

The Storyteller

THE INCOMPATIBLES

(Concluded from last week.)

The next morning was spent in roaming about the place, in company with a half-grown mulatto girl whom Cousin Rachel had deputed to wait on her young mistress. In the afternoon, her usual siesta finished, the old lady tapped on the door of Dora's room.

'I am going to show you everything that belonged to Winston when he was little,' she said. 'I know that will please you more than anything else I could do for you. I want you to get acquainted with it, so that when he comes you will be able to renew old memories with him. He will enjoy it so much better now.'

Dora smiled as she took the small withered hand in hers. She felt it incumbent upon her to say something. 'You love Winston very much, don't you, cousin Rachel?' she remarked.

'Love him! I adore him. Everybody here does. No one could help loving Winston.'

She looked radiantly up into Dora's face. The young wife looked as radiantly down upon her. She had always been susceptible to the moods of others, and who could do aught, by word or glance or opportunity silence, to sadden the thoughts of this dear old lady, in whose eyes she was a loved and happy wife? No: let that come later, when it must, for the present she too was going to be happy.

'First, I am going to show you the room Winston had when he was little. Really, there were two rooms, one opening into the other. This was the nursery. It would still do for one.'

The room was filled with games and toys of every kind. A hobbyhorse stood upon the broad hearth awaiting a rider. A low seat ran around two sides, close to the broad windows, which commanded a charming view of the surrounding woods and fields.

'See! here is even the little doll that Winston loved,' said Cousin Rachel, pointing to a battered specimen of dollhood, attired in a red dress and white apron and seated in a little rockingchair. 'He used to call it his wife. He thought it the most beautiful thing in existence. How I have laughed behind his back when he would caress the ridiculous thing! Poor doll! she has sat there lonely and unloved for many a year. Winston has something dearer now.'

Dora said not a word.

'Doesn't it touch you to the bottom of your heart to see and hear about these little things?' continued Rachel.

'Yes, it does,' answered Dora in a low voice.

Cousin Rachel opened another door.

'This is where he slept,' she said. 'This room is smaller, of course; but it is very pleasant.'

And so it was. A child might have slept in the little white bed the night before. Thin, ruffled sash curtains partially concealed the windows. In the closet two small sailor hats were on the shelves, a pair of knee-trousers hung inside the door. On a table between the windows were a Latin grammar, an old geography, and two or three well-worn story-books.

'The Swiss Family Robinson' and 'Cecil and His Dog,' said Cousin Rachel, opening them. 'He did love those books—when he was little. He used to read them over and over again. And here, on the lower shelf of the table, are his copybooks—from the very beginning. And this is his first French dictation book. 'Aimons nous les uns les autres.' Dear child! he took that for his motto, and he has always lived up to it. He was never anything but kind to everybody.'

Dora took the book from her hand. On the front page, in large characters, she read the words aloud, translating them: 'Let us love one another.' They seemed to ring in her ears—she was growing dizzy.

'Let us go into the garden,' she said. 'I do not feel very well.'

'Yes, yes, of course. I thought you seemed silent, my dear. You are really more quiet than I imagined. Winston had given me the idea that you were very lively.'

'I used to be, I think,' said Dora, slowly.

'But I may have changed in that respect since my marriage. No doubt I have.'

They went downstairs and into the garden. Cousin Rachel led the way to a miniature lake at the lower end. They seated themselves on a bench near it. Presently two beautiful swans sailed out from beneath the shade of some overhanging bushes.

'There are Jupiter and Juno,' said Cousin Rachel. 'They have been in the lake for a great many years:

long before Winston was born. He gave them those names—when he was little. He was about eleven, I think—just after he had begun to study mythology. Once he fell into the water over there, under that tree, where it is deepest. He was nearly drowned. I shall never forget it. Scipio heard him call and jumped in. The poor little fellow was so brave about it.'

Dora got up.

'Let us walk,' she said—'unless you are too tired, Cousin Rachel.'

'No. When I walk slowly it does not tire me. Shall we go down to the edge of the wood?'

'Come, lean on me,' said Dora.

'It is so nice to have you here,' answered the old lady, 'and to know that you are Winston's wife! Do you see that bench yonder?' she went on, as they neared the first group of trees. 'Winston always came here to read in summer when he was little. Just behind it, between four sycamores which form a square, he made what he used to call his "study garden." Violets grew there and lilies of the valley. If you had been here last month you would have seen them. Ah, there are a few violets left! I am going to gather them for you.'

Dora leaned back on the green bench. In a few moments Cousin Rachel came to her with a little bouquet of the sweet-scented purple blossoms.

'Let me pin them on your bosom,' she said. 'How delighted Winston would be to see them there: children of the flowers he planted when he was little!'

The next morning they visited the stables.

'Here is Boniface!' said Cousin Rachel, stroking an old grey donkey that stood quietly nibbling grass. 'Has Winston never told you about Boniface, the donkey he loved so, when he was little?'

And so they continued, step by step, through the stables, to the negro cabins, where the people all inquired for Mars Winston with the tenderest affection, especially the old men and women who had known and loved him 'when he was little.' And by degrees Dora learned how careful of their conduct he had always been, and still was; of the sweets for the children and the bright bandanas and tobacco for the elders that came regularly every Christmas to Longwood, addressed to each by name.

Then they went across the plantation to the cemetery where his parents were buried. A tombstone of dark granite had been placed at the head of each grave. Both were carefully tended and enclosed by a heavy iron fence.

'They have been dead a long time,' said Dora, bending over to read the inscriptions.

'When Winston was eleven his mother died,' answered Cousin Rachel, 'his father when he was fifteen. Let us sit here while I tell you about them—something he would never do.'

Dora readily consented; and, seated on the sward at the foot of the graves, with her arm around the young wife, Cousin Rachel went on:

'I am going to tell you because I think you ought to know. Winston's parents were eccentric, both of them. They were as good and honorable as it is possible for two persons to be, but they were not well-mated—were not congenial. They realised this all too soon, and, instead of quarrelling, decided to live practically apart. His father remained abroad a great deal; when he was here the mother visited about among her relatives. Both loved the boy, their only child; but neither was so unjust as to wish to deprive the other of him. Consequently he lived here alone with me for the greater part of the time. He was very fond of them, though, poor little fellow! I tried to make up to him all that his life lacked—when he was little. I gave him of my best, and he has returned it a hundred-fold. Oh, how happy I felt when he wrote me that he was about to be married. And ever since his letters have been full of you, my dear; and it has rejoiced my poor old heart.'

'He writes to you of me, then, Cousin Rachel?' asked Dora.

'Always, always. You are his life.'

'Poor Winston!' thought Dora. 'It is kind of him to keep up the fiction of happiness with this poor old woman. He does not wish to grieve her by doing heart.'

'I tell you all this,' resumed Cousin Rachel, 'because, being the child of such a marriage, and having been thus peculiarly situated, you must not be surprised if in some respects he may be also a little eccentric, perhaps reserved, perhaps nervous, perhaps even at times apparently self-absorbed and cold. I do not say that you have ever observed these things in him. I hope and believe marriage may have opened for him a vista of joy and content that his infancy and childhood unfortunately missed. But I have seen these things in him at times; and although, as I said, you may not