

Josephine Daskam Bacon

Mrs. Duds Sister



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MRS. DUD'S SISTER

By Josephine Daskam

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They were having tea on the terrace. As Varian strolled up to the group he wished that Hunter could see the picture they made--Hunter, who had not been in America for thirty years, and who had been so honestly surprised when Varian had spoken of Mrs. Dud's pretty maids--she always had pretty ones, even to the cook's third assistant.

"Maids? Maids? It used to be 'help,'" he had protested. "You don't mean to say they have waitresses in Binghamville now?"

Varian had despaired of giving him any idea.

"Come over and see Mrs. Dud," he had urged, "and do her portrait. We've moved on since you left us, you know. She's a wonder--she really is. When you remember how she used to carry her father's dinner to the store Saturday afternoons--"

"And now I suppose she sports real Mechlin on her cap," assented Hunter, anxious to show how perfectly he caught the situation.

Varian had roared helplessly. "Cap? Cap!" he had moaned finally. "Oh, my sainted granny! Cap! My poor fellow, your view of Binghamville must be like the old maps of Africa in the green geography, that said 'desert' and 'interior' and 'savage tribes' from time to time. I should like awfully to see Mrs. Dud in a cap."

Hunter had looked puzzled.

"But, dear me! she might very well wear one, I should think," he had murmured defensively. "I don't wish to be invidious, but surely Lizzie must be--let's see; 'eighty, 'ninety--why, she must be between forty-five and fifty now."

Varian had waved his hand dramatically. "Nobody considers Mrs. Dud and time in the same breath. If you could see her in her golf rig! Or on a horse! She even sheds a lustre on the rest of us. I forget my rheumatism!"

But Hunter, retreating behind his determination to avoid a second seasickness--it might have been sincere; nobody ever knew--had stayed in Florence, and Varian had been obliged to come without him to the house-party.

On a straw cushion, a cup in her strong white hand, a bunch of adoring young girls at her feet, sat Mrs. Dud. Rosy and firm-cheeked, crisp in stiff white duck, deliriously contrasted with her fluffy Parisian parasol, she scorned the softening ruffles of her presumable contemporaries; her delicately squared chin, for the most part held high, showed a straight white collar under a throat only a little fuller than the girlish ones all around her.

Old Dudley himself strolled about the group, gossiping here and there with some pretty woman, sending the grave servants from one to another with some particularly desirable sandwich, "rubbing it in," as he said to the men who had failed to touch his score on the links, tantalizingly uncertain as to which one of the young women he would invite to lead the cotillon with him at the club dance that week: none of the young men could take his place at that, as they themselves enviously admitted.

What a well-matched couple it was! What a lot they got out of life! Varian walked quietly by the group, to enjoy better the pretty, modish picture they made. Their quick chatter, their bursts of laughter, the sweet faint odor of the tea, the gay dresses and light flannels, with the quiet, sombrely attired servants to add tone, all gave him, fresh from Hunter's quick sense of the effective, an appreciation that gained force from his separateness; he walked farther away to get a different point of view.

He was out of any path now, and suddenly, hardly beyond reach of their voices, he found himself in a part of the grounds he had never approached before. A thick high hedge shut in a kind of court at the side and back of the great house, and a solid wooden door, carefully matched to its green, left open by accident, showed a picture so out of line with the succession of vivid scenes that dazzled the visitor at Wilton Bluffs that he stopped involuntarily. The rectangle was carpeted with the characteristic emerald turf of the place, divided by intersecting red brick paths into four regular squares. In the farther corner of each of these a trim green clothes-tree was planted, all abloom with snowy fringed napkins that shone dazzling white against the hedge. One of the squares was a neat little kitchen-garden; parsley was there in plenty, and other vaguely familiar green things, curly-leaved and spear-pointed. A warm gust of wind brought mint to his nostrils. A second plot held a small crab-apple tree covered with pink and orange globes. A great tortoise-shell cat with two kittens ornamented the third, and in the middle of the fourth, beside a small wooden table, a woman sat with her back toward the intruder. On the table were one or two tin boxes and a yellow earthen dish;

in her left hand, raised to the shoulder-level, was a tall thin bottle, from which an amber fluid dripped in an almost imperceptibly thin stream; her right arm stirred vigorously. She was a middle-aged woman with lightly grayed hair--a kind of premonitory powdering. Over her full skirt of lavender-striped cotton stuff fell a broad, competent white apron. Except for the thudding of the spoon against the bowl, and a faint, homely echo of clashing china and tin, mingled with occasionally raised voices and laughter from some farther kitchen region, all was utterly, placidly still.

Varian stood chained to the open gate. Something in the calm sun-bathed picture tugged strongly at his heart. He thought suddenly of his mother and his Aunt Delia--he had been very fond of Aunt Delia. And what cookies she used to make! Molasses cookies, brown, moist, and crumbly, they had sweetened his boyhood.

What was it, that delighted sense of congruity that filled him, every passing second, with keener familiarity, so strangely tinged with sorrow and regret? Ah, he had it! He bit his lip as it came clear to him. His little namesake nephew, dead at eight years old, and dear as only a dearly loved child can be, had delighted greatly in the Kate Greenaway pictures that came in "painting-books," with colored prints on alternate pages and corresponding outlines on the others. Dozens of those books the boy had cleverly filled in with his little japanned paint-box and mussy, quill-handled brushes; and the scene before him, the rich tints of the hedge, the symmetrical little tree brilliant with hundreds of tiny globes, the big white apron, the lazy yellow cats, and everywhere the prim rectangular lines so amusingly conventional to accentuate the likeness, almost choked him with the suddenness of the recognition. They must have colored that very picture a dozen times, Tommy and he.

Half unconsciously he rested his arms on the top of the gate and drifted into reverie. He forgot that he was at Wilton Bluffs, one of the greatest of the country palaces, and lived for a while in a mingled vision of his boyhood on the old farm and in the land of the Greenaway painting-books.

Suddenly a door opened into the green.

A housemaid advanced to the table, bearing in both red hands a long tray covered with a napkin. On the napkin lay, heaped in rich confusion, a great pile of spicy, smoking brown cookies.

"They're just out o' the oven," she began, but Varian could contain himself no longer. He could not be deceived: he would have known those cookies in the Desert of Sahara. He crossed the little plot in three long steps, and faced the astonished maid.

"I beg your pardon," he said firmly, "but it is very necessary that I should have one of those cookies! I hope you can spare one?"

She giggled convulsively.

"I--I guess you can, sir," she murmured, laying down the tray and retreating toward the house door.

Varian faced the older woman, and, with hat still in hand, instinctively bowed lower; for this was no housekeeper--he was sure of that. Even as she met his eyes a great flood of pink rushed to her smooth forehead, and she dropped her lids as she bowed slightly. He reflected irrelevantly that he had never seen Mrs. Dudley blush in his life.

"You are very welcome to all you wish, I am sure," she said graciously. "I--I didn't know any one liked them but me. I always have them made for me--I taught her the rule. I always call them"--she laughed nervously, and it dawned on him that this woman was really shy and "talking against time," as they said--"I always call them 'Aunt Delia's cookies.' They--"

"Aunt Delia's cookies!" he interrupted. "What Aunt Delia?"

"Aunt Delia Parmentre," she returned, a little surprised, evidently, at this stranger, who, with a straw sailor-hat in one hand and a warm molasses cookie in the other, stared so intently at her. "She wasn't really my aunt, of course--"

"But she was mine!" he burst out, "and these are her cookies, and no mistake. Who are you?"

Again she flushed, but more lightly.

"I am Miss Redding," she said with a gentle dignity, "Mrs. Wilton's sister."

He stared at her vaguely.

"Mrs. Wilton--oh! you're her sister? I didn't know--" He stopped abruptly. As his confusion grew, her own faded away.

"You didn't know she had one?" she asked, almost mischievously.

"I didn't know you were here," he recovered himself. "You've never been with Mrs. Dud before, have you?"

"No, not here when there was company," she said.

He hardly noticed the words; his mind was groping among past histories.

"Her sister--her sister," he muttered. "Why, then," with an illuminating smile, "I used to go to school with you! I'm Tom Varian!"

She smiled and held out her hand.

"I'm very glad to see you," she said cordially. "Won't you--" She looked about for a chair, but he dropped on the

grass at her feet.

"You've changed since we met last," he remarked, biting into his cookie. She looked at his bronzed face and thick silvered hair and nodded thoughtfully.

"I was six years old then," she said; "and you were one of the 'big boys'--you were fourteen."

"That's a long while," he suggested laughingly.

"It is thirty-six years," she replied simply.

He winced. His associates were not accustomed to be so scrupulously accurate. It seemed indecently long ago. And yet there was a certain charm, now one faced it, a quaint halo of interest.

"You used to hand me water in a tin dipper," he said.

She nodded. "Yes, that was for a reward, when I was good," she said seriously. "I could hand the water to the big boys. I was very proud of it. You drank a great deal."

He chuckled. "I was born thirsty," he acknowledged. "By George, how it comes back! I can see it now, that school-house! Funny little red thing--remember how it looked? Big shelf around the sides for a desk, and another under that for the books? Bench all round the room to sit on, and we just whopped our legs over and faced round to recite? And carved--Lord! I don't believe there was an inch of the wood, all told, that was clear! I nearly cut my thumb off there, one day."

"One of the big girls fainted away," she added, "and they laid her on the floor and told me to bring a dipper of water; but my hand shook so I spilled it all over my apron, and she came to before we got more. I was very timid."

He began on another cookie.

"Did you have two pigtales? And striped stockings?" he inquired, his eyes fixed reminiscently on the hedge.

She nodded softly.

"And played some game with stones? I can't just remember--"

"It was houses," she reminded him. "We little girls used to make little houses--just marked out with stones in squares on the ground; and if you boys felt like it, you'd bring us big flat stones to eat our dinner on."

"Ah, yes!" It all came back to him. "And then you'd race off to get flag-root or something, and--"

"And gobble our dinner as we ran. It was fun, all the same," she added.

"But what a mite you were, to be in school!" he said wonderingly. "What under heaven did you study?"

"I don't remember at all," she confessed. "But I suppose I spelled. Do you remember the spelling-matches? And how you big ones wanted to 'leave off head'?"

He chuckled. "I should say I did! And sometimes the greatest idiot would 'leave off head' because there wasn't any more time. It was maddening!"

He munched in silence for a while, and she did not dream of interrupting.

"In the winter, though--George! but it was cold! We used to positively swim through the drifts. I tell you, there aren't any such snows now! How did you get there?"

"I only went in the summer," she said; "and I used to come in all stained with the berries I ate along the way. It was dreadful"--she grew stern, as if addressing the little girl in striped stockings and pigtales--"the way I ate berries! I used to eat the bushes clean on the way to school!"

She had got over her first shyness, and had gained time to realize her big apron, which she hastily untied. He caught the motion and protested.

"No, no! Keep it on! I haven't seen a woman--a lady--in an apron for years! Please keep it on! And do go on with the--the mess in the dish!"

"The mess"--she bent her brows reprovingly--"it's mayonnaise sauce. But I don't think--"

He jumped up to put the bowl in her lap. A sudden twinge in his knee wrung an involuntary groan from him. He walked a little stiffly toward her.

"You have rheumatism! And you sat all the time on that damp grass!" she cried reproachfully. "I thought at first it was the craziest thing to do, but I didn't dare say so."

He ignored the charge but smiled at the confession.

"And now you're not afraid?"

She blushed again. It was very becoming.

"It seems--it seems foolish to act like strangers when it's been so long--we remember so well--" She sighed a little. He studied her face--so like her sister's and so utterly different. The same gray eyes, but calm and drooped; the same clear white skin, but a fuller, yes, a more matronly face, a riper, sweeter, more restful curve. The soft dark shadows that

accentuated Mrs. Dudley's eyes were lacking; a group of tiny wrinkles at the corners gave her instead a pleasant, humorous regard that her sister's literal directness missed utterly.

Nervous under his scrutiny, she rose hastily, and before he could prevent her she had brought him a roomy arm-chair from the house.

"At our age there's no use in running risks," she said simply, "you ought not to sit on the grass; leave that for the young folks."

Again he winced, but dropped with relief into the chair.

"Oh, one must keep up with the procession, you know!" he said lightly.

She made no reply; and as she lifted the bottle and began to beat the yellow mass again, it occurred to him that the remark was exceptionally silly.

"Does it have to go in slowly like that--the whole bottleful?" he inquired lazily.

She nodded. "Or it curdles," she explained. "The cook sprained his wrist yesterday. He never allows anybody to make the mayonnaise--he can't trust them--and I was glad to do it for him. He says mine is as good as his. Did you ever see him?"

"Well, no," Varian returned. "But he doesn't need to be seen to be appreciated."

A strange suspicion crept over him.

"Do you often--Do you do much--How is it that you--" He could not say it properly. Was it possible that Mrs. Dudley-- It was unworthy of her!

She caught his meaning, and her cool gray eyes met his with their uncompromising directness. He seemed convicted of unnecessary shuffling.

"Oh, Lizzie asked me not to do anything," she said quietly. "She wanted me to enjoy myself with her friends. But I'm not used to so much society, and I don't want to be any hinderance. I'm not so young as I used to be. I'd have liked the gayety well enough when I was a girl, but I guess it tires me a little now. There seems to be so much going on all the time. Lizzie says she's resting, but it wouldn't rest me. Do you find it so?"

He recalled his yesterday's programme: driving a pulling team all the morning; carrying Mrs. Dudley's heavy bag over the links all the afternoon--she preferred her friends to caddies; prompting for the dramatics rehearsal, with a poor light, all the evening, while the actors gossiped and squabbled and flirted contentedly.

"It is not always restful," he admitted.

"It makes my head ache," she remarked placidly. "I like to see the girls enjoy themselves. I'm glad they're happy--some of those visiting Lizzie are so pretty!--but I'm glad I haven't got to run about so much. I'm very fond of driving myself, if I have a good quiet horse that won't shy and doesn't go fast, and Lizzie has one for me--a white one that's gentle--and I drive about in the phaeton a great deal. The doctor that came that night--were you here?--when Mrs. Page fainted and they couldn't bring her to (it seems she was in the habit of taking some medicine to make her sleep, and it weakened her heart) asked me if I wouldn't like to take out some patients of his, and so I called for a very nice lady--a Mrs. Williams; you probably don't know her?--and after that a young girl with spinal trouble, and--and several others. They seemed to enjoy it, and I'm sure I did. Once I took a young girl that's staying here--she had a bad headache. She was a sweet girl, and I liked her. She said the drive helped her a great deal. It's astonishing"--her eyes met his wonderingly--"how much trouble you can have, with all the money you want! I--I was sorry for her," she added, half to herself.

Before he thought he leaned forward, took her hand with the silver tablespoon in it, and kissed it gently. He admired her as he would admire some charming soft pastel hung in a cool white room.

"How sweet and good you are!" he said warmly; and then, to cover her deep embarrassment and his own sudden emotion, he continued quickly, "Are you very busy in the morning, always?"

"There are different things," she murmured, still looking at her spoon. "I have letters to write--I keep up with a good many old friends in Binghamville and Albany, where I lived with my married niece ten years, till they moved West. I loved her children; I half brought them up. One died; I can't seem to get over it--" Her eyes filled, and she made no effort to cover two tears that slipped over.

Varian took her hand again. "I know about that--I know!" he said softly.

"Then there are my flowers; I do so enjoy the beds and the greenhouses here," she went on more cheerfully. "The gardeners are very kind to me--I think they like to have me come in. Mr. McFadden gives me a good many slips and cuttings. I love flowers dearly. Then I read a good deal, and there is always some little thing to do for the young girls here. They--the ones I know--come in for a moment while I mend something, or pin their things in the back, and it's surprising how much there is to do! They fly about so they can't stop to take care of their things. They talk to me while I set them straight, and it's very interesting. I tell Lizzie I go out a great deal, just hearing about their adventures, when she drops in to see me. She never forgets me; she brings somebody to my sitting-room every day or so that she thinks

I'd enjoy meeting--and I always do. She never makes a mistake."

"Oh, she's wonderful," Varian agreed easily. "There's nobody like Mrs. Dud, of course."

She stopped her work a moment and looked curiously at him.

"What do you mean by that?" she asked. "You all say it--in just that way; but I don't think I quite see what you mean. Why is she wonderful? Because she looks so young?"

"That, in the first place," Varian returned, with a smile, "but not only that."

"Of course that is very strange," she mused. "Now Lizzie is three years older than I. You would never think it, would you?"

"No," he agreed, still smiling; "but then, Mrs. Dud looks younger than everybody. It is her specialty. I think what we mean," he continued, "is her amazing capacity; she does so much, so ridiculously much, and so much better than other people. We try to keep up with things--your sister is a little bit ahead. She seems to have always been doing the very latest thing, you see. And all her responsibilities, her various affairs--it makes one's head swim! The women have set themselves a tremendous field to cover nowadays, and when one succeeds so admirably--" He paused.

She shook her head thoughtfully.

"But everything is done for her!" she protested. "Why, I have never yet seen all the servants in this house! And you know there is a housekeeper? Lizzie sees her a little while in the morning, that's all. And she never sews a stitch--there's a seamstress here all the time, you know, and that has nothing to do with the clothes that come home in boxes. And little Dudley has his tutor, and his old nurse that looks after his clothes. What is it that she does to make it so wonderful?"

He only smiled at her perplexity, and she added confidentially:

"Lizzie wanted me to go to her dressmaker, but I didn't like the idea of a man, to begin with, and then I knew Miss Simms would feel so hurt. She lives in Albany, and she's made my dresses for so long that I thought, though she may not be so stylish, I'd better keep up with her; wouldn't you?"

A perfectly unreasonable tenderness surged through his heart. How sweet she was!

"If she made that dress, I certainly should!" he declared.

She smoothed the crisp lavender folds deprecatingly.

"Oh, this is only a cotton dress," she said. "But she made my gray silk, too, and Lizzie herself said it fitted beautifully."

She took up the bottle again: it was nearly empty.

"Now my mother," she began, "*she* was wonderful, if you like. Do you know what my mother used to do? We lived on the farm, you know, like yours, and most of the work of that farm mother did. She did the cooking--for all the hired hands, too; she made the butter, and took care of the hens; she made the candles and the soap; she made the carpets and all our clothes--my brothers', too; and she put up preserves and jellies and cordials, and did the most beautiful embroidery; I have some of mother's embroidered collars, and I can't do anything like them."

"It was tremendous," he said. "My Aunt Delia did that, too."

"We were old-fashioned, even for then," she said. "Everybody didn't do so much, of course, as we did. Lizzie says we were just on the edge of the new age. It certainly is different. And of course I wouldn't go back to it for anything. After we came back from boarding-school it was all changed. We moved, then, nearer the town. But, do you know, my mother went to singing-school, and Lizzie was looking that up in a book, the other day, to see what they did--she wanted it for a party!"

He laughed. "That *is* delicious!" he said.

"See what I found to-day!" she added, drawing a small object from her pocket. "I hunted it up to show Miss Porter tonight. She was so interested when I told her about it."

She showed him, with a tender amusement, a little slender white silk mitten. Around the wrist was embroidered in dark blue a legend in Old English script. He puzzled it out: *A Whig or no Husband!*

"That was mother's," she said, "the girls wore them then. She was quite a belle, mother was! And when people ask me how Lizzie does so much, I say that she inherits it. But at her age mother was broken down and old. She had to be. There were nine of us, and here there's only little Dudley, and it was so long before he came."

They sat quietly. The setting sun flamed through the crab-apples and burnished the fur of the tortoise-shell cat. The mint smelled strong. The sweet, mellow summer evening was reflected in her handsome face, with its delicate lines, that only added a restful charm to forehead and cheek. He had no need to talk; it was very, very pleasant sitting there.

A maid came out to get the mayonnaise, and the spell was broken. He took out his watch.

"Just time to dress," he sighed. "Will you be here again? We must talk old times once more."

She smiled and seemed to assent, but her eyes were not on him; she was still in a reverie. He walked softly away. She seemed hardly to notice him, and his last backward glance found the quiet of the picture unbroken; again it was a page from the Greenaway book.

He reached the terrace; laughter and applause from the piazza caught his ear. Fresh from the atmosphere he had left, he stared in amazement at the scene before him.

Swift figures were scudding from one to another of the four great elms that marked out a natural rectangle on the smooth side lawn.

"Puss! puss! Here, puss!" a high voice called, and a tall slender girl in a swish of lace and pink draperies rushed across one side of the square. A portly trousered figure essayed to gain the tree she had left, but a romping girl in white caught him easily, while Mrs. Dud, the tail of her gown thrown over her arm, skimmed triumphantly across to her partner's tree.

"One more, one more, colonel. You can't give up, now you're caught! One more before we go in!" called the pink girl.

"Here's Mr. Varian. Come and help us out--the colonel's beaten!" added Mrs. Dud.

"Here, puss! here, puss!" With excited little shrieks and laughs they dashed by, the colonel making ineffectual grabs at their elusive skirts. Varian shook his head good-naturedly.

"Too late, too late!" he called back, and taking pity on the puffing, purple colonel, he bore him off.

"Thank God! I'm just about winded! I'd have dropped in my tracks," complained the rescued man, breathing hard as they rounded the shrubbery. In the corner two figures, half seen in the dark, leaned toward each other an imperceptible moment. The colonel laughed contentedly.

"When I see that sort of thing, I think we've made a mistake--eh, Varian?" he said, half serious. "It's a poor job, getting old alone. Live at the club, visit here and there, make yourself agreeable to get asked again, nobody to care if you're sick, always play the other fellow's game--little monotonous after a while, eh?"

Varian nodded. "Right enough," he said.

"Different ending to their route!" suggested the colonel, jerking his elbow back toward the two in the shrubbery.

"That's it!" The answer was laconic, but the pictures that swept through his brain took on a precision and color that half frightened him.

He had no idea how frequently he dropped in at the little court behind the hedge after that. Sometimes he sat and mused alone there; more than once he took a surreptitious afternoon nap. He developed a dormant fancy for gardening, and walked with his new-old friend contentedly among the deserted garden paths. He studied her hair especially, wondering why it was that the little tender flecks of white attracted him so. At dinner he secretly tried to rouse in himself the same desire to stroke the gleaming silver fleece, high-dressed, puffed, and ornamented with jet, of the woman opposite him, whose hair, somewhat prematurely turned snowy, had won her a great vogue among her friends. But he never succeeded. She was absolutely too effective. She turned the simplest gathering to a fancy-dress ball, he decided.

He had supposed that it was the quaint privacy of their acquaintance that charmed him particularly--the feeling of an almost double existence; but when Mrs. Dud, who, he afterwards reflected, was of course omniscient, restrained herself no longer, and thanked him with a pretty sincerity for his delicate and appreciated courtesy, intimating charmingly that she realized the personal motive, a veil suddenly dropped. He gasped, shook himself, colored a little, and met her eye.

"I'm afraid I'm not so kind as you think," he said, a little awkwardly. "I've been an old fool, I see. Do you think--is that the way *she* looks at it?"

"Mary?" said Mrs. Dud, wonderingly. "Yes, I suppose so. Why?"

The naive egotism of the answer only threw a softer light on the picture that had grown to fill his thoughts. He smiled inscrutably.

"Because in that case it is due to her to undeceive her," he said. "I am glad I have entertained her. I should like to have the opportunity to do so indefinitely. Do you think there's a chance for me?"

"What on earth do you mean?" asked his hostess, in unassumed stupefaction.

"I mean, do you think she would marry me?" Varian brought out plumply. "Is there--was there ever anybody else?"

For one instant Mrs. Dud lost her poise; in her eyes he almost saw more than she meant; the sheer, flat blow of it levelled her for a breath to the plane of other and ordinary women. But even as he thought it, it was gone. She put out her hand; she smiled; she shook her finger at him.

"I think, my friend, she would be a fool not to marry you," she answered him, clear-eyed; "and there was never," her tone was too sweet, he thought, to carry but one meaning--pleasure for him, "there was never anybody else!"

Varian walked straight to the garden. She was training a fiery wall of nasturtiums with firm white fingers. It occurred to him that he was ready to give up the tally-ho, and the Berkshires, and the scramble of pretty girls for the place beside

him, to sit quietly and watch her among her flowers.

"I'm getting old--old!" he said to himself, but he said it with a smile.

For he knew that no boy's heart ever beat more swiftly, no boy's tongue ever sought more excitedly to find the right words. But when he faced her a little doubt chilled him: she was so calm and complete, in her sunny, busy, balanced life, that he feared to disturb that sweet placidity. With an undercurrent of fear, a sudden realization that he had no more the blessed egotism of youth to drive him on, he walked beside her, outwardly content, at heart a little solitary. At some light question he turned and faced her.

"You could not have all the greenhouses, but there could be plenty of flowers," he said pleadingly.

"Flowers? Where?" she asked.

"Wherever we lived," he answered. "And oh, Mary, I think we could be happy together! Don't say no!" as she shrank a little. "Don't, Mary, for heaven's sake! I care too much--I care terribly. I am too old a man to care so much and--lose.... There, there, my dear girl, never mind. I can bear it, of course. Only I didn't know I'd planned it all out so, and--But never mind. I was going to have a bay-window full of--"

He turned away from her for a moment. But her hand was on his arm.

"We can plan it out together," she said.

He knew how she would blush; he had even dared to think how directly her clear gray eyes would meet his--her sky-ness was never hesitation--but he had not dreamed how soft her hair could be.