a curious combination of extreme frivolity, shrewd common sense and warm-heartedness. I liked her, because she was the first girl who had ever shown me any kindness. She would listen to my ideas of things with the utmost good temper, point out where she thought I was mistaken, and allow me the luxury of differing from her; which you will admit is a favor usually hard to obtain from friends. Letty Bishop's father was by no means rich. He had been left a widower many years before, and to Letty was assigned the duty of tending his latter years. This she did with a devotion which I admired. I might have emulated her example, but my mother would have shuddered at, and repudiated, the idea of "latter years."

After my miserable failure as a "blushing *debutante*," I was not long in seeking Letty's society. Early the next morning I was in Colville Gardens. I found Letty in the breakfast-room, reading a parliamentary debate in

one of the morning papers, so that she could discuss it with her father when he returned from his office. She was attired in the wrapper which women affect nowadays. She threw down her paper when she saw me, and advancing toward me, gave me an effusive kiss on each cheek.

“So glad to see you, dear,” she said, “I expected you would be round this morning. Elsie, let me congratulate you on your great success. I’m really proud of you.”

I looked what I felt—surprised. That I had been successful, was something I had never contemplated. “I don’t know what you mean, Letty,” I murmured. “I never spent such a mournfully wretched evening in my life. But,” I added, “put on your things and let us go for a nice walk, and I will tell you all about it.”

“Now you know, dear,” said Letty, sinking into her comfortable chair, “that if there is one thing on the face of this earth which I cordially detest, it is a ‘nice walk.’ It makes one look so dreadfully healthy, and I abhor dairymaid beauty. No, dear, if you have anything to tell me, say it here, in this cosy room. I’m all ears.”

This was not strictly true; Miss Bishop’s ears were of the style which our imaginative novelists liken to “dainty pink shells.” But I knew what she meant, and was not in a particularly humorous mood, so I took off my things and sat down. “Letty,” I said, quietly, “tell me why I was a success.”

I felt and looked rather dejected, but she did not appear to notice this.

“Why you were a success,” she replied energetically, “because you had more partners than you wanted; because you looked lovely in that dear little white silk dress; because all the men noticed you and asked numerous questions about you, and because—well, my dear, I can’t give any more reasons; they are obvious. You must know them as well as I do.”

I was disappointed. “Tell me, Letty,” I asked, “was this a representative party? Was it an average affair?”

“Far above the average, my dear,” was Letty’s prompt response. “There was at least a man to every two girls, which is unusual, there being generally about seventeen times as many women as men. Then the men were really very nice. Mrs. Bouverie deserves great credit for her selection. The wallflowers were composed of those who deserved to be wallflowers,

which is worth noting. The supper was excellent, the floor good, the music admirable, and the arrangements perfect.”

Miss Bishop folded her hands after these dogmatic utterances, and half closing her eyes looked at me through her heavy eyelashes. I fidgetted and was uncomfortable.

“If the selection of men were really good,” I said thoughtfully and grammatically, “I never want to see a bad selection. Letty, every one of my partners made fun of me. What I have done I don’t know, but a man must think very little of a girl to be constantly telling her that her cheeks are like roses, her eyes like stars, her lips—Ah; I sicken when I think of it. Do you mean to say that men talk like that to girls whom they really like and respect?” I was half crying.

Letty rose and kissed me. “You are an innocent little thing,” she said, with plaintive condescension, “and my dear,”—quite cheerfully—“I am afraid you are going to have plenty of trouble. Why, I assure you, that a man who doesn’t say pretty things to girls is looked upon as a man who can’t say them—that is, a boor. Men who talk sense—and there are very, very few of them,—are considered egotistical nuisances. Once I had a partner who had traveled considerably, and he would insist upon describing his travels. He used to carry me off to the Red Sea, lead me gently to the desert of Sahara, or row me tenderly over the lakes of Switzerland. He was very wearisome. I hated him. Yes, Elsie, dear,” she went on, seeming positively to enjoy my look of disgust, “I would sooner any day hear something about my pretty eyes and my peach-like cheeks, than a graphic description of the Saharan desert, in a ball-room.”

My best friend was leaving me alone and a feeling of desolation came over me. “Can’t men talk with girls as they would with men?” I asked. “It seems to me that they must take us for very inferior beings. Men surely don’t pay each other idiotic compliments, do they?”

Letty grew serious, and a faint blush deepened the “peach-like” color to which she had already referred. “What men say to one another,” she remarked, “I am afraid our ears would hardly tolerate. When my brother Ralph was at home—before he went to China—we always used to have the house full of young fellows. I used frequently to come upon them, when they were laughing heartily, and evidently enjoying themselves. I wanted to laugh as well, but they invariably stopped when they saw me, as though I were a wet blanket. Once or twice I asked them to tell me

what was amusing them. The youngest of the party blushed, while the oldest adroitly changed the subject. I presume," said Letty, with charming resignation, "that they were afraid of shocking me. I didn't think so then, but I do now. Men like their little jokes, but—I am afraid we shouldn't."

"I wish mamma would let society alone," I pouted sullenly, feeling thoroughly ill-tempered. "I know I shall be forced to flutter about drawing-rooms until one of these men wants my star-like eyes and my satin complexion for his own. I don't look forward to much happiness. I'd sooner be a governess, or a shorthand writer, or—or—anything." I ended in a burst of indignation.

Miss Bishop laughed, and then became thoughtful. "Elsie," she said presently, "have you ever met Arthur Ravener and Captain Jack Dillington?"

"No," I said shortly, "and I'm not particularly anxious to do so."

"Arthur Ravener and Captain Jack Dillington," pursued Letty, disdaining to notice my petulance, "are known in society as Damon and Pythias.¹ They are inseparable. Such a case of friendship I have never seen. I half expected they would be at your mother's party, but I presume they were not invited. I have never met one without the other. They always enter a ball-room together and leave together. Of course they can't dance with each other, but I'm sure they regret that fact. They are together between the dances, conversing with as much zest as though they had not met for a month. Girls don't like them because they talk downright, painful sense. Men seem to despise them. You might appreciate them, however," with a smile.

"I'm sure I should," I said, enthusiastically. "Men who are capable of feeling deep friendship cannot be fools. I should like to know them,

1 Symbols of undying friendship between men, Damon and Pythias were Pythagorean philosophers from the fourth century BCE. Condemned to death for treason by the tyrant Dionysus I of Syracuse, Pythias, according to legend, begs to return to Greece before his execution to settle his affairs. Dionysus agrees on condition that Pythias's friend Damon remain in Syracuse in his place, acting as human collateral, subject to execution in the event Pythias flees. When Pythias returns on schedule, Dionysus is so touched by his loyalty to his friend, that he issues a pardon and makes the two men his court philosophers.

Letty. As long as I have to be a society butterfly, I may as well make myself as comfortable as I can under the circumstances.”

“You’re a strange girl,” remarked Letty, with a sigh, “but,” reflectively, “I suppose you can’t help it. The next opportunity I have I will introduce you to Arthur Ravener. I can promise you he will pay you no compliments. He’ll talk books or politics or—anything unseasonable.”

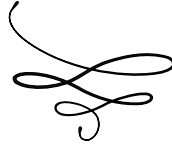
“Or Captain Jack Dillington?” I suggested.

“They rarely speak of one another,” said Miss Bishop. “Why, I don’t know. Some people call them mysteries, because they can’t understand them; but—you shall judge for yourself.”

“Thank you, Letty,” I said, gratefully, and I brought my visit to a close.

Perhaps as I walked home slowly, I may have indulged in a little complacent recognition of my own superiority. I had a soul above social shallowness, I told myself, and it was hardly likely that I should ever be happy in my home surroundings. I know now that it is one of the laws of nature that a budding woman should rejoice in the admiration of the other sex, should court its favor, and should be plunged into dire misery if she find it not. I must have been a peculiar girl, I suppose. Peculiarities do not always bring undiluted happiness to their owners. I paid dearly for mine, and the debt is not yet liquidated.

CHAPTER 3



FOUR weeks later, after a weary round of festivities (so called), I was sitting discontentedly in Lady Burlington's tawdry drawing-room, wondering why it was that the time passed so slowly. Miss Angelina Fotheringay was singing "*Voi che sapete*,"¹ with a hideous Italian accent, and in a gratingly harsh voice. When she began I was anxious to see how she would conduct herself with regard to the high notes in the song, and was prepared to respect her if she would calmly and delicately evade them. Such a proceeding, however, was evidently far from her intentions. She went over them neck and crop, landing in the midst of a heart-rending shriek, but placidly pursuing her course uninjured. My nerves were shocked. I had an ear for music and was therefore clearly out of place.

I wonder why girls will sing Italian and French songs which they cannot pronounce, when there are so many pretty English ballads which are within their scope. French people laugh at our rendering of their songs, and make most unflattering allusions to our efforts. They

1 Famous aria, "You, who know [what love is]," from Mozart's *The Marriage of Figaro* (1786).

have a right to make these allusions. You will very rarely, if ever, hear a Frenchwoman attack an English song. She prefers a field in which she knows she will be at home.

“Thanks, so much, dear,” I heard Lady Burlington bleat as the songstress concluded amid a volley of applause. I applauded, too, because I was glad the song was at an end.

“I know I am dreadfully importunate,” continued my hostess, “but won’t you give us one more song? It is such a treat to hear you. Do, dear,” pursued Lady Burlington, as Angelina became coy. “There’s that pretty little thing you sing so sweetly, let me see—what is it? Ah, I remember ‘Angels ever bright and fair.’”¹

“Angels ever bright and fair,” a pretty little thing! Ye gods!

Miss Fotheringay sat down at the piano again, and having hooked a vapid-looking youth to turn over the pages for her, proceeded to request those unhappy angels to take, oh, take her to their care. She concluded with an operatic flourish, and then without being asked favored the company with a little something in variations, of which I shall never know the name.

I felt positively ill, and when Lady Burlington requested me to play, pettishly declined. As I have already said I had a stock of drawing-room pieces which my fashionable professor had selected; but I hated them. I was thoroughly cross, and longed for something or somebody to distract my mind.

No sooner had I expressed this longing to myself than I noticed two young men enter the drawing-room. They attracted my attention at once. The younger was a tall, slightly built man, about twenty-five years of age. His features were so regular, and his complexion so perfect, that if you had shaven off the small golden moustache which adorned his upper lip, and dressed him in my garments, I felt that he would have done them much more credit than I could ever hope to do. He was extremely pretty. His clothes were faultless, his light hair was carefully brushed, and his appearance altogether irreproachable.

I cannot say as much for his companion, who must have been some ten years his senior. This gentleman had a puffy face, with thick red lips,

1 From Georg Friedrich Händel’s tragic oratorio *Theodora* (1749), which concerns Christian martyrdom.

and beady black eyes, something like those of a canary, but not as clear. He had the most unpleasant looking mouth I have ever seen, and as he wore no moustache whatever, it was very visible.

The two new arrivals sat down together during the progress of a song. Then they made their greetings in a quietly dignified manner, and were soon separated in the crowd. I noticed that the younger man looked continually after his friend when the latter went his way. I was still wondering who the two gentlemen were, when I saw Letty Bishop energetically steering her way in my direction, followed closely by the younger.

“Ah, I’ve been looking for you, Elsie,” she said impulsively, regardless of etiquette. “I want to introduce you to Mr. Arthur Ravener. My friend, Miss Bouverie, Mr. Ravener.”

Mr. Ravener took the vacant seat beside me, and on closer inspection I found his complexion quite as perfect and his features quite as regular as they had seemed when there was distance between us.

“You do not appear to be enjoying yourself, Miss Bouverie,” he said in soft, musical tones.¹

“I am not indeed,” I answered, vexed that he had been able to read my feelings so easily, “I think musical evenings are detestable.”

“Query: Is this a musical evening?” Mr. Ravener sank his voice to a whisper, and I laughed outright. The ice was broken.

We entered upon a conversation which was thoroughly delightful, to me at any rate. I found that Arthur Ravener was fond of music, and understood it thoroughly. He asked who were my favorite composers. I told him that I had never been allowed to have any favorites. I had been dosed with Brinley Richards, Sydney Smith and Kuhe,² and the effect had been extremely injurious. I liked to hear classical music. It did not weary me in the least; in fact, if I had been properly educated, I might have proved a fairly competent musician.

1 In late-Victorian gay or “Uranian” subculture, “being musical” euphemistically referred to “being same-sex oriented.”

2 Henry Brinley Richards (1817-1885), Welsh composer; Sydney Smith (1839-1889), English pianist and composer; Wilhelm Kuhe (1823-1912), German pianist and composer.

He was drawing me out, actually. I had not said as much since I left school to any new acquaintance. Here I was talking to a man with as much ease as though he were one of my beloved feminine school-friends. Mr. Ravener listened to me very attentively. He interposed soft “Oh, indeeds,” and “Ah’s” in a very pleasant manner, and appeared to be interested. He was very serious and extremely deferential. His face showed none of the changes that steal involuntarily over the features of most men when they speak to young girls. He talked to me as unconcernedly as though I were a man. I became as confidential as though he were a woman. I said presently, “if you are so fond of music, how is it you come to evenings like this?”

“May I address the same question to you?” he asked.

“Oh, that’s another thing,” I replied. “Girls can’t do as they like, you know. They have to follow in the paths their fathers and mothers make for them. But I should have thought it would have been different with men.”

“It is not, however,” said Mr. Ravener, quietly, and I suppose he thought that settled it, as he dropped the subject. I noticed that he seemed to be eagerly searching for some one in the crowd, and at last I saw his eyes rest upon his unprepossessing friend.

“Are you afraid your friend is not enjoying himself?” I asked, rather cheekily I admit.

He reddened slightly. “Captain Dillington always enjoys himself,” he said quietly. “He is very happy in society.”

I remembered Letty’s story of Damon and Pythias, and longed to know something of these two young men, one of whom at least was different from the ordinary drawing-room specimen. Arthur Ravener was certainly attractive, and I felt I was going to be interested in him, so I must be excused if I showed too much curiosity.

“How rarely you find two really sincere friends,” I remarked, rather sentimentally. “The present time seems to be wonderfully unsuited to such a tie.”

“That is true”—very laconically.

“I think there is nothing so beautiful as friendship,” I went on, with persistence.

“You have heard of Damon and Pythias,” he said quickly, reading me like a book. I blushed deeply and was then furiously angry with myself. “I don’t mind,” he went on. “Make all the fun of us you like.”

“Mr. Ravener,” I protested, “I assure you that when I heard of the friendship existing between you and Captain Dillington, I became interested in you.” (A pretty little declaration to make.) “I don’t see where any fun comes in. I am tired of the stupid men I meet at such gatherings as these. They have not enough feeling about their composition to allow them to make friends. Far from feeling amused at Damon and Pythias, I am deeply interested in them.”

Arthur Ravener looked pleased. I went on gushing like the school-girl I was. “I can think a great deal better of a young man who is capable of being sincerely attached to a companion, than I can of those foolish chatterboxes over there, who are forever telling me I have pretty eyes, pretty hair and a pretty figure, as though I had not been intimately acquainted with myself for the last seventeen years. Don’t think I laugh at you, Mr. Ravener, I am very much interested.” Then, so ingenuously that it could hardly be considered rude, “I should like to hear all about Captain Dillington, and how you came to know him?”

“There surely can be nothing to tell,” he said in strained tones. “What is the friendship between two young men that you should deem it worth discussing?”

“It is worth discussing,” I impulsively asserted. “What are we going to talk about? You are not going to tell me about my sylph-like form, or compare my charms with those of my less fortunate friends?”

“No,” he replied gravely, “you will find that is not my style when you know me better. I trust we shall know each other better, Miss Bouverie,” he remarked quietly.

“Yes.” I blushed in my prettiest manner, and cast my eyes down. I was determined to impress Arthur Ravener favorably. I looked extremely well when my long fringed lids could be seen advantageously. Picture my disgust and annoyance when, looking up again, I found I was alone, and just in time to see Arthur Ravener vanishing from the room with Captain Dillington. Even my acquiescence in his wish for our better acquaintance had not been sufficiently interesting to keep him at my side.

He was gone. “Well,” I said to myself, “the claims of friendship are great. He is not very polite, but let him go”—which was extremely kind of me, as he had already gone.

Later in the evening I saw the two young men again. Arthur Ravener did not approach me, but bowed in an astonishingly friendly manner,

and I, anxious not to seem piqued, returned the nod, accompanied by a smile.

I was subsequently made acquainted with Captain Dillington, for whom, after I had been in his society five minutes, I felt an overwhelming dislike. I cannot say what it was that induced the impression, but Captain Dillington reminded me of a toad, from his beady little eyes, to his sleek, smooth shaven face. He was conspicuously and effusively polite, which I always consider an unpleasant feature in any man's behavior. Though he paid me no compliments, I was uneasy in his society; again I say I do not know why. We discussed various subjects; he in his oily, complacent manner, I in my superficial, gushing way. I was delighted when he left me, but I could not recover my previous serenity.

It was now the hour when departures were expected with resignation; in fact, Lady Burlington was yawning most openly—if I were in a flippant mood, I should consider that a tolerably decent pun—and I could see the poor thing thought she had entertained us sufficiently.

“Good-night, dear Lady Burlington,” I said affectionately, with a smile which mamma would have given six years of her life to see; “I have spent a delightful evening.”

May I be forgiven that sin, and the thousands of others of a like nature which I have committed, rebelling as I have rebelled against their absurdity. May all who sin in a like manner be forgiven. May only society that knows these words are mostly sins, and that yet accepts them, be unforgiven! That is what I wish.

“How did you like them?” asked Letty Bishop, as I stood in the hall being cloaked, while I silently vowed to myself that I would tell no more lies to my hostesses.

“Who's them?” I inquired ungrammatically and peevishly, for I was tired.

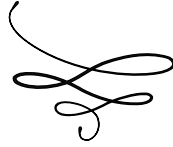
“Arthur Ravener and Captain Dillington.”

“I don't know,” I answered. “Mr. Ravener was away from me before I could make up my mind whether I liked him or not. I forgive him freely.”

“Ah!” said Letty, with such detestable unction that, friend though I was, I could have enjoyed boxing her ears, “he doesn't pay you compliments. I expect the amiability was all on your side.”

I made no answer, but with a hasty “good-night,” I jumped into the carriage which was awaiting me and was borne homewards.

CHAPTER 4



ARTHUR Ravener called to “see mamma” a few days later, at least that was the nominal object of his visit, I believe. There is a great deal of humbug about us Londoners. In America young men when they are slightly smitten call upon a girl openly and without beating about the bush; here they ask to see the papas, and the mammas, and the brothers, and the duennas,¹ and everybody but the person they really want.

The idea of any young man deliberately calling to see mamma was so ludicrous, that when I heard of it I laughed. I knew he had come to see me, and I should have thought all the more of him if he had admitted the fact like a man. I was studying hard when I heard him go into the library. I was not puzzling over mathematics, or physics, but was extremely engrossed in a cook-book. I had made a tart, the crust of which was so hideously and irrepressibly solid, that when I had tried to insert a knife in it, the contents of the plate had flown ceilingwards, and cook had looked at me sardonically happy. I hated the woman for that look. I went into the library with a little dab of jam on my cheek, and I was too lazy to worry about it. It was a big room, filled with exquisitely bound

1 Chaperones.

books. Dear mamma was very anxious that every volume should be beautifully leather-covered. The contents of the covers were a secondary consideration. It was the correct thing to have a library. It was a good place into which to usher people.

"I thought I would just run in to see if you had recovered from your fatigue of the other night," he said, after we had exchanged salutations.

"Is that why you wished to see mamma?" I asked demurely.

"Of course," he answered. "Mrs. Bouverie might prefer to give me the information herself."

"She couldn't," I declared rather boisterously, "for the simple reason that she never knew that I was fatigued. As a matter of fact I was not, I was bored. The only pleasant part of the evening was furnished by you. There is a compliment for you, before you have been in the house five minutes."

I was very lively indeed, but the arrival of mamma dampened my ardor. She sailed into the room, and seemed extremely pleased to see Mr. Ravener. She liked young men, and always treated them graciously. She did not stay long, however, but begged to be excused. Some girls might have considered this a delicate and motherly piece of consideration. I did not. I had nothing to say to Arthur Ravener or any other young man that might not have been published in the daily papers if the editors had seen fit to inflict it upon their readers. He took one arm chair and I sat opposite. I did not feel at all called upon to talk about the weather and other pleasantly conventional topics. Mr. Ravener had certainly made a most favorable impression upon my maidenly heart.

"You are all over jam, Miss Bouverie," he remarked, as I sat down.

"Don't remind me of my troubles," said I, "I have been cooking very unsuccessfully, and I feel miserable. By the bye, pardon my rudeness in forgetting to ask after the health of Captain Dillington."

There had been a smile on his face as I began my speech. It froze at once—as they say in the novels. A pained blush spread itself slowly over his face. "Captain Dillington," he said deliberately, "is well. Why are you so interested in him?"

"Only because you are," I replied flippantly. "It is the mutual attachment of you two young men that interests me. I think I told you so before, Mr. Ravener."

There was silence for a long time. It was not an eloquent silence. I employed a few leisure moments in removing the jam from my face. He

bit his small moustache, as young men often do, more I believe to show that they have one to bite, than because they like it.

“Miss Bouverie,” said Arthur Ravener, “you say you were interested in me because you found that I did not pay you silly compliments and talk nonsense. Now don’t think me impertinent, if I tell you that I rejoice in the fact that I have met somebody who does not care for such nonsense. Perhaps you will like it better when you are older”—regretfully.

“Never,” said I. All the jam was now removed, and though I felt sticky, no one could guess that fact.

“Do you think a young man and woman ought to converse as though they were brother and sister—platonically, I mean?”

“Mr. Ravener,” said I, pettishly, “I do not intend to talk metaphysics with you. I have ideas of my own. I like a man, if I have to meet him often, to talk sense.”

“Suppose you fell in love?”—tentatively.

“Yes,” said I, trying hard to blush a little and failing in a most abject manner. “You are rather impertinent, Mr. Ravener, but no matter. If I ever fell in love, I should see no necessity for discussing it with my ‘loved one.’ I should not like him any better if he deared and darlined me. I think I should despise him. I know some people must be demonstrative. Letty Bishop kisses her father about sixteen times in the course of an evening. I suppose she likes it, but it always seems to me very unnecessary. I cannot imagine myself kissing mamma, even if—even if—” I hesitated.

“Even if what?” he asked, unparardonably interested.

“Never mind,” sharply. “I was going to reveal family matters to a stranger. You are a stranger, you know. I was going to say—don’t think me awful—that I cannot imagine myself kissing mamma even if she did not powder.”

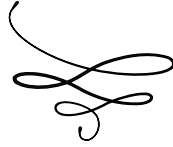
He looked rather shocked at my frankness, and I respected him for it. He did not smile, and I went back to my theme. “I could not be demonstrative,” I declared. “It seems to me so dreadfully coarse. I flatter myself that I am extremely matter-of-fact.”

“I thought so,” he said, “and so did—” He stopped in some slight confusion, and reddened in that most provoking manner that people have.

“So did who?” I asked.

“I was merely going to say—”

CHAPTER 5



I FIRMLY believe that if I had told mamma that the Grand Mogul was coming to dinner, and that the Mikado of Japan intended dropping in during the evening in a friendly way, she would simply have remarked, "I am pleased to hear it; we must entertain them." Arthur Ravener's frequent appearance at our house caused not the least surprise, and interested her but slightly. "He is a nice young fellow, Elsie," she said on one occasion. "He is very attentive to you, of course, but there is something about him I don't quite understand. He is cold and undemonstrative, and yet I can tell that he likes you. He seems to have something on his mind."

"Well, that is better than not possessing a mind to have anything on," I retorted in my unpleasantly pert way, "as is the case with the usual nonentities of society."

"Elsie," said my mother, "I dislike to hear a young girl like yourself belittle the people you are accustomed to meet. You may be far superior to them, but—excuse me—I doubt it."

I was snubbed and subsided.

One afternoon as I was walking down Oxford Street, I saw Arthur Ravener and Captain Dillington approaching. Only the latter

noticed me at first. He nudged Arthur and, with an indescribably ugly smile on his face, said something to him. I longed to know what it was, woman-like, because I instinctively felt it was not for my ears. Arthur reddened in a most uncomfortable way, and Captain Dillington laughed. I felt annoyed. I resolved that they should stop and speak to me, though I am sure they had no intention of so doing. Accordingly when they raised their hats, by a dainty little feminine manœuvre, I contrived to make them stop. Captain Dillington greeted me boldly. Arthur Ravener seemed tongue-tied.

“Why do you never come to see us, Captain Dillington?” I asked in my airy way, as they turned and walked back with me.

“Would you care to have us both, Miss Bouverie?”

“I don’t see why not. There is plenty of room for you.”

“I wonder if you will always be as accommodating, Miss Bouverie?” There was something so insolent in his tone, that I became scarlet in the face. I cannot explain what there was offensive in his speech. You who read it will say that I made a mountain out of a molehill. It impressed Arthur Ravener as it impressed me.

“Take care, Dillington,” I heard him say in a low voice, as I turned towards a shop window to cool down.

“If you care to come, Captain Dillington,” I said haughtily, “we shall be pleased. If you do not care to come—” I shrugged my shoulders; that is very expressive.

The Captain looked alarmed. “I assure you, Miss Bouverie,” he said, “you misunderstood me. I should be delighted to call. I am not at all bashful. I feel convinced that we shall meet a great deal”—he made a marked pause—“later.”

I cannot describe the look on Arthur Ravener’s face. I feel that novelists would call it “the look of the hunted antelope brought to bay.” I have no doubt their simile is a good one, though I have never seen an antelope hunted or otherwise.

“Captain Dillington pays very few visits,” said Arthur Ravener, lamely. “He sees very little society, indeed.”

“Except yours,” remarked the Captain.

“Except mine,” echoed Arthur, slowly. “But, Captain,” appealingly, “I should like you to call one day this week upon Mrs. Bouverie; I think you could manage it if you tried, couldn’t you?”

Captain Dillington nodded, and I, not at all anxious to prolong the scene, skipped into a shop with a hasty “good afternoon.”

I confess I was puzzled. What Arthur Ravener could see to admire in Captain Dillington it was utterly impossible for me to divine. That the tie which held them together was strong and binding, I could not for a moment doubt. I have always heard that dissimilar spirits form friendships of long duration, but I could not realize that this would hold good in the case of Arthur Ravener and Captain Dillington, one an apparently frank young man who could only just have “begun to live,” the other a repulsive being, with no particularly redeeming feature.

I had already seen them often together, and I knew Arthur Ravener was a different man when removed from his friend. It was not true that Captain Dillington saw but little society. He accompanied Arthur on all occasions. In fact, I had never met the one without the other, except at home. Captain Dillington was the chaperon, or at least I looked upon him in that light. However, excuses will never stand analysis.

“What are you doing in here, Elsie?”

I turned round, and beheld Letty Bishop laden with parcels.

“I came in here to look at some—” I began to stammer hopelessly. I never could fib successfully when taken by surprise, which shows that I was an amateur in the art.

Miss Bishop opened the door and looked down the street. Of course she saw the retreating forms of Damon and Pythias, as she called them.

“No, dear,” she said calmly, “you came in here to look at nothing at all. You wanted to avoid a certain couple I see fading in the distance. Are you going home, Elsie?”

Yes, I was going home. I admitted the fact. We stepped out into the noise of Oxford Street.

“Elsie,” said Letty, suddenly, “I want to talk to you seriously on a subject upon which—pardon me, my dear—I am afraid your mother will have but little to say. You and I have always been great friends, have we not, dear?”

I hate any one to be affecting, especially in the street. I had an awful idea that there was pathos in Miss Bishop’s voice, but I made a vow that nothing should induce me to weep and redden my nose, no matter how harrowing she became.

“Yes,” I said, “we’ve been great friends, Letty, and as neither of us intend shuffling off just yet, I vote that we go on being friends, and say nothing about it.”

“You can be as flippant as you like,” said Miss Bishop severely, “but I am going to talk to you just the same. You remember, Elsie, at the beginning of the season, how miserable you were at all the festivities, and how you dreaded the silly men, as you called them, whom you were obliged to meet. I told you of Damon and Pythias. I introduced you to Arthur Ravener.”

“Well?”—impatiently.

“I never imagined that the introduction would lead to anything.”

“No?” I was really boiling over with rage, but I tried to conceal that fact.

“No. But it has. People are coupling your name with that of Arthur Ravener. No, don’t interrupt me. If I did not care for you, I should say nothing. Look here, Elsie. I am quite certain that you will never be happy, if you do anything rashly. Arthur Ravener is very unpopular. The men won’t look at him. I was speaking to my cousin Ned about him the other day, since I have noticed how you encouraged him.”

“I—”

“— and Ned told me to warn any friend of mine against him. Why? I asked. He would give me no reason, but, my dear, Ned is a conservative old fellow, and you so rarely hear him say a bad word against anybody, that if he does make an attack it carries weight with it. Personally, I like Ravener; but, my dear, I cannot help listening to what people say. Why I heard the remark the other day that the only reason Ravener and Dillington went into society at all, was to borrow its cloak of respectability.”

“Perhaps you think they are highway robbers in disguise, or forgers, or playful assassins?”

“I think nothing, my dear. I only tell you what people say. I do that merely because it was I who introduced you. I had no more idea that you and Arthur Ravener would ever care for one another—”

“Did I say I cared for Arthur Ravener?”

“No, but you do, and my prophetic soul tells me that you will throw yourself away upon him.”

“Don’t listen to what people say, my child,” I remarked loftily, “and you will be a great deal happier. Since you have been talking I have come to the conclusion that I like Arthur Ravener immensely. When I marry