
CHARLOTTE
M. BRAME
DORA
THORNE

Charlotte M. Brame

Dora Thorne

EAN 8596547336747

DigiCat, 2022
Contact: DigiCat@okpublishing.info

Table of Contents

Chapter I

Table of Contents

"The consequences of folly seldom end with its originator," said Lord Earle to his son. "Rely upon it, Ronald, if you were to take this most foolish and unadvisable step, you would bring misery upon yourself and every one connected with you. Listen to reason."

"There is no reason in prejudice," replied the young man haughtily. "You can not bring forward one valid reason against my marriage."

Despite his annoyance, a smile broke over Lord Earle's grave face.

"I can bring a thousand reasons, if necessary," he replied. "I grant everything you say. Dora Thorne is very pretty; but remember, she is quite a rustic and unformed beauty—and I almost doubt whether she can read or spell properly. She is modest and good, I grant, and I never heard one syllable against her. Ronald, let me appeal to your better judgment—are a moderate amount of rustic prettiness and shy modesty sufficient qualifications for your wife, who will have to take your mother's place?"

"They are quite sufficient to satisfy me," replied the young man.

"You have others to consider," said Lord Earle, quickly.

"I love her," interrupted his son; and again his father smiled.

"We know what it means," he said, "when boys of nineteen talk about love. Believe me, Ronald, if I were to consent to your request, you would be the first in after years to reproach me for weak compliance with your youthful folly."

"You would not call it folly," retorted Ronald, his face flushing hotly, "if Dora were an heiress, or the daughter of some—"

"Spare me a long discourse," again interrupted Lord Earle. "You are quite right; if the young girl in question belonged to your own station, or even if she were near it, that would be quite a different matter. I am not annoyed that you have, as you think, fallen in love, or that you wish to marry, although you are young. I am annoyed that you should dream of wishing to marry a simple rustic, the daughter of my lodge keeper. It is so supremely ridiculous that I can hardly treat the matter seriously."

"It is serious enough for me," returned his son with a long, deep sigh. "If I do not marry Dora Thorne, I shall never marry at all."

"Better that than a mesalliance," said Lord Earle, shortly.

"She is good," cried Ronald—"good and fair, modest and graceful. Her heart is pure as her face is fair. What mesalliance can there be, father? I never have believed and never shall believe in the cruel laws of caste. In what is one man better than or superior to another save that he is more intelligent or more virtuous?"

"I shall never interfere in your politics, Ronald," said Lord Earle, laughing quietly. "Before you are twenty-one you will have gone through many stages of that fever. Youth is almost invariably liberal, age conservative. Adopt what line of politics you will, but do not bring theory into practice in this instance."

"I should consider myself a hero," continued the young man, "if I could be the first to break through the trammels of custom and the absurd laws of caste."

"You would not be the first," said Lord Earle, quietly. "Many before you have made unequal marriages; many will do so after you, but in every case I believe regret and disappointment followed."

"They would not in my case," said Ronald, eagerly; "and with Dora Thorne by my side, I could so anything; without her, I can do nothing."

Lord Earle looked grieved at the pertinacity of his son.

"Most fathers would refuse to hear all this nonsense, Ronald," he said, gently. "I listen, and try to convince you by reasonable arguments that the step you seem bent upon taking is one that will entail nothing but misery. I have said no angry word to you, nor shall I do so. I tell you simply it can not be. Dora Thorne, my lodge keeper's daughter, is no fitting wife for my son, the heir of Earlescourt. Come with me, Ronald; I will show you further what I mean."

They went together, the father and son, so like in face yet so dissimilar in mind. They had been walking up and down the broad terrace, one of the chief beauties of Earlescourt. The park and pleasure grounds, with flushed summer beauty, lay smiling around them. The song of hundreds of birds trilled through the sweet summer air, the water of many fountains rippled musically, rare flowers charmed the eye and sent forth sweet perfume; but neither song of birds nor fragrance of flowers—neither sunshine nor music—brought any brightness to the grave faces of the father and son.

With slow steps they quitted the broad terrace, and entered the hall. They passed through a long suite of magnificent apartments, up the broad marble staircase, through long corridors, until they reached the picture gallery, one of the finest in England. Nearly every great master was represented there. Murillo, Guido, Raphael, Claude Lorraine, Salvator Rosa, Correggio, and Tintoretto. The lords of Earlescourt had all loved pictures, and each of them ad added to the treasures of that wonderful gallery.

One portion of the gallery was set aside for the portraits of the family. Grim old warriors and fair ladies hung side by side; faces of marvelous beauty, bearing the signs of noble descent, shone out clearly from their gilded frames.

"Look, Ronald," Lord Earle said, laying one hand upon his shoulder, "you stand before your ancestors now. Yours is a grand old race. England knows and honors it. Look at these pictured faces of the wives our fathers chose. There is Lady Sybella Earle; when one of Cromwell's soldiers drew his dagger to slay her husband, the truest friend King Charles ever had, she flung herself before him, and received the blow in his stead. She died, and he lived—noble and beautiful, is she not? Now look at the Lacy Alicia—this fair patrician lady smiling by the side of her grim lord; she, at the risk of her life, helped him to fly from prison, where he lay condemned to death for some great political wrong. She saved him, and for her sake he received pardon. Here is the Lady Helena—she is not beautiful, but look at the intellect, the queenly brow, the soul-lit eyes! She, I need not tell you, was a poetess. Wherever the English language was spoken, her verses were read—men were nobler and better for reading them. The ladies of our race were such that brave men may be proud of them. Is it not so, Ronald?"

"Yes," he replied, calmly; "they were noble women."

Lord Earle then led his son to a large painting, upon which the western sunbeams lingered, brightening the fair face they shone upon, until it seemed living and smiling. A deep and tender reverence stole into Lord Earle's voice as he spoke:

"No fairer or more noble woman ever ruled at Earlescourt than your mother, Ronald. She is the daughter of 'a hundred earls,' high-bred, beautiful, and refined. Now, let me ask you, in the name of common sense, do you wish to place my lodge keeper's daughter by your mother's side? Admit that she is pretty and good—is it in the fitting order of things that she should be here?"

For the first time, in the heedless, fiery course of his love, Ronald Earle paused. He looked at the serene and noble face before him, the broad brow, the sweet, arched lips, the refined patrician features, and there came to him the memory of another face, charming, shy and blushing, with a rustic, graceful beauty different from the one before him as sunlight compared to moonlight. The words faltered upon his lips—instinctively he felt that pretty, blushing Dora had no place there. Lord Earle looked relieved as he saw the doubt upon his son's face.

"You see it, Ronald," he cried. "Your idea of the 'fusion' of races is well enough in theory, but it will not do brought into practice. I have been patient with you—I have treated you, not as a school boy whose head is half turned by his first love, but as a sensible man endowed with reason and thought. Now give me a reward. Promise me here that you will make a brave effort, give up all foolish thoughts of Dora Thorne, and not see her again. Go abroad for a year or two —you will soon forget this boyish folly, and bless the good sense that has saved you from it. Will you promise me, Ronald?"

"I can not, father," he replied, "for I have promised Dora to make her my wife. I can not break my word. You yourself could never counsel that."

"In this case I can," said Lord Earle, eagerly. "That promise is not binding, even in honor; the girl herself, if she has any reason, can not and does not expect it."

"She believed me," said Ronald, simply. "Besides, I love her, father."

"Hush," replied Lord Earle, angrily, "I will listen to no more nonsense. There is a limit to my patience. Once and for all, Ronald, I tell you that I decidedly forbid any mention of such a marriage; it is degrading and ridiculous. I forbid you to marry Dora Thorne; if you disobey me, you must bear the penalty."

"And what would the penalty be?" asked the heir of Earlescourt, with a coolness and calmness that irritated the father.

"One you would hardly wish to pay," replied the earl. "If, in spite of my prayers, entreaties, and commands, you persist in marrying the girl, I will never look upon your face again. My home shall be no longer your home. You will lose my love, my esteem, and what perhaps those who have lured you to ruin may value still more, my wealth. I can not disinherit you; but, if you persist in this folly, I will not allow you one farthing. You shall be to me as one dead until I die myself."

"I have three hundred a year," said Ronald, calmly; "that my godfather left me."

Lord Earle's face now grew white with anger.

"Yes," he replied, "you have that; it would not find you in gloves and cigars now. But, Ronald, you can not be serious, my boy. I have loved you—I have been so proud of you—you can not mean to defy and wound me."

His voice faltered, and his son looked up quickly, touched to the heart by his father's emotion.

"Give me your consent, father," he cried, passionately. "You know I love you, and I love Dora; I can not give up Dora."

"Enough," said Lord Earle; "words seem useless. You hear my final resolve; I shall never change it—no after repentance, no entreaties, will move me. Choose between your parents, your home, your position, and the love of this fair, foolish girl, of whom in a few months you will be tired and weary. Choose between us. I ask for no promises; you have refused to give it. I appeal no more to your affection; I leave you to decide for yourself. I might coerce and force you, but I will not do so. Obey me, and I will make your happiness my study. Defy me, and marry the girl then, in life, I will never look upon your face again. Henceforth, I will have no son; you will not be worthy of the name. There is no appeal. I leave you now to make your choice; this is my final resolve."

Chapter II

Table of Contents

The Earles, of Earlescourt, were one of the oldest families in England. The "Barony of Earle" is mentioned in the early reigns of the Tudor kings. They never appeared to have taken any great part either in politics or warfare. The annals of the family told of simple, virtuous lives; they contained, too, some few romantic incidents. Some of the older barons had been brave soldiers; and there were stories of hair-breadth escapes and great exploits by flood and field. Two or three had taken to politics, and had suffered through their eagerness and zeal; but, as a rule, the barons of Earle had been simple, kindly gentlemen, contented to live at home upon their own estates, satisfied with the duties they found there, careful in the alliances they contracted, and equally careful in the bringing up and establishment of their children. One and all they had been zealous cultivators of the fine arts. Earlescourt was almost overcrowded with pictures, statues, and works of art.

Son succeeded father, inheriting with title and estate the same kindly, simple dispositions and the same tastes, until Rupert Earle, nineteenth baron, with whom our story opens, became Lord Earle. Simplicity and kindness were not his characteristics. He was proud, ambitious, and inflexible; he longed for the time when the Earles should become famous, when their name should be one of weight in council. In early life his ambitious desires seemed about to be realized. He was but twenty when he succeeded his father, and was an only child, clever, keen and ambitious. In his twenty-first year he married Lady Helena Brooklyn, the daughter of one of the proudest peers in Britain. There lay before him a fair and useful life. His wife was an elegant, accomplished woman, who knew the world and its ways—who had, from her earliest childhood, been accustomed to the highest and best society. Lord Earle often told her, laughingly, that she would have made an excellent embassadress—her manners were so bland and gracious; she had the rare gift of appearing interested in every one and in everything.

With such a wife at the head of his establishment, Lord Earle hoped for great things. He looked to a prosperous career as a statesman; no honors seemed to him too high, no ambition too great. But a hard fate lay before him. He made one brilliant and successful speech in Parliament—a speech never forgotten by those who heard it, for its astonishing eloquence, its keen wit, its bitter satire. Never again did his voice rouse alike friend and foe. He was seized with a sudden and dangerous illness which brought him to the brink of the grave. After a long and desperate struggle with the "grim enemy," he slowly recovered, but all hope of public life was over for him. The doctors said he might live to be a hale old man if he took proper precautions; he must live quietly, avoid all excitement, and never dream again of politics.

To Lord Earle this seemed like a sentence of exile or death. His wife tried her utmost to comfort and console him, but for some years he lived only to repine at his lot. Lady Helena devoted herself to him. Earlescourt became the center and home of famous hospitality; men of letters, artists, and men of note visited there, and in time Lord Earle became reconciled to his fate. All his hopes and his ambitions were now centered in his son, Ronald, a fine, noble boy, like his father in every respect save one. He had the same clear-cut Saxon face, with clear, honest eyes and proud lips, the same fair hair and stately carriage, but in one respect they differed. Lord Earle was firm and inflexible; no one ever thought of appealing against his decision or trying to change his resolution. If "my lord" had spoken, the matter was settled. Even Lady Helena knew that any attempt to influence him was vain. Ronald, on the contrary, could be stubborn, but not firm. He was more easily influenced; appeal to the better part of his nature, to his affection or sense of duty, was seldom made in vain.

No other children gladdened the Lord Earle's heart, and all his hopes were centered in his son. For the second time in his life great hopes and ambitions rose within him. What he had not achieved his son would do; the honor he could no longer seek might one day be his son's. There was something almost pitiful in the love of the stern, disappointed man for his child. He longed for the time when Ronald would be of age to commence his public career. He planned for his son as he had never planned for himself.

Time passed on, and the heir of Earlescourt went to Oxford, as his father had done before him. Then came the second bitter disappointment of Lord Earle's life. He himself was a Tory of the old school. Liberal principles were an abomination to him; he hated and detested everything connected with Liberalism. It was a great shock when Ronald returned from college a "full-fledged Liberal." With his usual keenness he saw that all discussion was useless.

"Let the Liberal fever wear out," said one of his friends; "you will find, Lord Earle, that all young men favor it. Conservatism is the result of age and experience. By the time your son takes a position in the world, he will have passed through many stages of Liberalism."

Lord Earle devoutly believed it. When the first shock of his disappointment was over, Ronald's political zeal began to amuse him. He liked to see the boy earnest in everything. He smiled when Ronald, in his clear, young voice, read out the speeches of the chief of his party. He smiled when the young man, eager to bring theory into practice, fraternized with the tenant farmers, and visited families from whom his father shrunk in aristocratic dread.

There was little doubt that in those days Ronald Earl believed himself called to a great mission. He dreamed of the time when the barriers of caste would be thrown down, when men would have equal rights and privileges, when the aristocracy of intellect and virtue would take precedence of noble birth, when wealth would be more equally distributed, and the days when one man perished of hunger while another reveled in luxury should cease to be. His dreams were neither exactly Liberal nor Radical; they were simply Utopian. Even then, when he was most zealous, had any one proposed to him that he should inaugurate the new state of things, and be the first to divide his fortune, the futility of his theories would have struck him more plainly. Mingling in good society, the influence of clever men and beautiful women would, Lord Earle believed, convert his son in time. He did not oppose him, knowing that all opposition would but increase his zeal. It was a bitter disappointment to him, but he bore it bravely, for he never ceased to hope.

A new trouble was dawning for Lord Earle, one far more serious than the Utopian dream of his son; of all his sorrows it was the keenest and the longest felt. Ronald fell in love, and was bent on marrying a simple rustic beauty, the lodge keeper's daughter.

Earlescourt was one of the fairest spots in fair and tranquil England. It stood in the deep green heart of the land, in the midst of one of the bonny, fertile midland counties.

The Hall was surrounded by a large park, where the deer browsed under the stately spreading trees, where there were flowery dells and knolls that would charm an artist; a wide brook, almost broad and deep enough to be called a river, rippled through it.

Earlescourt was noted for its trees, a grand old cedar stood in the middle of the park; the shivering aspen, the graceful elm, the majestic oak, the tall, flowering chestnut were all seen to greatest perfection there.

Art had done much, Nature more, to beautify the home of the Earles. Charming pleasure gardens were laid out with unrivaled skill; the broad, deep lake was half hidden by the drooping willows bending over it, and the white water lilies that lay on its tranquil breast.

The Hall itself was a picturesque, gray old building, with turrets covered with ivy, and square towers of modern build; there were deep oriel windows, stately old rooms that told of the ancient race, and cheerful modern apartments replete with modern comfort.

One of the great beauties of Earlescourt was the broad terrace that ran along one side of the house; the view from it was unequaled for quiet loveliness. The lake shone in the distance from between the trees; the perfume from the hawthorn hedges filled the air, the fountains rippled merrily in the sunshine, and the flowers bloomed in sweet summer beauty.

Lord Earle loved his beautiful home; he spared no expense in improvements, and the time came when Earlescourt was known as a model estate.

One thing he did of which he repented till the hour of his death. On the western side of the park he built a new lodge, and installed therein Stephen Thorne and his wife, little dreaming as he did so that the first link in what was to be a fatal tragedy was forged.

Ronald was nineteen, and Lord Earle thought, his son's college career ended, he should travel for two or three years. He could not go with him, but he hoped that surveillance would not be needed, that his boy would be wise enough and manly enough to take his first steps in life alone. At college he won the highest honors; great things were prophesied for Ronald Earle. They might have been accomplished but for the unfortunate event that darkened Earlescourt with a cloud of shame and sorrow.

Lord and Lady Earle had gone to pay a visit to an old friend, Sir Hugh Charteris, of Greenoke. Thinking Ronald would not reach home until the third week in June, they accepted Sir Hugh's invitation, and promised to spend the first two weeks in June with him. But Ronald altered his plans; the visit he was making did not prove to be a very pleasant one, and he returned to Earlescourt two days after Lord and Lady Earle had left it. His father wrote immediately, pressing him to join the party at Greenoke. He declined, saying that after the hard study of the few last months he longed for quiet and rest.

Knowing that every attention would be paid to his son's comfort, Lord Earle thought but little of the matter. In after years he bitterly regretted that he had not insisted upon his son's going to Greenoke. So it happened that Ronald Earle, his college career ended, his future lying like a bright, unruffled dream before him, had two weeks to spend alone in Earlescourt.

The first day was pleasant enough. Ronald went to see the horses, inspected the kennels, gladdened the gamekeeper's heart by his keen appreciation of good sport, rowed on the lake, played a solitary game at billiards, dined in great state, read three chapters or "Mill on Liberalism," four of a sensational novel, and fell asleep satisfied with that day, but rather at a loss to know what he should do on the next.

It was a beautiful June day; no cloud was in the smiling heavens, the sun shone bright, and Nature looked so fair and tempting that it was impossible to remain indoors. Out in the gardens the summer air seemed to thrill with the song of the birds. Butterflies spread their bright wings and coquetted with the fragrant blossoms; busy humming bees buried themselves in the white cups of the lily and the crimson heart of the rose.

Ronald wandered through the gardens; the delicate golden laburnum blossoms fell at his feet, and he sat down beneath a large acacia. The sun was warm, and Ronald thought a dish of strawberries would be very acceptable. He debated within himself for some time whether he should return to the house and order them, or walk down to the fruit garden and gather them for himself.

What impulse was it that sent him on that fair June morning, when all Nature sung of love and happiness, to the spot where he met his fate?

Chapter III

Table of Contents

The strawberry gardens at Earlescourt were very extensive. Far down among the green beds Ronald Earle saw a young girl kneeling, gathering the ripe fruit, which she placed in a large basket lined with leaves, and he went down to her.

"I should like a few of those strawberries," he said, gently, and she raised to his a face he never forgot. Involuntarily he raised his hat, in homage to her youth and her shy, sweet beauty. "For whom are you gathering these?" he asked, wondering who she was, and whence she came.

In a moment the young girl stood up, and made the prettiest and most graceful of courtesies.

"They are for the housekeeper, sir," she replied; and her voice was musical and clear as a silver bell.

"Then may I ask who you are?" continued Ronald.

"I am Dora Thorne," she replied, "the lodge keeper's daughter."

"How is it I have never seen you before?" he asked.

"Because I have lived always with my aunt, at Dale," she replied. "I only came home last year."

"I see," said Ronald. "Will you give me some of those strawberries?" he asked. "They look so ripe and tempting."

He sat down on one of the garden chairs and watched her. The pretty white fingers looked so fair, contrasted with the crimson fruit and green leaves. Deftly and quickly she contrived a small basket of leaves, and filled it with fruit.

She brought it to him, and then for the first time Ronald saw her clearly, and that one glance was fatal to him.

She was no calm, grand beauty. She had a shy, sweet, blushing face, resembling nothing so much as a rosebud, with fresh, ripe lips; pretty little teeth, which gleamed like white jewels, large dark eyes, bright as stars, and veiled by long lashes; dark hair, soft and shining. She was indeed so fair, so modest and graceful, that Ronald Earle was charmed.

"It must be because you gathered them that they are so nice," he said, taking the little basket from her hands. "Rest awhile, Dora—you must be tired with this hot sun shining full upon you. Sit here under the shade of this apple tree."

He watched the crimson blushes that dyed her fair young face. She never once raised her dark eyes to his. He had seen beautiful and stately ladies, but none so coy or bewitching as this pretty maiden. The more he looked at her the more he admired her. She had no delicate patrician loveliness, no refined grace; but for glowing, shy, fresh beauty, who could equal her?

So the young heir of Earlescourt sat, pretending to enjoy the strawberries, but in reality engrossed by the charming figure before him. She neither stirred nor spoke. Under the boughs of the apple tree, with the sunbeams falling upon her, she made a fair picture, and his eyes were riveted upon it.

It was all very delightful, and very wrong. Ronald should not have talked to the lodge keeper's daughter, and sweet, rustic Dora Thorne should have known better. But they were young, and such days come but seldom, and pass all too quickly.

"Dora Thorne," said Ronald, musingly—"what a pretty name! How well it suits you! It is quite a little song in itself."

She smiled with delight at his words; then her shy, dark eyes were raised for a moment, and quickly dropped again.

"Have you read Tennyson's 'Dora?'" he asked.

"No," she replied—"I have little time for reading."

"I will tell you the story," he said, patronizingly. "Ever since I read it I have had an ideal 'Dora,' and you realize my dream."

She had not the least idea what he meant; but when he recited the musical words, her fancy and imagination were stirred; she saw the wheat field, the golden corn, the little child and its anxious mother. When Ronald ceased speaking, he saw her hands were clasped and her lips quivering.

"Did you like that?" he asked, with unconscious patronage.

"So much!" she replied. "Ah, he must be a great man who wrote those words; and you remember them all."

Her simple admiration flattered and charmed him. He recited other verses for her, and the girl listened in a trance of delight. The sunshine and western wind brought no warning to the heir of Earlescourt that he was forging the first link of a dreadful tragedy; he thought only of the shy, blushing beauty and coy grace of the young girl!

Suddenly from over the trees there came the sound of the great bell at the Hall. Then Dora started.

"It is one o'clock!" she cried. "What shall I do? Mrs. Morton will be angry with me."

"Angry!" said Ronald, annoyed at this sudden breakup of his Arcadian dream. "Angry with you! For what?"

"She is waiting for the strawberries," replied conscious Dora, "and my basket is not half full."

It was a new idea to him that any one should dare to be angry with this pretty, gentle Dora.

"I will help you," he said.

In less than a minute the heir of Earlescourt was kneeling by Dora Thorne, gathering quickly the ripe strawberries, and the basket was soon filled.

"There," said Ronald, "you need not fear Mrs. Morton now, Dora. You must go, I suppose; it seems hard to leave this bright sunshine to go indoors!"

"I—I would rather stay," said Dora, frankly; "but I have much to do."

"Shall you be here tomorrow?" he asked.

"Yes," she replied; "it will take me all the week to gather strawberries for the housekeeper."

"Goodbye, Dora," he said, "I shall see you again."

He held out his hand, and her little fingers trembled and fluttered in his grasp. She looked so happy, yet so frightened, so charming, yet so shy. He could have clasped her in his arms at that moment, and have said he loved her; but Ronald was a gentleman. He bowed over the little hand, and then relinquished it. He watched the pretty, fairy figure, as the young girl tripped away.

"Shame on all artificial training!" said Ronald to himself. "What would our fine ladies give for such a face? Imagine beauty without coquetry or affectation. The girl's heart is as pure as a stainless lily; she never heard of 'a grand match' or a 'good parli.' If Tennyson's Dora was like her, I do not wonder at anything that happened."

Instead of thinking to himself that he had done a foolish thing that bright morning, and that his plain duty was to forget all about the girl, Ronald lighted his cigar, and began to dream of the face that had charmed him.

Dora took the fruit to Mrs. Morton, and received no reprimand; then she was sent home to the cottage, her work for the day ended. She had to pass through the park. Was it the same road she had trodden this morning? What caused the new and shining glory that had fallen on every leaf and tree? The blue heavens seemed to smile upon her; every flower, every song of the bright birds had a new meaning. What was it? Her own heart was beating as it had never beaten before; her face was flushed, and the sweet, limpid eyes shone with a new light. What was it? Then she came to the brook-side and sat down on the violet bank.

The rippling water was singing a new song, something of love and youth, of beauty and happiness—something of a new and fairy-like life; and with the faint ripple and fall of the water came back to her the voice that had filled her ears and touched her heart. Would she ever again forget the handsome face that had smiled so kindly upon her? Surely he was a king among men, and he had praised her, said her name was like a song, and that she was like the Dora of the beautiful poem. This grand gentleman, with the clear, handsome face and dainty white hands, actually admired her.

So Dora dreamed by the brook-side, and she was to see him again and again; she gave no thought to a cold, dark time when she should see him no more. Tomorrow the sun would shine, the birds sing, and she should see him once again.

Dora never remembered how that happy day passed. Good Mrs. Thorne looked at her child, and sighed to think how pretty she was and how soon that sweet, dimpled face would be worn with care.

Dora's first proceeding was characteristic enough. She went to her own room and locked the door; then she put the cracked little mirror in the sunshine, and proceeded to examine her face. She wanted to see why Ronald Earle admired her; she wondered much at this new power she seemed possessed of; she placed the glass on the table, and sat down to study her own face. She saw that it was very fair; the coloring was delicate and vivid, like that of the heart of a rose; the fresh, red lips were arched and smiling; the dark, shy eyes, with their long silken lashes, were bright and clear; a pretty, dimpled, smiling face told of a sweet, simple, loving nature—that was all; there was no intellect, no soul, no high-bred refinement; nothing but the charm of bright, half-startled beauty.

Dora was half puzzled. She had never thought much of her own appearance. Having lived always with sensible, simple people, the pernicious language of flattery was unknown to her. It was with a half-guilty thrill of delight that she for the first time realized the charm of her own sweet face.

The sunny hours flew by. Dora never noted them; she thought only of the morning past and the morning to come, while Ronald dreamed of her almost unconsciously. She had been a bright feature in a bright day; his artistic taste had been gratified, his eyes had been charmed. The pretty picture haunted him, and he remembered with pleasure that on the morrow he should see the shy, sweet face again. No thought of harm or wrong even entered his mind. He did not think that he had been imprudent. He had recited a beautiful poem to a pretty, coy girl, and in a grand, lordly way he believed himself to have performed a kind action.

The morning came, and they brought bright, blushing Dora to her work; again the little white fingers glistened amid the crimson berries. Then Dora heard him coming. She heard his footsteps, and her face grew "ruby red." He made no pretense of finding her accidentally.

"Good morning, Dora," he said; "you look as bright as the sunshine and as fair as the flowers. Put away the basket; I have brought a book of poems, and mean to read some to you. I will help you with your work afterward."

Dora, nothing loath, sat down, and straightway they were both in fairyland. He read industriously, stealing every now and then a glance at his pretty companion. She knew nothing of what he was reading, but his voice made sweeter music than she had ever heard before.

At length the book was closed, and Ronald wondered what thoughts were running through his companion's simple, artless mind. So he talked to her of her daily life, her work, her pleasures, her friends. As he talked he grew more and more charmed; she had no great amount of intellect, no wit or keen powers of repartee, but the girl's love of nature made her a poetess. She seemed to know all the secrets of the trees and the flowers; no beauty escaped her; the rustle of green leaves, the sighs of the western wind, the solemn hush of the deep-green woods, the changing tints of the summer sky delighted her. Beautiful words, embodying beautiful thoughts, rippled over the fresh, ripe lips. She knew nothing else. She had seen no pictures, read no books, knew nothing of the fine arts, was totally ignorant of all scholarly lore, but deep in her heart lay a passionate love for the fair face of nature.

It was new to Ronald. He had heard fashionable ladies speak of everything they delighted in. He had ever heard of "music in the fall of rain drops," or character in flowers.

Once Dora forgot her shyness, and when Ronald said something, she laughed in reply. How sweet and pure that laughter was—like a soft peal of silver bells! When Ronald Earle went to sleep that night, the sound haunted his dreams.

Chapter IV

Table of Contents

Every morning brought the young heir of Earlescourt to the bright sunny gardens where Dora worked among the strawberries. As the days passed she began to lose something of her shy, startled manner, and laughed and talked to him as she would have done to her own brother. His vanity was gratified by the sweetest homage of all, the unconscious, unspoken love and admiration of the young girl. He liked to watch the blushes on her face, and the quivering of her lips when she caught the first sound of his coming footsteps. He liked to watch her dark eyes droop, and then to see them raised to his with a beautiful, startled light.

Insensibly his own heart became interested. At first he had merely thought of passing a pleasant hour; then he admired Dora, and tried to believe that reading to her was an act of pure benevolence; but, as the days passed on, something stronger and sweeter attracted him. He began to love her—and she was his first love.

Wonderful to say, these long tete-a-tetes had not attracted observation. No rumor of them escaped, so that no thorn appeared in this path of roses which led to the brink of a precipice.

It wanted three days until the time settled for the return of Lord and Lady Earle. Sir Harry Laurence, of Holtham Hall, asked Ronald to spend a day with him; and, having no valid excuse, he consented.

"I shall not see you tomorrow, Dora," he said. "I am going away for the day."

She looked at him with a startled face. One whole day without him! Then, with a sudden deadly pain, came the thought that these golden days must end; the time must come when she should see him no more. The pretty, dimpled face grew pale, and a dark shadow came into the clear eyes.

"Dora," cried Ronald, "why do you look so frightened? What is it?"

She gave him no answer, but turned away. He caught her hands in his own.

"Are you grieved that I am going away for one whole day?" he asked. But she looked so piteous and so startled that he waited for no reply. "I shall continue to see you," he resumed. "I could not let any day pass without that."

"And afterward," she said, simply, raising her eyes to his full of tears.

Then Ronald paused abruptly—he had never given one thought to the "afterward." Why, of course strawberries would not grow forever—it would not always be summer. Lord Earle would soon be back again, and then he must go abroad. Where would Dora be then? He did not like the thought—it perplexed him. Short as was the time he had known her, Dora had, in some mysterious way, grown to be a part of himself. He could not think of a day wherein he should not see her blushing, pretty face, and hear the music of her words. He was startled, and clasped her little hands more tightly within his own.

"You would not like to lose me, Dora?" he said, gently.