
GEORGE
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MUSLIN


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PREFACE

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My excuse for modifying the title of this book is, that *A Drama in Muslin* has long seemed to me to be the vulgar one among the titles of my many books. But to change the title of a book that has been in circulation, however precarious, for more than thirty years, is not permissible, and that is why I rejected the many titles that rose up in my mind while correcting the proofs of this new edition. In *Neophytes*, *Débutantes*, and *The Baiting of Mrs. Barton*, readers would have divined a new story, but the dropping out of the unimportant word 'drama' will not deceive the most casual follower of literature. The single word 'muslin' is enough. *Mousseline* would be more euphonious, a fuller, richer word; and *Bal Blanc*, besides being more picturesque, would convey my meaning; but a shade of meaning is not sufficient justification for the use of French titles or words, for they lessen the taste of our language; we don't get the smack, and Milord's epigrams poisoned my memory of *A Drama in Muslin*. But they cannot be omitted without much re-writing, I said, and remembering my oath never to attempt the re-writing of an old book again, I fell back on the exclusion of *A Drama in Muslin* as the only way out of

the dilemma. A wavering resolution was precipitated by recollection of some disgraceful pages, but a moment after I was thinking that the omission of the book would create a hiatus. *A Drama in Muslin*, I reflected, is a link between two styles; and a book that has achieved any notoriety cannot be omitted from a collected edition, so my publishers said, and they harped on this string, until one day I flung myself out of their office and rattled down the stairs muttering, 'What a smell of shop!' But in the Strand near the Cecil Inn, the thought glided into my mind that the pages that seemed so disgraceful in memory might not seem so in print, 'and the only way to find out if this be so,' the temptation continued, 'will be to ask the next policeman the way to Charing Cross Road.' Another saw me over a dangerous crossing (London is the best policed city in Europe), a third recommended a shop 'over yonder: you've just passed it by, sir.' 'Thank you, thank you,' I cried back, and no sooner was I on the other side than, overcome by shyness, as always in these stores of dusty literature, I asked for the *Drama in Muslin*, pronouncing the title so timidly that the bookseller guessed me at once to be the author, and began telling of the books that were doing well in first editions. 'If I had any I wanted to get rid of?' he mentioned several he would be glad to buy. Whereupon in turn I grew confidential and confided to him my present dilemma, failing, however, to dissuade him from his opinion that *A Drama in Muslin* ought to be included. 'Any corrections you make in the new edition will keep up the price of the old,' he added as he wrapped up the brown paper parcel. 'You will like the book better than you think for.' 'Thank you, thank you,' I cried after me,

and hopped into a taxi, unsuspicious that I carried a delightful evening under my arm. A comedy novel, written with sprightliness and wit, I said, as I turned to the twentieth page, and it needs hardly any editing. A mere re-tying of a few bows that the effluxion of time has untied, or were never tied by the author, who, if I remember right, used to be less careful of his literary appearance than his prefacer, neglecting to examine his sentences, and to scan them as often as one might expect from an admirer, not to say disciple, of Walter Pater.

An engaging young man rose out of the pages of his book, one that Walter Pater would admire (did admire), one that life, I added, seems to have affected through his senses violently, and who was (may we say therefore) a little over anxious to possess himself of a vocabulary which would suffer him to tell all he saw, heard, smelt and touched.

Upon this sudden sympathy the book, of which I had read but twenty pages, dropped on my knees, and I sat engulfed in a reverie of the charming article I should have written about this book if it had come to me for review. 'But it couldn't have come to me,' I reflected, 'for myself and the young man that wrote it were not contemporaries.' It would be true, however, to say that our lives overlapped; but when did the author of the *Drama in Muslin* disappear from literature? His next book was *Confession of a Young Man*. It was followed by *Spring Days*; he must have died in the last pages of that story, for we find no trace of him in *Esther Waters*! And my thoughts, dropping away from the books he had written, began to take pleasure in the ridiculous appearance that the author of *A Drama in Muslin* presented

in the mirrors of Dublin Castle as he tripped down the staircases in parly morning. And a smile played round my lips as I recalled his lank yellow hair (often standing on end), his sloping shoulders and his female hands—a strange appearance which a certain vivacity of mind sometimes rendered engaging.

He was writing at that time *A Mummer's Wife* in his bedroom at the Shelbourne Hotel, and I thought how different were the two visions, *A Mummer's Wife* and *A Drama in Muslin* and how the choice of these two subjects revealed him to me. 'It was life that interested him rather than the envelope' I said. 'He sought Alice Barton's heart as eagerly as Kate Ede's;' and my heart went out to the three policemen to whose assiduities I owed this pleasant evening, all alone with my cat and my immediate ancestor; and as I sat looking into the fire I fell to wondering how it was that the critics of the 'eighties could have been blind enough to dub him an imitator of Zola. 'A soul searcher, if ever there was one,' I continued, 'whose desire to write well is apparent on every page, a headlong, eager, uncertain style (a young hound yelping at every trace of scent), but if we look beneath the style we catch sight of the young man's true self, a real interest in religious questions and a hatred as lively as Ibsen's of the social conventions that drive women into the marriage market. It seems strange,' I said, abandoning myself to recollection, 'that the critics of the 'eighties failed to notice that the theme of *A Drama in Muslin* is the same as that of the *Doll's House*; the very title should have pointed this put to them.' But they were not interested in themes; but in morality, and how they might

crush a play which, if it were uncrushed by them, would succeed in undermining the foundations of society—their favourite phrase at the time, it entered into every article written about the *Doll's House*—and, looking upon themselves as the saviours of society, these master-builders kept on staying and propping the damaged construction till at length they were joined by some dramatists and story-tellers who feared with them for the 'foundations of society,' and these latter set themselves the task of devising new endings that would be likely to catch the popular taste and so mitigate the evil, the substitution of an educational motive for a carnal one. For Nora does not leave her husband for a lover, but to educate herself. The critics were used to lovers, and what we are used to is bearable, but a woman who leaves her husband and her children for school-books is unbearable, and much more immoral than the usual little wanton. So the critics thought in the 'eighties, and they thought truly, if it be true that morality and custom are interchangeable terms. The critics were right in a way; everybody is right in a way, for nothing is wholly right and nothing wholly wrong, a truth often served up by philosophers; but the public has ever eschewed it, and perhaps our argument will be better appreciated if we dilute this truth a little, saying instead that it is the telling that makes a story true or false, and that the dramatic critics of the 'eighties were not altogether as wrong as Mr. Archer imagined them to be, but failed to express themselves.

The public is without power of expression, and it felt that it was being fooled for some purpose not very apparent and perhaps anarchical. Nor is a sudden revelation very

convincing in modern times. In the space of three minutes, Nora, who has been her husband's sensual toy, and has taken pleasure in being that, and only that, leaves her husband and her children, as has been said, for school-books. A more arbitrary piece of stage craft was never devised; but it was not the stage craft the critics were accustomed to, and the admirers of Ibsen did not dare to admit that he had devised Nora to cry aloud that a woman is more than a domestic animal. It would have been fatal for an apostle or even a disciple to admit the obvious fact that Ibsen was a dramatist of moral ideas rather than of sensuous emotions; and there was nobody in the 'eighties to explain the redemption of Ibsen by his dialogue, the strongest and most condensed ever written, yet coming off the reel like silk. A wonderful thread, that never tangles in his hands. Ibsen is a magical weaver, and so closely does he weave that we are drawn along in the net like fishes.

But it is with the subject of the *Doll's House* rather than with the art with which it is woven that we are concerned here. The subject of *A Drama in Muslin* is the same as that of *A Doll's House*, and for this choice of subject I take pride in my forerunner. It was a fine thing for a young man of thirty to choose the subject instinctively that Ibsen had chosen a few years before; it is a feather in his cap surely; and I remember with pleasure that he was half through his story when Dr. Aveling read him the first translation of *A Doll's House*, a poor thing, done by a woman, that withheld him from any appreciation of the play. The fact that he was writing the same subject from an entirely different point of view prejudiced him against Ibsen; and the making of a

woman first in a sensual and afterward transferring her into an educational mould with a view to obtaining an instrument to thunder out a given theme could not be else than abhorrent to one whose art, however callow, was at least objective. In the *Doll's House* Ibsen had renounced all objectivity. It does not seem to me that further apologies are necessary for my predecessor's remark to Dr. Aveling after the reading that he was engaged in moulding a woman in one of Nature's moulds. 'A puritan,' he said, 'I am writing of, but not a sexless puritan, and if women cannot win their freedom without leaving their sex behind they had better remain slaves, for a slave with his sex is better than a free eunuch;' and he discoursed on the book he was writing, convinced that Alice Barton represented her sex better than the archetypal hieratic and clouded figure of Nora which Ibsen had dreamed so piously, allowing, he said, memories of Egyptian sculpture to mingle with his dreams.

My ancestor could not have understood the *Doll's House* while he was writing *A Drama in Muslin*, not even in Mr. Archer's translation; he was too absorbed in his craft at that time, in observing and remembering life, to be interested in moral ideas. And his portrait of Alice Barton gives me much the same kind of pleasure as a good drawing. She keeps her place in the story, moving through it with quiet dignity, commanding our sympathy and respect always, and for her failure to excite our wonder like Nora we may say that the author's design was a comedy, and that in comedy the people are not and perhaps should not be above life size. But why apologize for what needs no apology? Alice Barton is a creature of conventions and prejudices, not her

mother's but her own; so far she had freed herself, and it may well be that none obtains a wider liberty. She leaves her home with the dispensary doctor, who has bought a small practice in Notting Hill, and the end seems a fulfilment of the beginning. The author conducts her to the door of womanhood, and there he leaves her with the joys and troubles, no doubt, of her new estate; but with these he apparently does not consider himself to be concerned, though he seems to have meditated at this time a sort of small *comédie humaine*—small, for he must have known that he could not withstand the strain of Balzac's shifts of fourteen hours. We are glad he was able to conquer the temptation to imitate, yet we cannot forego a regret that he did not turn to Violet Scully that was and look into the married life of the Marchioness of Kilcamey—her grey intense eyes shining through a grey veil, and her delightful thinness—her epicene bosom and long thighs are the outward signs of a temper, constant perhaps, but not narrow. He would have been able to discover an intrigue of an engaging kind in her, and the thinking out of the predestined male would have been as agreeable a task as falls to the lot of a man of letters. And being a young man he would begin by considering the long series of poets, painters and musicians, he had read of in Balzac's novels, but as none of these would be within the harmony of Violet's perverse humour, he would turn to life, and presently a vague shaggy shape would emerge from the back of his mind, but it would refuse to condense into any recognizable face; which is as well, perhaps, else I might be tempted to

pick up this forgotten flower, though I am fain to write no more long stories.

But though we regret that the author of *Muslin* did not gather this Violet for his literary buttonhole, let no one suggest that the old man should return to his Springtime to do what the young man left undone. Our gathering-time is over, and we are henceforth prefacers. *The Brook Cherith* is our last. Some may hear this decision with sorrow, but we have written eighteen books, which is at least ten too many, and none shall persuade us to pick up the burden of another long story. We swear it and close our ears to our admirers, and to escape them we plunge into consideration of Violet's soul and her aptitudes, saying, and saying well, that if polygamy thrives with Mohammedanism in the East, polyandry has settled down in the West with Christianity, and that since Nora slammed the door the practice of acquiring a share in a woman's life, rather than insisting on the whole of it, has caught such firm root in our civilization that it is no exaggeration to say that every married woman to-day will admit she could manage two men better than her husband could manage two wives. If we inquire still further, we submit, and confidently, that every woman—saint or harlot, it matters not which—would confess she would prefer to live with two men rather than share her husband with another woman. All women are of one mind on this subject; it is the one thing on which they all agree irrespective of creed or class, so these remarks barely concern them; but should male eyes fall on this page, and if in the pride of his heart he should cry out, 'This is not so,' I would have him make application to his wife or sister, and if

he possess neither he may discover the truth in his own mind. Let him ask himself if it could be otherwise, since our usage and wont is that a woman shall prepare for the reception of visitors by adorning her rooms with flowers and dressing herself in fine linen and silk attire, and be to all men alike as they come and go. She must cover all with winning glances, and beguile all with seductive eyes and foot, and talk about love, though, perhaps she would prefer to think of one who is far away. Men do not live under such restraint. A man may reserve all his thoughts for his mistress, but the moment he leaves, his mistress must begin to cajole the new-comer, however indifferent he may be to her. The habit of her life is to cajole, to please, to inspire, if possible, and if she be not a born coquette she becomes one, and takes pleasure in her art, devoting her body and mind to it, reading only books about love and lovers, singing songs of love, and seeking always new scents and colours and modes of fascination. If lovers are away and none calls, she abandons herself to dreams, and her imagination furnishes quickly a new romance. Somebody she has half-forgotten rises up in her memory, and she thinks that she could like him if he were to come into her drawing-room now. It would be happiness indeed to walk forward into his arms and to call her soul into her eyes; or, if a letter were to come from him asking her to dinner, she would accept it; and, lying back among her silken cushions, she thinks she could spend many hours in his company without weariness. She creates his rooms and his person and his conversation, and when he is exhausted a new intrigue rises up in her mind, and then another and

another. Some drop away and remain for ever unfulfilled, while others 'come into their own,' as the saying is.

If this be a true analysis of a woman's life—and who will say it is not?—the dreams of the Marchioness of Kilcarney would begin in her easy-chair about the second spring after her marriage, the shaggy shape that haunts the back of my mind would hear her dreams, and the wooing that began with the daffodils would continue always, for she is a woman that could keep a lover till the end of time. At her death husband and lover would visit her grave together and talk of her perfections in the winter evenings. But if Violet did not die another vagrant male would steal through the ilex-trees, a hunter in pursuit of game, or else it might be a fisher, seated among the rocks waiting, for tunny-fish. Either might take Violet's fancy. The author of *Muslin* seems to have entertained a thought of some such pastoral frolic in the Shelbourne Hotel—the opposition of husband and lover to the newcomer, Harding, whom it had occurred to Mrs. Barton to invite to Brookfield, and whom she would have invited had it not been for her great matrimonial projects; my forerunner, who was an artist, saw that any deflection of Mrs. Barton's thoughts would jeopardize his composition, and he allowed Mrs. Barton to remain a chaperon. He was right in this, but Violet should have been the impulse and nucleus of a new story. . . . I began to think suddenly of the blight that would fall on the twain if Violet's lover were to die, and to figure them sitting in the evenings meditating on the admirable qualities of the deceased till in their loneliness he would come to seem to them as a being more than human, touching almost on the Divine. Their ears

would retain the sound of his voice, and the familiar furniture would provoke remembrances of him. Ashamed of their weakness, their eyes would seek the chair he used to sit in: it is away in a far corner, lest a casual visitor should draw it forward and defile it with his presence—a thing that happened once (the unhappy twain remember how they lacked moral courage to beg him to choose another chair). The table, laid for two, was too painful to behold, and they never enjoyed a meal, hardly could they eat, till at last it was decided that his place should be laid for him as if he had gone away on a journey, and might appear in the doorway and sit down with them and share the repast as of yore—a pretty deception the folly of which they were alive to (a little) but would not willingly be without.

His room, too, awaits him, and his clothes have not been destroyed or given to the poor, but he folded by charitable hands in the drawers kept safe from moth with orris-root and lavender. His hat hangs on its accustomed peg in the hall, and they think of it among many other things. At last the silence of these lonely meditations is broken by sudden recollections—for dinner the cook had sent up a boiled chicken instead of roast, and he had looked upon boiled chicken as a vulgar insularism always. Nor were there bananas on the table. Bananas were an acquired taste with them, they had learned to eat the fruit for love of their friend, and since he has gone they have not eaten the chicken roast nor the fruit, and it seems to them that they should have eaten of these things in memory of him. In the Spring they come upon his pruning-knife, and discourse sadly on the changes he would have advised. Spring opens

into summer, and when summer drops into the autumn Kilcarney's black passes into grey; he appears one morning in a violet tie, and the tie, picked out of a drawer with indifferent hand, causes Violet to doubt her husband's constancy. It was soon after this thoughtless act that he began, for the thousandth time, to remind her that the world might be searched in its dimmest corners and no friend again found like the one they had lost. . . . The reflection had become part of their habitual thought, and, feeling a little trite and commonplace, Violet listened, or half-listened, engulfed in retrospect.

'I met in Merrion Square,' and she mentioned a name, 'and do you know whom he seemed to be very like?' The colour died out of Kilcarney's cheek and he could but murmur, 'Oh, Violet!' and colouring at being caught up on what might be looked upon as a mental infidelity, she answered, 'of course, none is like him . . . I wish you would not seek to misunderstand me.'

The matter passed off, but next evening she sat looking at her husband, her thoughts suspended for so long that he began to fear, wrongly however, that she was about to put forward some accusation, to twit him perchance on his lack of loyalty to his dead friend. He had not eaten a banana for dinner, though he had intended to eat one. 'Of course, we shall never find anyone like him,' she said—'not if we were to search all the corners of the world. That is so, we're both agreed on that point, but I've been thinking which of all our friends and acquaintances would least unworthily fill his place in our lives.' 'Violet! Violet!' 'If you persist in misunderstanding me,' she answered, 'I have no more to

say,' whereupon the Marquis tried to persuade the Marchioness out of the morose silence that had fallen upon them, and failing to move her he raised the question that had divided them. 'If you mean, Violet, that our racing friend would be a poor shift for our dead friend, meaning thereby that nobody in Dublin is comparable'—'could I have meant anything else, you old dear?' she replied; and the ice having been broken, the twain plunged at once into the waters of recollection, and coming upon a current they were borne onward, swiftly and more swiftly, till at length a decision had to be come to—they would invite their racing friend.

It was on the Marquis's lips to say a word or two in disparagement of the invited guest, but on second thoughts it seemed to him that he had better refrain; the Marchioness, too, was about to plead, she did not know exactly what, but she thought she would like to reassure the Marquis. . . . On second thoughts she decided too that it would be better (perhaps) to refrain. Well, to escape from the toils of an interesting story (for I'm no longer a story-teller but a prefacer) I will say that three nights later Sir Hugh took the Marchioness in to dinner; he sat in his predecessor's chair, knowing nothing of him, thereby startling his hosts, who, however, soon recovered their presence of mind. After dinner the Marquis said, 'Now, Sir Hugh, I hope you will excuse me if I go upstairs. I am taking the racing calendar with me, you see.'

My forerunner, the author of *Muslin*, should have written the story sketched here with a failing hand, his young wit would have allowed him to tell how the marriage that had wilted sadly after the death of Uncle Toby now renewed its

youth, opening its leaves to the light again, shaking itself in the gay breezes floating by. He would have been able in this story to present three exemplars of the domestic virtues, telling how they went away to the seaside together, and returned together to their castle among tall trees in October compelling the admiration of the entire countryside. He would have shown us the Marchioness entertaining visitors while the two men talked by the fireplace, delighting in each other's company, and he would not have forgotten to put them before us in their afternoon walks, sharing between them Violet's knick-knacks, her wraps, her scarf, her fan, her parasol, her cushion. His last chapter would probably be in a ball-room, husband and lover standing by the door watching the Marchioness swinging round the room on the arm of a young subaltern. 'Other women are younger than she, Kilcarney, but who is as graceful? Have you ever seen a woman hold herself like Violet?' One of the daughters (for there have been children by this second, or shall we say by this third, marriage) comes up breathless after the dance. 'Darling Uncle Hughie, won't you take me for an ice?' and he gives her his arm affectionately, but as they pass away to the buffet Sir Hugh hears Kilcarney speaking of Lily as his daughter. Sir Hugh's face clouds suddenly, but he remembers that, after all, Kilcarney is a guardian of his wife's honour. A very ingenious story, no doubt, and if, as the young man's ascendant—the critics of 1915 are pleased to speak of me as ascendant from the author of *Muslin*—I may be permitted to remark upon it, I would urge the very grave improbability that three people ever lived

contemporaneously who were wise enough to prefer, and so consistently, happiness to the conventions.

There are still May Gould and Olive to consider, but this preface has been prolonged unduly, and it may be well to leave the reader to imagine a future for these girls, and to decide the interests that will fill Mrs. Barton's life when Lord Dungory's relations with this world have ceased.

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The convent was situated on a hilltop, and through the green garden the white dresses of the schoolgirls fluttered like the snowy plumage of a hundred doves. Obeying a sudden impulse, a flock of little ones would race through a deluge of leaf-entangled rays towards a pet companion standing at the end of a gravel-walk examining the flower

she has just picked, the sunlight glancing along her little white legs proudly and charmingly advanced. The elder girls in their longer skirts were more dignified, but when they caught sight of a favourite sister, they too ran forward, and then retreated timidly, as if afraid of committing an indiscretion.

It was prize-day in the Convent of the Holy Child, and since early morning all had been busy preparing for the arrival of the Bishop. His throne had been set at one end of the school-hall, and at the other the carpenters had erected a stage for the performance of *King Cophetua*, a musical sketch written by Miss Alice Barton for the occasion.

Alice Barton was what is commonly known as a plain girl. At home, during the holidays, she often heard that the dressmaker could not fit her; but though her shoulders were narrow and prim, her arms long and almost awkward, there was a character about the figure that commanded attention. Alice was now turned twenty; she was the eldest, the best-beloved, and the cleverest girl in the school. It was not, therefore, on account of any backwardness in her education that she had been kept so long out of society, but because Mrs. Barton thought that, as her two girls were so different in appearance, it would be well for them to come out together. Against this decision Alice said nothing, and, like a tall arum lily, she had grown in the convent from girl to womanhood. To her the little children ran to be comforted; and to walk with her in the garden was considered an honour and a pleasure that even the Reverend Mother was glad to participate in.

Lady Cecilia Cullen sat next to Alice, and her high shoulders and long face and pathetic eyes drew attention to her shoulders—they were a little wry, the right seemingly higher than the left. Her eyes were on Alice, and it was plain that she wished the other girls away, and that her nature was delicate, sensitive, obscure, if not a little queer. At home her elder sisters complained that an ordinary look or gesture often shocked her, and so deeply that she would remain for hours sitting apart refusing all consolation; and it was true that a spot on the tablecloth or presence of one repellent to her was sufficient to extinguish a delight or an appetite.

Violet Scully occupied the other end of the garden bench. She was very thin, but withal elegantly made. Her face was neat and delicate, and it was set with light blue eyes; and when she was not changing her place restlessly, or looking round as if she fancied someone was approaching, when she was still (which was seldom), a rigidity of feature and an almost complete want of bosom gave her the appearance of a convalescent boy.

If May Gould, who stood at the back, her hand leaning affectionately on Alice's shoulder, had been three inches taller, she would have been classed a fine figure, but her features were too massive for her height. Her hair was not of an inherited red. It was the shade of red that is only seen in the children of dark-haired parents. In great coils it rolled over the dimpled cream of her neck, and with the exception of Alice, May was the cleverest girl in the school. For public inspection she made large water-coloured drawings of Swiss scenery; for private view, pen-and-ink sketches of officers

sitting in conservatories with young ladies. The former were admired by the nuns, the latter occasioned some discussion among a select few.

Violet Scully and May Gould would appeal to different imaginations.

Olive, Alice's sister, was more beautiful than either, but there was danger that her corn-coloured hair, wound round a small shapely head, might fail to excite more than polite admiration. Her nose was finely chiselled, but it was high and aquiline, and though her eyes were well drawn and coloured, they lacked personal passion and conviction; but no flower could show more delicate tints than her face—rose tints fading into cream, cream rising into rose. Her ear was curved like a shell, her mouth was faint and weak as a rose, and her moods alternated between sudden discontent and sudden gaiety.

'I don't see, Alice, why you couldn't have made King Cophetua marry the Princess. Whoever heard of a King marrying a beggar-maid? Besides, I hear that lots of people are going to be present, and to be jilted before them all isn't very nice. I am sure mamma wouldn't like it.'

'But you are not jilted, my dear Olive. You don't like the King, and you show your nobleness of mind by refusing him.'

'I don't see that. Whoever refused a King?'

'Well, what do you want?' exclaimed May. 'I never saw anyone so selfish in all my life; you wouldn't be satisfied unless you played the whole piece by yourself.'

Olive would probably have made a petulant and passionate reply, but at that moment visitors were coming

up the drive.

'It's papa,' cried Olive.

'And he is with mamma,' said Violet; and she tripped after Olive.

Mr. Barton, a tall, handsome man, seemed possessed of all the beauty of a cameo, and Olive had inherited his high aquiline nose and the moulding of his romantic forehead; and his colour, too. He wore a flowing beard, and his hair and beard were the colour of pale *cafe-au-lait*. Giving a hand to each daughter, he said:

'Here is learning and here is beauty. Could a father desire more? And you, Violet, and you, May, are about to break into womanhood. I used to kiss you in old times, but I suppose you are too big now. How strange—how strange! There you are, a row of brunettes and blondes, who before many days are over will be charming the hearts of all the young men in Galway. I suppose it was in talking of such things that you spent the morning?'

'Our young charges have been, I assure you, very busy all the morning. We are not as idle as you think, Mr. Barton,' said the nun in a tone of voice that showed that she thought Mr. Barton's remark ill-considered. 'We have been arranging the stage for the representation of a little play that your daughter Alice composed.'

'Oh yes, I know; she wrote to me about it. *King Cophetua* is the name, isn't it? I am very curious indeed, for I have set Tennyson's ballad to music myself. I sing it to the guitar, and if life were not so hurried I should have sent it to you. However—however, we are all going home to-morrow. I

have promised to take charge of Cecilia, and Mrs. Scully is going to look after May.'

'Oh, how nice! Oh, how jolly that will be!' Olive cried; and, catching
Violet by the hands, she romped with her for glee.

But the nun, taking advantage of this break in the conversation, said:

'Come, now, young ladies, it is after two o'clock; we shall never be ready in time if you don't make haste—and it won't do to keep the Bishop waiting.' Like a hen gathering her chickens, the Sister hurried away with Violet, Olive, and May.

'How happy they seem in this beautiful retreat!' said Mrs. Scully, drawing her black lace shawl about her grey-silk shoulders. 'How little they know of the troubles of the world! I am afraid it would be hard to persuade them to leave their convent if they knew the trials that await them.'

'We cannot escape our trials,' a priest said, who had just joined the group; 'they are given to us that we may overcome them.'

'I suppose so, indeed,' said Mrs. Scully; and, trying to find consolation in the remark, she sighed. Another priest, as if fearing further religious shop from his fellow-worker, informed Mr. Barton, in a cheerful tone of voice, that he had heard he was a great painter.

'I don't know—I don't know,' replied Mr. Barton; 'painting is, after all, only dreaming. I should like to be put at the head of an army, but when I am seized with an idea I have to rush to put it down.'

Finding no appropriate answer to these somewhat erratic remarks, the priest joined in a discussion that had been

started concerning the action taken by the Church during the present agrarian agitation. Mr. Barton, who was weary of the subject, stepped aside, and, sitting on one of the terrace benches between Cecilia and Alice, he feasted his eyes on the colour-changes that came over the sea, and in long-drawn-out and disconnected phrases explained his views on nature and art until the bell was rung for the children to assemble in the school-hall.

II

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It was a large room with six windows; these had been covered over with red cloth, and the wall opposite was decorated with plates, flowers, and wreaths woven out of branches of ilex and holly.

Chairs for the visitors had been arranged in a semicircle around the Bishop's throne—a great square chair approached by steps, and rendered still more imposing by the canopy, whose voluminous folds fell on either side like those of a corpulent woman's dress. Opposite was the stage. The footlights were turned down, but the blue mountains and brown palm-trees of the drop-curtain, painted by one of the nuns, loomed through the red obscurity of the room. Benches had been set along the walls. Between them a strip of carpet, worked with roses

and lilies, down which the girls advanced when called to receive their prizes, stretched its blue and slender length.

'His Grace is coming!' a nun cried, running in, and instantly the babbling of voices ceased, and four girls hastened to the pianos placed on either side of the stage, two left-hands struck a series of chords in the bass, the treble notes replied, and, to the gallant measure of a French polka, a stately prelate entered, smiling benediction as he advanced, the soft clapping of feminine palms drowning, for a moment, the slangy strains of the polka.

When the Bishop was seated on his high throne, the back of which extended some feet above his head, and as soon as the crowd of visitors had been accommodated with chairs around him, a nun made her way through the room, seeking anxiously among the girls. She carried in her hand a basket filled with programmes, all rolled and neatly tied with pieces of different coloured ribbon. These she distributed to the ten tiniest little children she could find, and, advancing five from either side, they formed in a line and curtsied to the Bishop. One little dot, whose hair hung about her head like a golden mist, nearly lost her balance; she was, however, saved from falling by a companion, and then, like a group of kittens, they tripped down the strip of blue carpet and handed the programmes to the guests, who leaned forward as if anxious to touch their hands, to stroke their shining hair.

The play was now ready to begin, and Alice felt she was going from hot to cold, for when the announcement printed on the programme, that she was the author of the comedy of *King Cophetua* had been read, all eyes were fixed upon her; the Bishop, after eyeing her intently, bent towards the

Reverend Mother and whispered to her. Cecilia clasped Alice's hand and said: 'You must not be afraid, dear; I know it will be all right.'

And the little play was as charming as it was guileless. The old legend had been arranged—as might have been expected from a schoolgirl—simply and unaffectedly. The scene opened in a room in the palace of the King, and when a chorus, supposed to be sung by the townspeople, was over, a Minister entered hurriedly. The little children uttered a cry of delight; they did not recognize their companion in her strange disguise. A large wig, with brown curls hanging over the shoulders, almost hid the face, that had been made to look quite aged by a few clever touches of the pencil about the eyes and mouth. She was dressed in a long garment, something between an ulster and a dressing-gown. It fell just below her knees, for it had been decided by the Reverend Mother that it were better that there should be a slight display of ankles than the least suspicion of trousers. The subject was a delicate one, and for some weeks past a look of alarm had not left the face of the nun in charge of the wardrobe. But these considerations only amused the girls, and now, delighted at the novelty of her garments, the Minister strutted about the stage complaining of the temper of the Dowager Queen. 'Who could help it if the King wouldn't marry? Who could make him leave his poetry and music for a pretty face if he didn't care to do so? He had already refused blue eyes, black eyes, brown eyes. However, the new Princess was a very beautiful person, and ought, all things considered, to be accepted by the King. She must be passing through the city at the moment.'

On this the Queen entered. The first words she spoke were inaudible, but, gathering courage, she trailed her white satin, with its large brocaded pattern, in true queenly fashion, and questioned the Minister as to his opinion of the looks of the new Princess. But she gave no point to her words. The scene was, fortunately, a short one, and no sooner had they disappeared than a young man entered. He held a lute in his left hand, and with his right he twanged the strings idly. He was King Cophetua, and many times during rehearsal Alice had warned May that her reading of the character was not right; but May did not seem able to accommodate herself to the author's view of the character, and, after a few minutes, fell back into her old swagger; and now, excited by the presence of an audience, by the footlights, by the long coat under which she knew her large, well-shaped legs could be seen, she forgot her promises, and strolled about like a man, as she had seen young Scully saunter about the stable-yard at home. She looked, no doubt, very handsome, and, conscious of the fact, she addressed her speeches to a group of young men, who, for no ostensible reason except to get as far away as possible from the Bishop, had crowded into the left-hand corner of the hall.

And so great was May's misreading of the character, that Alice could hardly realize that she was listening to her own play. Instead of speaking the sentence, 'My dear mother, I could not marry anyone I did not love; besides, am I not already wedded to music and poetry?' slowly, dreamily, May emphasized the words so jauntily, that they seemed to be poetic equivalents for wine and tobacco. There was no