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PART FIRST

My Friend Prospero

I

The coachman drew up his horses before the castle gateway, where their hoofs beat a sort of fanfare on the stone pavement; and the footman, letting himself smartly down, pulled, with a peremptory gesture that was just not quite a swagger, the bronze hand at the end of the dangling bell-cord.

Seated alone in her great high-swung barouche, in the sweet April weather, Lady Blanchemain gave the interval that followed to a consideration of the landscape: first, sleeping in shadowy stillness, the formal Italian garden, its terraced lawns and metrical parterres, its straight dark avenues of ilex, its cypresses, fountains, statues, balustrades; and then, laughing in the breeze and the sun, the wild Italian valley, a forest of blossoming fruit-trees, with the river winding and glinting in its midst, with olive-clad hills blue-grey at either side, and beyond the hills, peering over their shoulders, the snow-peaks of mountains, crisp against the sky, and in the level distance the hazy shimmer of the lake.

"It is lovely," she exclaimed, fervently, in a whisper, "lovely.— And only a generation of blind-worms," was her after-thought, "could discern in it the slightest resemblance to the drop-scene of a theatre."

II

Big, humorous, emotional, imperious, but, above all, interested and sociable Lady Blanchemain: do you know her, I wonder? Her billowy white hair? Her handsome soft old face, with its smooth skin, and the good strong bony structure underneath? Her beautiful old grey eyes, full of tenderness and shrewdness, of curiosity, irony, indulgence, overarched and emphasized by regular black eyebrows? Her pretty little plump pink-white hands, (like two little elderly Cupids), with their shining panoply of rings? And her luxurious, courageous, high-hearted manner of dressing? The light colours and jaunty fashion of her gowns? Her laces, ruffles, embroideries? Her gay little bonnets? Her gems? Linda Baroness Blanchemain, of Fring Place, Sussex; Belmore Gardens, Kensington; and Villa Antonina, San Remo: big, merry, sociable, sentimental, worldly-wise, impetuous Linda Blanchemain: do you know her? If you do, I am sure you love her and rejoice in her; and enough is said. If you don't, I beg leave to present and to commend her.

I spoke, by the bye, of her "old" face, her "old" eyes. She is, to be sure, in so far as mere numbers of years tell, an old woman. But I once heard her throw out, in the heat of conversation, the phrase, "a young old thing like me;" and I thought she touched a truth.

III

Well, then, the footman, in his masterful way, pulled the bell-cord; Lady Blanchemain contemplated the landscape, and had her opinion of a generation that could liken it to the drop-scene of a theatre; and in due process of things the bell was answered.

It was answered by a man in a costume that struck my humorous old friend as pleasing: a sallow little man whose otherwise quite featureless suit of tweeds was embellished by scarlet worsted shoulder-knots. With lack-lustre eyes, from behind the plexus of the grille, he rather stolidly regarded the imposing British equipage, and waited to be addressed.

Lady Blanchemain addressed him in the language of Pistoja. Might one, she inquired, with her air of high affability, in her distinguished old voice, might one visit the castle?—a question purely of convention, for she had not come hither without an assurance from her guide-book.

Shoulder-knots, however,—either to flaunt his attainments, or because indeed Pistoiese (what though the polyglot races of Italy have agreed upon it as a *lingua franca*) offered the greater difficulties to his Lombardian tongue,—replied in French.

"I do not think so, Madame," was his reply, in a French sufficiently heavy and stiff-jointed, enforced by a dubious oscillation of the head.

Lady Blanchemain's black eyebrows shot upwards, marking her surprise; then drew together, marking her determination.

"But of course one can—it's in the guide-book," she insisted, and held up the red-bound volume.

The sceptic gave a shrug, as one who disclaimed responsibility and declined discussion.

"Me, I do not think so. But patience! I will go and ask," he said; and, turning his back, faded from sight in the depths of the dark tunnel-like *porte-cochère*.

Vexed, perplexed, Lady Blanchemain fidgeted a little. To have taken this long drive for nothing!—sweet though the weather was, fair though the valley: but she was not a person who could let the means excuse the end. She neither liked nor was accustomed to see her enterprises balked,—to see doors remain closed in her face. Doors indeed had a habit of flying open at her approach. Besides, the fellow's manner,—his initial stare and silence, his tone when he spoke, his shrug, his exhortation to patience, and something too in the conduct of his back as he departed,—hadn't it lacked I don't know what of becoming deference? to satisfy her amour-propre, at any rate, that the mistake, if there was a mistake, sprang from no malapprehension of her own, she looked up chapter and verse. Yes, there the assurance stood, circumstantial, in all the convincingness of the sturdy, small black type:—

"From Roccadoro a charming excursion may be made, up the beautiful Val Rampio, to the mediæval village of Sant' Alessina (7 miles), with its magnificent castle, in fine grounds, formerly a seat of the Sforzas, now belonging to the Prince of Zelt-Neuminster, and containing the celebrated Zelt-Neuminster collection of paintings. Incorporated in the castle buildings, a noticeable peculiarity, are the parish church and presbytery. Accessible daily, except Monday, from 10 to 4; attendant 1 fr."

So then! To-day was Wednesday, the hour between two and three. So—! Her amour-propre triumphed, but I fancy her vexation mounted....

IV

"I beg your pardon. It's disgraceful you should have been made to wait. The porter is an idiot. You wish, of course, to see the house—?"

The English words, on a key of spontaneous apology, with a very zealous inflection of concern—yet, at the same time, with a kind of entirely respectful and amiable abruptness, as of one hailing a familiar friend,—were pronounced in a breath by a brisk, cheerful, unmistakably English voice.

Lady Blanchemain, whose attention had still been on the incriminated page, looked quickly up, and (English voice and spontaneous apology notwithstanding) I won't vouch that the answer at the tip of her impulsive tongue mightn't have proved a hasty one—but the speaker's appearance gave her pause: the appearance of the tall, smiling, unmistakably English young man, by whom Shoulder-knots had returned accompanied, and who now, having pushed the grille ajar and issued forth, stood, placing himself with a tentative obeisance at her service, beside the carriage: he was so clearly, first of all—what, if it hadn't been for her preoccupation, his voice, tone, accent would have warned her to expect—so visibly a gentleman; and then, with the even pink of his complexion, his yellowish hair and beard, his alert, friendly, very blue blue eyes—with his very blue blue flannels too, and his brick-red knitted tie—he was so vivid and so unusual.

His appearance gave her a pause; and in the result she in her turn almost apologized.

"This wretched book," she explained, pathetically bringing forward her *pièce justificative*, "said that it was open to the public."

The vivid young man hastened to put her in the right.

"It is—it is," he eagerly affirmed. "Only," he added, with a vaguely rueful modulation, and always with that amiable abruptness, as a man very much at his ease, while his blue eyes whimsically brightened, "only the blessed public never comes—we're so off the beaten path. And I suppose one mustn't expect a Scioccone"—his voice

swelled on the word, and he cast sidelong a scathing glance at his summoner—"to cope with unprecedented situations. Will you allow me to help you out?"

"Ah," thought Lady Blanchemain, "Eton," his tone and accent now nicely appraised by an experienced ear. "Eton—yes; and probably—h'm? Probably Balliol," her experience led her further to surmise. But what—with her insatiable curiosity about people, she had of course immediately begun to wonder—what was an Eton and Balliol man doing, apparently in a position of authority, at this remote Italian castle?

V

He helped her out, very gracefully, very gallantly; and under his guidance she made the tour of the vast building: its greater court and lesser court; its cloisters, with their faded frescoes, and their marvellous outlook, northwards, upon the Alps; its immense rotunda, springing to the open dome, where the sky was like an inset plaque of turquoise; its "staircase of honour," guarded, in an ascending file, by statues of men in armour; and then, on the *piano nobile*, its endless chain of big, empty, silent, splendid state apartments, with their pavements of gleaming marble, in many-coloured patterns, their painted and gilded ceilings, tapestried walls, carved wood and moulded stucco, their pictures, pictures, pictures, and their atmosphere of stately desolation, their memories of another age, their reminders of the power and pomp of people who had long been ghosts.

He was tall (with that insatiable curiosity of hers, she was of course continuously studying him), tall and broad-shouldered, but not a bit rigid or inflexible—of a figure indeed conspicuously supple, suave in its quick movements, soft in its energetic lines, a figure that could with equal thoroughness be lazy in repose and vehement in action. His yellow hair was thick and fine, and if it hadn't been cropped so close would have curled a little. His beard, in small crinkly spirals, did actually curl, and toward the edge its yellow burned to red. And his blue eyes were so very very blue, and so very keen, and so very frank and pleasant—"They are like sailors' eyes," thought Lady Blanchemain, who had a sentiment for sailors. He carried his head well thrown back, as a man who was perfectly sure of himself and perfectly unselfconscious; and thus unconsciously he drew attention to the vigorous sweep of his profile, the decisive angles of his brow and nose. His voice was brisk and cheerful and masculine; and that abruptness with which he spoke—which seemed, as it were, to imply a previous acquaintance—was so tempered by manifest good breeding and so coloured by manifest good will, that it became a positive part and parcel of what one liked in him. It was the abruptness of a man very much at his ease, very much a man of the world, yet it was somehow, in its essence, boyish. It expressed freshness, sincerity, conviction, a boyish whole-

sale surrender of himself to the business of the moment; it expressed, perhaps above all, a boyish thorough good understanding with his interlocutor. "It amounts," thought his present interlocutrice, "to a kind of infinitely sublimated bluffness."

And then she fell to examining his clothes: his loose, soft, very blue blue flannels, with vague stripes of darker blue; his soft shirt, with its rolling collar; his red tie, knitted of soft silk, and tied in a loose sailor's-knot. She liked his clothes, and she liked the way he wore them. They suited him. They were loose and comfortable and unconventional, but they were beautifully fresh and well cared for, and showed him, if indifferent to the fashion-plate of the season, meticulous in a fashion of his own. "It's hard to imagine him dressed otherwise," she said, and instantly had a vision of him dressed for dinner.

But what – what – what was he doing at Castel Sant' Alessina?

VI

Meanwhile he plainly knew a tremendous lot about Italian art. Lady Blanchemain herself knew a good deal, and could recognize a pundit. He illumined their progress by a running fire of exposition and commentary, learned and discerning, to which she encouragingly listened, and, as occasion required, amiably responded. But Boltraffios, Bernardino Luinis, even a putative Giorgione, could not divert her mind from its human problem. What was he doing at Castel Sant' Alessina, the property, according to her guide-book, of an Austrian prince? What was his status here, apparently (bar servants) in solitary occupation? Was he its tenant? He couldn't, surely, this well-dressed, high-bred, cultivated young compatriot, he couldn't be a mere employé, a steward or curator? No: probably a tenant. Antecedently indeed it might seem unlikely that a young Englishman should become the tenant of an establishment so huge and so sequestered; but was it conceivable that this particular young Englishman should be a mere employé? And was there any other alternative? She hearkened for a word, a note, that might throw light; but of such notes, such words, a young man's conversation, in the circumstances, would perhaps naturally yield a meagre crop.

"You mustn't let me tire you," he said presently, as one who had forgotten and suddenly remembered that looking at pictures is exhausting work. "Won't you sit here and rest a little?"

They were in a smaller room than any they had previously traversed, an octagonal room, which a single lofty window filled with sunshine.

"Oh, thank you," said Lady Blanchemain, and seated herself on the circular divan in the centre of the polished terrazza floor. She wasn't really tired in the least, the indefatigable old sight-seer; but a respite from picture-gazing would enable her to turn the talk. She put up her mother-of-pearl lorgnon, and glanced round the walls; then, lowering it, she frankly raised her eyes, full of curiosity and kindness, to her companion's.

"It's a surprise, and a delightful one," she remarked, "having pushed so far afield in a foreign land, to be met by the good offices of a fellow-countryman—it's so nice of you to be English."

And her eyes softly changed, their curiosity being veiled by a kind of humorous content.

The young man's face, from its altitude of six-feet-something, beamed responsively down upon her.

"Oh," he laughed, "you mustn't give me too much credit. To be English nowadays is so ingloriously easy—since foreign lands have become merely the wider suburbs of London."

Lady Blanchemain's eyes lighted approvingly. Afterwards she looked half serious.

"True," she discriminated, "London has spread pretty well over the whole of Europe; but England, thanks be to goodness, still remains mercifully small."

"Yes," agreed the young man, though with a lilt of dubiety, and a frown of excogitation, as if he weren't sure that he had quite caught her drift.

"The mercy of it is," she smilingly pointed out, "that English folk, decent ones, have no need to fight shy of each other when they meet as strangers. We all know more or less about each other by hearsay, or about each other's people; and we're all pretty sure to have some common acquaintances. The smallness of England makes for sociability and confidence."

"It ought to, one would think," the young man admitted. "But does it, in fact? It had somehow got stuck in my head that English folk, meeting as strangers, were rather apt to glare. We're most of us in such a funk, you see, lest, if we treat a stranger with civility, he should turn out not to be a duke."

"Oh," cried Lady Blanchemain, with merriment, "you forget that I said *decent*. I meant, of course, folk who *are* dukes. We're all dukes—or bagmen."

The young man chuckled; but in a minute he pulled a long face, and made big, ominous eyes.

"I feel I ought to warn you," he said in a portentous voice, "that some of us are mere marquises—of the house of Carabas."

Lady Blanchemain, her whole expansive person, simmered with enjoyment.

"Bless you," she cried, "those are the ducalest, for marquises—of the house of Carabas—are men of dash and spirit, born to bear everything before them, and to marry the King's daughter."

With that, she had a moment of abstraction. Again, her eyeglass up, she glanced round the walls—hung, in this octagonal room, with dim-coloured portraits of women, all in wonderful toilets, with wonderful hair and head-gear, all wonderfully young and pleased with things, and all four centuries dead. They caused her a little feeling of uneasiness, they were so dead and silent, and yet somehow, in their fixed postures, with their unblinking eyes, their unvarying smiles, so—as it seemed to her—so watchful, so intent; and it was a relief to turn from them to the window, to the picture framed by the window of warm, breathing, heedless nature. But all the while, in her interior mind, she was busy with the man before her. "He looks," she considered, "tall as he is, and with his radiant blondeur—with the gold in his hair and beard, and the sea-blue in his eyes—he looks like a hero out of some old Norse saga. He looks like-what's his name?—like Odin. I must really compel him to explain himself."

It very well may be, meantime, that he was reciprocally busy with her, taking her in, admiring her, this big, jolly, comely, high-mannered old woman, all in soft silks and drooping laces, who had driven into his solitude from Heaven knew where, and was quite unquestionably Someone, Heaven knew who.

She had a moment of abstraction; but now, emerging from it, she used her eyeglass as a pointer, and indicatively swept the circle of painted eavesdroppers.

"They make one feel like their grandmother, their youth is so flagrant," she sighed, "these grandmothers of the Quattrocento. Ah, well, we can only be old once, and we should take advantage of the privileges of age while we have 'em. Old people, I am thankful to say, are allowed, amongst other things, to be inquisitive. I'm brazen-

ly so. Now, if one of our common acquaintances were at hand—for with England still mercifully small, we're sure to possess a dozen, you and I—what do you think is the question I should ask him?—I should ask him," she avowed, with a pretty effect of hesitation, and a smile that went as an advance-guard to disarm resentment, "to tell me who you are, and all about you—and to introduce you to me."

"Oh," cried the young man, laughing. He laughed for a second or two. In the end, pleasantly, with a bow, "My name," he said, "if you can possibly care to know, is Blanchemain."

His visitor caught her breath. She sat up straight, and gazed hard at him.

"Blanchemain?" she gasped.