

The Storyteller.

GOOD LOOKS ARE NOT EVERYTHING.

I WAS the plain one of the family. Lucy was fair and blue-eyed; Myra was dark, with a bright colour and neat features, whilst Mave was tall and stately, with the face and figure of a Diana. My sisters were all well pleased with themselves, and very angry with me. I had no right to be so ugly, they often remarked—it spoilt the harmony of things and made people talk.

'After all, Mave, what does it matter?' I heard my mother say, in a tone of expostulation, one morning. 'Good looks are not everything. "Handsome is as handsome does," remember, and a better girl than Molly never lived. She ought to be a model to you all.'

I blushed to the roots of my hair, and wished I dared come out from my hiding place behind the window curtains. But I was afraid to show myself, and sat very still, hoping my mother and sister would soon leave the room.

'Good!' Mave tossed her handsome head and shrugged her shoulders. 'Goodness doesn't count for much in this world. If a girl can only be a saint, she had better go into a convent at once.'

'I don't see that,' my mother answered sharply. 'And you'll please keep such thoughts to yourself. It's all very well to be pretty—but, we're as God made us. And a girl like Molly would bring a blessing on any home.'

'I'm glad you think so,' Mave laughed a little contemptuously. 'For I'm quite sure you'll get leave to keep her. No one will be anxious to steal her away from you.'

'You are very severe. But wait till Molly puts up her hair and gets suitable frocks, and you'll see how nice she'll look.'

'She'll cost you a fortune. Her dress allowance will have to be twice as big as ours.'

'And so it shall be, if necessary. Everything shall be done to make my sweet Brownie appear to the best advantage.'

'Dear, kind mother!' I cried, as I heard the door shut, and I knew that I was alone. 'I don't think dress will make much difference in your Brownie. And she must be content to remain plain and unnoticed. It is God's will. And if He will but make her good and gentle and patient, and you will love her thus, she will not complain.'

The tears that had been long gathering in my eyes now splashed down in great drops upon my clasped hands, and for a moment or two I sat in my secluded corner weeping silently. Then I jumped up and said:

'What a goose I am. These are the last tears I shall shed over such nonsense. If I am plain what matter. My sisters are pretty and admired, and as frivolous as can be, but they are not happy, always wanting something—craving for something that they never seem to get. I shall never be pretty, never be admired, and am not naturally frivolous. I shall not try to be either one thing or the other. But I will be happy. The secret of happiness is to be content—never to expect or to look for anything beyond what we've got, and to devote ourselves to others. I'll do that. My mother shall be my first object. I'll do all I can to make her life bright and happy.'

Having come to this determination I went upstairs, bathed my face and re-arranged my hair, and putting on my freshest white blouse, hurried down to tea.

In three months' time I was to come out as a young lady. My skirts were to be lengthened, my dresses made by Mave's Parisian dressmaker.

'I don't think they'll suit my style, mother dear,' I said, smiling into her loving eyes. 'Sweet simplicity is the best thing for me.'

'Not at all, dearie,' kissing me. 'As long as I can afford it you must be well dressed.'

I laid my cheek against hers, saying softly:

'It will be a waste of money, mother dear. Your little Brownie is not worth it.'

'My little Brownie,' pressing me in her arms, 'is worth more than I can ever give her. And as far as I can I'll see that she has everything of the very best.'

Taking little interest in my new finery, which I felt could never make me look anything but a small, brown, insignificant person, I was greatly relieved when my last visit to the dressmaker had been paid, and my outfit was complete.

'You're a lucky girl,' said Mave, coming into my room one evening and gazing round at the dainty clothes that lay upon the bed and chairs and couch. 'I'd love to be beginning all over again like that.'

'But you have lots of lovely things.'

'Not half what I want. And my allowance is so absurdly small that I'm always in debt.'

'That's a pity,' I said gravely. 'I think a hundred a year is a good deal to spend on one's clothes.'

'Oh! do you? Well, just wait. But then, of course, you're different. You'll never have the temptations I have to be extravagant.'

'I hope not. Anyway, I don't mean to give in to them.'

'You're a virtuous creature. Too good for this world,' laughed Mave, and she swept gracefully out of the room.

'Too good and too plain,' I sighed. 'Molly Craven, you're a mistake. If you hadn't a mother to love you, your lot would be a sad one.'

When I went down to the drawing-room before dinner that evening, in one of my new frocks, an exquisite white muslin, trimmed with fine lace and insertion, a bunch of scarlet poppies on my breast, a tall, good-looking young man was standing by the piano turning over Mave's music. He was very fair, but with deep-

set dark grey eyes, that gave colour and intelligence to his handsome face. Mave looked superb in pale mauve silk and Honiton lace. She laughed as I came in and, turning on the music-stool, introduced me to our guest.

'Miss Molly Craven, Lord Vandeleur,' she said. 'Her first appearance in long frocks.' And she swung round again to the piano with a silvery, and I thought somewhat mocking, laugh.

Lord Vandeleur bowed, and as I met his frank eyes I recovered my composure, which had been suddenly routed by Mave's peculiar introduction.

'I am delighted to make your acquaintance, Miss Molly, either in short frocks or long,' he said with a friendly smile. 'I have heard a great deal of you as a tennis-player.'

'Yes, Molly is terribly energetic,' Mave remarked with a drawl. 'These little people always are. Now, Lord Vandeleur, we'll go over this again, please.'

He turned to the piano, and after sitting quite still for moment with crimson cheeks and loudly-beating heart I stole away to look for my mother.

As I paused in the conservatory I heard Lord Vandeleur say to Mave:

'There's something very nice about your little sister, although she's not at all like the rest of the family.'

'Happily not,' she answered dryly. 'We consider her very plain.'

'Oh, do you? Well, I'm not so sure. Those little brown things are very fascinating.'

'This is too bad,' I cried, stamping my foot. 'Why can't they leave me and my looks alone?' And I fled away, angry and ashamed.

For the next few days we lived in a whirl of excitement and gaiety. There were dances, tea-parties, and tennis, both at home and abroad. I went everywhere—my mother insisted on that—and thanks to the kindness of friends and my own good spirits I enjoyed myself thoroughly.

Lord Vandeleur was a welcome guest at all these entertainments, and although he was an acknowledged admirer of Mave's and was constantly by her side, he was extremely kind to me and paid me many little attentions that filled me with wonder and gratitude. I was always bright and happy in his company, and the only time I felt inclined to envy Mave her good looks was when I saw him talking and dancing with her and heard people say what a handsome couple they made. But I resolutely put these thoughts aside, and was as merry and free from care as the prettiest girl amongst the many at these gay parties.

The idea of trouble was far from our minds in those days. No fear of coming sorrow dimmed our happiness for a moment. And yet, though we knew it not, our time of trial was fast approaching, our years of ease and luxury were drawing to a close.

One evening we came home late from a tennis party. I was in high spirits. Lord Vandeleur had been my partner in a set that afternoon, and as I had played my very best, we had won. My success, the compliments I had received, and my partner's evident pleasure in being with me, had almost turned my head, and I was in a state of wild elation when I ran into the morning-room to look for my mother. But she was not there, and to my surprise Father Ryan, our parish priest, came forward to meet me, and with grave, sad eyes, took my hand in his.

'Molly,' he said (he had known me from my infancy and had given me many words of advice and comfort during my life), 'a great sorrow has fallen upon your mother and upon you all. But God will help you to bear it. You are brave and good and ready to submit to His holy will in all things, I know.'

'Father, what is it?' I cried, growing white and trembling with sudden fear. 'My mother!'

'Your mother is well, dear child, but in sad trouble. Your father was taken ill soon after you went out. He was worried and anxious. Things had been going wrong in the city of late and—'

'He—is—dead. Oh, father! I see it in your eyes.'

'He—God rest his soul. His call was sudden. But Our Lord is good. His mercy is great. And He will help and care for you as He has always done. Go to your mother, Molly. You were the only one she asked for in her sorrow.'

'Oh, father!' I sobbed. 'It is very terrible. Poor, dear father—dead.'

And then I turned away and staggered out of the room.

A moment later I was weeping my heart out in my mother's arms.

My father's sudden death, and the discovery that he had left us well nigh penniless, was an awful blow to us all. We were prostrate with grief and misery, and for some weeks were incapable of raising a hand to help ourselves.

But the situation was a grave one, and before the first two months had elapsed we were obliged to sell off everything and leave our beautiful home for ever. Then came the question of what we were to do. For every one of us, mother and all, had to turn round and, ill-fitted as we were for any kind of really remunerative work, try and earn our own bread.

A cousin of my mother's, a hard-working old priest in a poor and lonely parish in the Cotswold Hills, offered her the post of housekeeper in his modest establishment, at an almost nominal salary.

And glad to get away to some quiet spot, where she could think of and pray for her lost darling in peace, she accepted his offer. Tall, beautiful Mave, with her graceful figure and stately carriage, soon found a place at a hundred a year in Messrs. Jay's big show-rooms in Regent street. Lucy went as a governess to Lady Dalrymple's children, and Myra joined a well-to-do friend, who was opening a bonnet shop in Bond street, and wanted a pretty, dainty little person to sail about her rooms and persuade people they looked charming in her very costly and extremely fashionable head-gear.