

MISS BRETHERTON

By MRS. HUMPHREY WARD, AUTHOR OF "ROBERT ELSNER."

"But now, I said to her warmly, you have got free; or rather, you are on the way to freedom."

"She thought a little without speaking, his resting on her hand, her elbow on the table, her eyes fixed on the red brown mass of the Armenian convent. She seemed to be drinking in the dazzling harmonies of blue and warm and pearly light. When she spoke again it was very slowly, and though it was only a few words to a number of complex impressions."

"Yes," she said; "it seems to me that I am different; but I can't tell exactly how or why. I see all sorts of possibilities, new meanings everywhere, that is the half of it. But the other, and the greater, half is how to make all these new feelings and any new knowledge which may come to me tell on my art. And then she changed altogether with one of those delightful transitions of hers, and her face rippled with laughter. 'At present the chief result of the difference, whatever it may be, seems to be to make me more unmanageable at home. I am forever disagreeing with all the people who used to do this and I won't do that. I am getting to enjoy having my own way in the most absolute manner. And then she caught my hand, that was holding her, between both her own, and said half laughing and half in earnest: 'Did you ever realize that I don't know any single language besides my own—not even French? That I can't read any French book or any French play?'"

"Well," I said, half laughing, too, "it is very astonishing. And you know it can't go on if you are to do what I think you do. French you positively must learn, and learn quickly. It is available to you, it is a good play and a tradition of our own; but for the moment France is the center of your art, and you cannot remain at a distance from it. The French have organized their knowledge; it is available to you, it is ours. It is still floating and amateurish."

"And so on. You may imagine it, my dear Eustace; I spare you any more of it verbatim. After I had talked away for a long time, she said to me, 'I have the absolute necessity that she should know French and become acquainted with French acting and French dramatic ideals, she pulled me up in the full career of eloquence by demanding with a little provocative smile, a twinkling look, and a little French play—'"

"'Explain to me, please, how it is to be done?'" "Oh, I said, 'nothing is easier. Do you know anything at all?'" "Very little. I once had a term's lesson at Kingdon."

"Very well, then," I went on, enjoying this little comedy of a neglected education, 'get a French maid, a French master and a novel; I will provide you with "Comedies" and a translation to-morrow."

"As for the French maid," she answered, dubiously, shaking her head, 'I don't know. I expect my old black woman that I brought with me from London will do very well, or perhaps murder her. But the master can be managed and the novel. Will none of you laugh at me if you see me trailing a French grammar about?'"

"And so she actually began today. She makes a pretense of keeping her novel and a little dictionary and grammar in a bag and hides them when any one appears. But Paul has already begun to tease her about her new and mysterious occupations, and I foresee that he will presently press the greater part of his mornings in teaching her. I never saw anybody attract him like this, she is absolutely different from anything I have seen before, as she says, 'I am sure I shall be a great success in my studies; do you not think I shall be?'"

"During the last few days I have not been seeing much of Miss Bretherton. She has been devoting herself to her family and Paul and I have been doing our pictures. We cannot persuade her to take any very large dose of galleries; it seems to me that her thoughts are set on one subject—and one subject only—and while she is in this first stage of intimacy it is likely that anything else will be chanced."

"It is amusing to study the dissatisfaction of the uncle and aunt with the turn things have taken since they left London. Mr. Worrall has been evidently discontented to discover his niece's life is to bottom—to choose her plays for her, helped by Mr. Robinson; to advise her as to her fellow-artists and her behavior in society, and all of course, with a shrewd eye to the family profits and as little regard as possible to any fantastic conception of art."

"Now, however, Isabel has asserted herself in several unexpected ways. She has refused altogether to open her autumn season with a play which would have been profitable before they left London—a flimsy spectacular performance, quite unworthy of her. As soon as possible she will make important changes in the troupe who are to be with her, and at the beginning of September she is coming to stay three weeks with us in Paris, and, in all probability (though the world is to know nothing of it), Ferrault of the Conservatoire, who is a great friend of ours, will give her a great deal of positive instruction and his management is particularly expediting to Mr. Worrall. He regards it as sure to be known, a ridiculous confession of weakness on Isabel's part, and so on. However, in spite of his wise and judicious disapproval, she has stood firm, and matters are so arranged."

"Saturday night, August 25. 'This evening we persuaded her at last to give us some scenes of Juliet. How I wish you could have been here to see her! Those experiences which remain with us as a sort of perpetual witness to the poetry which life holds in it, and may yield up to one at any moment. It was in our little garden; the moon was high and the stars were out, and the narrow canal running past our side railed into the Grand Canal was a shining streak of silver. The air was balmy and absolutely still; no more perfect setting to the scene of poetry than I have ever imagined. Paul sat at a little table in front of the rest of us; he was to read Romeo and the Nurse in the scenes she had chosen, while in the background were the Worralls and Lucy Bretherton (the little crippled actress), Mr. Wallace and myself. It was the balcony scene, the morning scene with Romeo, the scene with the Nurse after Tybalt's death and the scene of the plaiter. There is an old sundial in the garden, which caught the moonlight and the stars, and when she looked up, her eyes fixed upon the throbbing, moonlit sky, her white brocaded dress glistening here and there in the pale light—a vision of perfect beauty. And when she began her sight-seeing speech—"

"O, Romeo, Romeo, where art thou, Romeo?—it seemed to me as if the night—the passionate Italian night—had found its voice—the only voice which fitted it."

"Afterwards I tried as much as possible to shake off the impressions peculiar to the ordinary conditions of the stage, to judge her purely as an actress. In the love scenes there seemed hardly anything to find fault with. I thought I could trace in many places the influence of her constant dramatic studies and exercises with Paul. The flow of passion was continuous and electric, but marked by all the simplicity, all the sweetness, all the young woman's extravagance which belong to Juliet. The great scene with the Nurse had many fine things in it; she had evidently worked hard at it line by line, and that speech of Juliet's with its extraordinary dramatic capabilities—"

"Shall I speak ill of him that is my husband?—was given with admirable variety and suggestions of intonation. The dreary sweetness of her still lies with me, and her gestures as she paced restlessly along the little strip of moonlit path. The speech before she takes the poison was the best I have ever seen; the glances and horror of it are beyond her resources yet; she could not infuse them with that terrible beauty which Desdemona would have given to every line. But where is the English actress that has ever yet succeeded in it?"

"We were all silent for a minute after her great cry—"

"I can't do it, that speech; I can't do it!"

"It was more words," said Paul; "You'll get it. But the rest was admirable. You'll see it in the play."

"So I have," she said, brightening at the warmth of his praise. "But Didrot is wrong, wrong, wrong! When I could once reach the feeling of the Tybalt speech, when I could once feel the love of Romeo, I could have breath in which I loved him for being Romeo, all was easy; gesture and movement came to me; I learned them, and the thing would be done."

"The reference, of course, meant that Paul had been reading to her his favorite 'Paradoxes sur le Comedien,' and that she had been stimulated, but not converted, by the famous contention that the actor should be the mere cold and tranquil spectator, the initiator of other men's feelings, while possessing those of his own. He naturally would have argued, but she would not have it, and made her rest. She would not have it by the effort, and I do not like this excessive fatigue of hers. I often wonder whether the life she is leading is not too exciting for her. This is supposed to be her holiday, and she is really going through more brain waste than she has ever done in a lifetime. I feel that I should like to see her whole energies into one thing only, the training of Miss Bretherton, and he is a man of forty-eight, with an immense experience, and she a girl of twenty-one, with everything that a young actress could desire. He is capable of exciting her. I really must keep him in check."

"Mr. Wallace, when we had sent her home across the canal—their apartment is on the second floor, and the railway station is a few minutes' walk—could not get enough to me of his amusement at the change in her."

"What have you done to her?" he asked. "I can hardly recognize the old Miss Bretherton as at all really new, for four months since your brother's work was done in the 'White Lady.' Why, you have bewitched her."

"We have done something, I admit, I said; but I don't know what it is. I don't know how you see developed in her now was really a new person, and she has come in contact with the new world and the new ideal which you and Eustace represented to her."

"There, my dear Eustace, have I given you your due? Oh, Miss Bretherton says so many kind things about you! I'll take special pains to tell you some of them next time I write."

"WALLACE TO KENDAL. 'PARIS, Aug. 27. 'MY DEAR KENDAL.—This has been a day of events which, I believe, will interest you as much as they did me. I told Mme. de Chateauxvieux that I should write to you tonight, and I have done so. I have written in place of one from her for a day or two. We have been to Torcello today—your sister, M. de Chateauxvieux, Miss Bretherton, and I. The expedition itself was delightful, but that I have no time to describe. I only want to tell you what happened when we got to Torcello."

"But first you will, of course, know from your sister's letter—she tells me she writes to you twice a week—how absorbed we have all been in the artistic progress of Miss Bretherton. I myself never saw such a change, such an extraordinary development as she has undergone since she came to Paris. I did not know her further into her? I see now, as I look back upon her old self, that the new self was there in germ. But I think perhaps it may have been the vast disproportion of her color to the rest of her; it was irritation with the public that made us deliver an over-hasty verdict on her."

"However that may be, I have been making up my mind for some days past, that the only way to do her justice was to write her a letter, and which you so generously undertook, was a blunder on my part which it would be delightful to repair, and which no artistic considerations whatever need prevent. I have now written it, and I think I have done so in a way which will do her justice. I have written it in Juliet the other night. Imperfect and harsh, of course, here and there, but still a creature to build many a great hopes upon, if ever there was one. 'The black and white' is a very rich and beautiful law is merciless to them whenever they appear, and she is forever working with a view to its approval, and also, I think, from a more or less things she has said, with a monthly or two, and I have written it in Juliet the other night. Imperfect and harsh, of course, here and there, but still a creature to build many a great hopes upon, if ever there was one. 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