

A Game of Confidences

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"OH, there you are, Paul! How do you do? I'm so glad to see you again." Mrs Vibart beamed delightfully upon me. "I hear you have quite settled Mr Rollison's affair—so clever of you."

"I had very little —"

"What a bother it has been, hasn't it? But I can't have my best young man doing nothing," continued my charming hostess. "Now there's such a dear little thing over there, by the window. Come along at once—I have a thousand people to arrange yet. And some of them are so uneven."

"Why don't you say 'odd,' and be done with it? What does the dear little thing do? And will any pecuniary advantage accrue to me if —"

"Don't argue—I haven't a minute to lose. Here come the Ponsonbys, with an artist man whose name I have entirely forgotten. Be quick."

"I must know whether she paints, or writes, or sculpts —"

"She doesn't do anything now, beyond being very good and sweet—and she's all alone. She comes from Devon. It's too far off for me to remember if she has any precise *métier*; but you'll soon find out, Paul—you're so intelligent."

"Lead on, dear lady. The fatted calf is ready for the sacrifice."

"It won't be any sacrifice, I'm positive." Mrs Vibart, without permitting me another word, steered us both marvellously across the wide studio. Then I heard her usual introduction—quite unintelligible, until my own name was reached. "My Paul, he has been been begging for an introduction! Do be kind to him, and excuse my rushing away at once. I see a heap more arrivals."

I turned dutifully towards the "dear little thing." I instantly rather liked her; and had a vague feeling that we had met before. I said, carefully: "I have been hearing how frightfully good you are, and that you come from Devon —"

"From Dartmoor," she particularized, prettily. Her voice was so beautifully contralto that I made haste to secure the seat next to hers. It was a positively secluded corner of the studio.

"But I'm not frightfully good," she added, gently—stirring familiar chords chaotically again within me.

"Honour bright?" I questioned.

She nodded. "I'm only a country cousin of Mrs Vibart's. She's awfully kind. Introduces me to every one."

"Whether you like it or not? That's just what she has done to me; only I'm not so dissatisfied with my partner."

"Please, I never said that. I meant that Cousin Amy was always troubling and fussing over me. Now, of course, you're a somebody? Artist, author, or ——"

"Philosopher," said I, taking a surreptitious peep at her. Surely that straight, defiant, little nose, that slightly self-conscious trick of flushing ——. But she was expecting a full definition of myself. "I'll tell you a secret—quite a dear, true little secret. It's the easiest thing in the world to be a philosopher, and the best paying. You merely have to wear a high forehead, and look profound. Nature most obligingly has permitted me to achieve the former—I rather want her to stop just where she is; whilst I have acquired a sphinx-like look through attending Cousin Amy's tea-parties ——"

"Cousin Amy? Then I suppose we're cousins, too?"

"Indubitably. But I'm a town cousin, which only counts since she has been a widow—four, or is it five years? As regards philosophy, however—but do you like hearing me talk?"

"It's—heavenly," she breathed, with shy conviction.

"Thank you. I rather enjoy it, too, when I have such an equally heavenly auditor. That's quits, isn't it? How young are you?"

"What a direct question! However, to a philosopher, I'll admit ——"

"Don't. I'll guess instead. It will make the time seem so short. Then I'll get tea; and we'll eat it—and then we can go."

"I shan't go," my companion announced. "I'm staying here."

"I'll ask Amy to invite me to dinner," I retorted. "Pray silence for the guess. Two-and-twenty?"

"Four-and-twenty. It's a lot, isn't it—to be still a nobody?"

"Don't worry. I'm half as old again—and simply a philosopher. Plenty of men are quite famous at my age; but I've never had time. What's your name? I'm sorry to have to ask these things; but Amy didn't say clearly."

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"I'm called Muriel."

"It becomes you," I remarked. "My name is Paul, which means 'little or small.' Your opportunity."

"I don't perceive that you're little or small, anyway," said Muriel, enigmatically. "What form does your philosophy take?"

"Telling stories to nice girls."

"Oh, but any one can do that."

"Pardon me—not philosophic stories, with morals and all that sort of thing."

"Let me judge."

"I had a heap of questions to ask," said I, regretfully. "I wanted to know what colours you liked, and whether your eyes are really dark grey. And whether that tiny heart-shaped locket on the end of that extraordinarily long chain contains a portrait?"

"A picture of a friend."

"Lucky friend. But you had to cut him."

She glanced up, surprisedly. "How did you know?" she asked, quickly.

"Not even a midget photo would go in there. You must have beheaded him."

"Oh, of course. I didn't understand." She paused. "Tell me your story, please."

"I was at that moment thinking where I had heard your name before. I mean the Muriel part of it," I explained, as I hadn't heard the other. "However, it has just come back to me, and thereby hangs a tale. It's about a Muriel, and is quite respectable. You might be able to advise me about it, since it's a problem."

"To whom?"

"Myself indirectly; and a friend chiefly. He's a decent fellow. I meet him at dinner. Middle Temple, you know. He's eating his terms, and occasionally I go to help. Well, in the course of his lunches he encountered a girl."

"Do they allow girls at the dinners?"

"I said *lunches*. She was a governess girl, at a shop. I must make myself clear. The shop is a very nice luncheon place, and the people live over it. They have children and a governess. I have seen her."

"Yes?"

"There's not the least doubt as regards her existence. One time they were shorthanded—at the busiest part of the day; and this girl was shot into the cashier's box. You know—little pay-place near the door. Well, my friend saw her."

"Yes?" My partner was flushing again in her delicious way.

"Fell over head and ears in love. Rum story, isn't it? Chance willed it that the girl should be imprisoned in that box day after day, for a week or more. Then, occasionally. Then chance meddled still further, and allowed meetings in the Temple Gardens, when she had the children with her. . . . All the while I never guessed a word."

"How did you find out?"

"Just sheer braininess. I perceived that Wally was not well. He seemed altogether peculiar. Ethereal and poetic. He left off swearing when dinner was late; studied harder than ever. After a little inward cogitation I drew him on one side. I said quietly, but distinctly: 'My boy, it won't do. What is her name, and how did you discover that she was an angel?' Wally—his real name is Wallace Rollison, by the way—turned pale as the Law Courts themselves."

"What did he say?" asked Muriel in a queer sort of voice.

"The whole miserable story burst forth, as from a volcano. I sat down heavily on the nearest seat—we were in Temple Gardens—and gasped. He clung to me, and instructed me that she was a dear. . . . They always are, you know. That her name was Muriel. . . . I'm sorry to drag you into it."

"Never mind that. Please go on. I'm so anxious to hear the moral."

"Don't be impatient. I talked about his career and about marrying in haste. I expounded that he hadn't known her long enough."

"That she was primarily only a governess girl; and that she had been in a shop?"

"No. Those facts were patent—and didn't so much matter. I thought of the spoiling of the boy's life. 'In a wife's lap, as in a grave, Man's airy notions mix with earth,' as the poet singeth. But he was infatuated."

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"Well?"

"At my earnest request, he kept away from her for a week. I said that he would get her into a row and make her lose her place. That, no doubt, she was poor—and had relatives. I was quite a father to him."

"Didn't it strike you that the girl might have had feelings?"

"Not at that moment. After a week he broke out worse than ever. I said: 'Go, then, and ask her to marry you.' He answered, to my surprise, for I imagined I had played a master card: 'I will go—and this very day.' And he added a quite extraordinary and unnecessary remark. He said: 'It's only love that matters, after all.'"

"You don't believe that?"

"Providence made me essentially normal. Everything I eat digests, you know. But pray hear the *dénouement*—if I'm not boring you. Shall I get some tea?"

"Please no. I would rather hear the end." The strange little creature was white as a ghost over it. Or, perhaps the failing light—

"Wally came back at four o'clock. He had seen the girl, and had asked her the great question. And she . . . had said, 'NO.'"

I paused to give this effect. My companion was looking away. Her small hands were restless in her lap. She spoke to me presently, very soft and low. "Were you surprised?" she enquired, nervously.

"Very. But my respect for Miss Muriel went up at a bound. I began to be angry with Rollison. I told him he hadn't asked her properly. He protested miserably that he had implored . . . until she had told him that there was some one else."

"Some one else?"

"More in her own position, she had declared. And then had incontinently commenced to cry. Quietly and pathetically, Wally said. He couldn't understand anything but the NO. He came away."

"Was there anything else to understand?"

"Now you are touching the problem. Of course there *wasn't* 'some one else.' I saw through that after ten minutes

hard thinking. The plucky little beggar had viewed the case as I had. She really loved him, and so wouldn't let him take the risk."

"And possibly she thought that he would lose his friends, as well as his chance. That his mother would, perhaps —"

"How well you see it!" I interrupted. "His mother . . . you would never credit it; but she actually told Wally to try again! Said that she was sure no boy of hers would ever ask her to love a new daughter who wasn't worthy. I felt awfully mean and small when I heard him answer that fair play was a jewel. That he wasn't going to ask the little girl to be disloyal."

"Why did you feel mean?"

"Because I only had to tell him what I had guessed, which, mind you, I'm as certain of as I am of anything in life; and he would have gone back, and would have persuaded her, in time."

"In time?"

"Yes. I made a few inquiries, discreetly, myself. She had left the shop place, and had gone home: and, all the while, I knew in my heart that she would make him the best little wife in the world. She would have helped him. . . . Don't you think I'm a beast?"

"Perhaps you were wrong. About the guess, I mean. She might have had another lover."

"She hadn't, absolutely."

"If they had married, would you, as one of his friends, have cared to still know him? They would have been poor, and through it all—the worry, I mean—he might have failed, and not ever have been 'called.' Again, she mightn't have been his equal."

"I feel a culprit," I protested. "Whenever I see his face, it comes home to me. I *ought* to tell him."

"Would you . . . be best man at his wedding?"

"The problem again! I have seen so many unhappy marriages; and yet —"

My companion turned towards me once more, and her grey eyes seemed to hold tears. It was full dusk in the studio, the gabbling riot going on—pictures and shows, and mediums and manners—all were curiously remote. I felt myself strangely drawn

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towards this little girl. . . . She put out her hand as if to take something from mine.

"Don't you feel that she was right?" she asked, gently and patiently. Then, altering her tone, she concluded, abruptly, "I'll take your check, please."

I knew her, then. I knew that I had known her all along. Of course, of course! That true contralto voice; those unforgettable eyes. I answered her soberly.

"I shall be very proud," said I, emphatically, "very honoured, if I may be best man at your wedding. We have both been wrong; and Wally was right. It is only love that matters in this poor little world. . . . Let me get you some tea?"

On my way I almost ran into Amy Vibart. "You have been good," she whispered. "Do you see who is by the door? It's Mr Rollison, looking everywhere for you."

"Not for me," I said, decidedly. "So *you* put it into my head, did you? You clever thing, how ingeniously it was suggested! I'm about to get Muriel some very nice tea—two cups—and then I'm going to let Rollison carry the tray."

Amy squeezed my arm, affectionately. "You're quite my best young man," she murmured.

PAUL CRESWICK