

第三章

Chapter 3



波弗家族拥有纽约罕见的舞厅住宅，但一年之中三百六十四天都处于封闭状态，只有一天举办舞会。波弗太太原名瑞吉娜，原本身无分文，却经表姐梅朵拉·曼森介绍到纽约，嫁进了最有名望的家族之一——波弗家族。波弗先生虽然看起来文质彬彬、热情风趣，在社交界有着重要的地位，但生性放荡，喜欢拈花惹草。婚后的波弗太太出人意料地越来越漂亮，而且把家中的一切都布置得大方得体，所有仆役都亲自培训，家务活动都亲自指导。波弗先生的生意也很成功，虽然他的履历很神秘，但人们还是乐于拜访他家，就像乐于拜访明哥特太太家一样。

波弗太太习惯于在有歌剧的晚上举办舞会，她总是提前半个小时离场。她举办舞会的住宅设计得十分气派，人们可以直接走进客厅而不必穿越狭窄的过道，屋子深处是一间温室，地板上映射着蜡烛的光芒。纽伦·阿切尔来得比较晚，他担心奥伦斯卡伯爵夫人会被人带到舞会上。阿切尔正在欣赏挂在客厅里的油画，有些裸体画也只有波弗家才敢挂在墙上。这时梅·韦兰正在不远处向众人宣布自己订婚的消息，阿切尔并没有感到高兴，虽然这是自己的意愿，但是看到自己的幸福被公之于众，感觉就像隐私被强行公开一样。他试图用订婚的消息来转移大家对奥伦斯卡伯爵夫人丑闻的关注。阿切尔拉着梅来到隐蔽处，匆匆地亲吻了她的嘴唇，之后两人在长椅上坐下，梅希望阿切尔能够亲自告诉艾伦他们订婚的消息，免得表姐以为大家排斥她。阿切尔说在舞会上并没有看到艾伦，听说是艾伦嫌自己的衣服不够漂亮所以没来参加，其实两人心里都清楚艾伦缺席的真正原因。

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阿切尔和梅

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It invariably happened in the same way.

Mrs. Julius Beaufort, on the night of her annual ball, never failed to appear at the Opera; indeed, she always gave her ball on an Opera night in order to emphasise her complete superiority to household cares, and her possession of a staff of servants competent to organise every detail of the entertainment in her absence.

The Beauforts' house was one of the few in New York that possessed a ball-room (it antedated even Mrs. Manson Mingott's and the Headly Chiverses'); and at a time when it was beginning to be thought "provincial" to put a "crash" over the drawingroom floor and move the furniture upstairs, the possession of a ball-room that was used for no other purpose, and left for three-hundred-and-sixty-four days of the year to shuttered darkness, with its gilt chairs stacked in a corner and its chandelier in a bag; this undoubted superiority was felt to compensate for whatever was regrettable in the Beaufort past.

Mrs. Archer, who was fond of coining her social philosophy into axioms, had once said: "We all have our pet common people—" and though the phrase was a daring one, its truth was secretly admitted in many an exclusive bosom. But the Beauforts were not exactly common; some people said they were even worse. Mrs. Beaufort belonged indeed to one of America's most honoured families; she had been the lovely Regina Dallas (of the South Carolina branch), a penniless beauty introduced to New York society by her cousin, the imprudent Medora Manson, who was always doing the wrong thing from the right motive. When one was related to the Mansons and the Rushworths one had a "Droit de cité" (as Mr. Sillerton Jackson, who had frequented the Tuileries, called it) in New York society; but did one not forfeit it in marrying Julius Beaufort?

The question was: who was Beaufort? He passed for an Englishman, was agreeable, handsome, ill-tempered, hospitable and witty. He had come to America with letters of recommendation from old Mrs. Manson Mingott's English son-in-law, the banker, and had speedily made himself an important position in the world of affairs; but his habits were dissipated, his tongue was

bitter, his antecedents were mysterious; and when Medora Manson announced her cousin's engagement to him it was felt to be one more act of folly in poor Medora's long record of imprudences.

But folly is as often justified of her children as wisdom, and two years after young Mrs. Beaufort's marriage it was admitted that she had the most distinguished house in New York. No one knew exactly how the miracle was accomplished. She was indolent, passive, the caustic even called her dull; but dressed like an idol, hung with pearls, growing younger and blonder and more beautiful each year, she throned in Mr. Beaufort's heavy brown-stone palace, and drew all the world there without lifting her jewelled little finger. The knowing people said it was Beaufort himself who trained the servants, taught the chef new dishes, told the gardeners what hot-house flowers to grow for the dinner-table and the drawing-rooms, selected the guests, brewed the after-dinner punch and dictated the little notes his wife wrote to her friends. If he did, these domestic activities were privately performed, and he presented to the world the appearance of a careless and hospitable millionaire strolling into his own drawing-room with the detachment of an invited guest, and saying: "My wife's gloxinias are a marvel, aren't they? I believe she gets them out from Kew."

Mr. Beaufort's secret, people were agreed, was the way he carried things off. It was all very well to whisper that he had been "helped" to leave England by the international banking-house in which he had been employed; he carried off that rumour as easily as the rest—though New York's business conscience was no less sensitive than its moral standard—he carried everything before him, and all New York into his drawing-rooms, and for over twenty years now people had said they were "going to the Beauforts'" with the same tone of security as if they had said they were going to Mrs. Manson Mingott's, and with the added satisfaction of knowing they would get hot canvas-back ducks and vintage wines, instead of tepid Veuve Cliquot without a year and warmed-up croquettes from Philadelphia.

Mrs. Beaufort, then, had as usual appeared in her box just before the Jewel Song; and when, again as usual, she rose at the end of the third act, drew her opera cloak about her lovely shoulders, and disappeared, New York knew that

meant that half an hour later the ball would begin.

The Beaufort house was one that New Yorkers were proud to show to foreigners, especially on the night of the annual ball. The Beauforts had been among the first people in New York to own their own red velvet carpet and have it rolled down the steps by their own footmen, under their own awning, instead of hiring it with the supper and the ball-room chairs. They had also inaugurated the custom of letting the ladies take their cloaks off in the hall, instead of shuffling up to the hostess's bedroom and recurling their hair with the aid of the gas-burner; Beaufort was understood to have said that he supposed all his wife's friends had maids who saw to it that they were properly coiffées when they left home.

Then the house had been boldly planned with a ball-room, so that, instead of squeezing through a narrow passage to get to it (as at the Chiverses') one marched solemnly down a vista of enfiladed drawing-rooms (the sea-green, the crimson and the bouton d'or), seeing from afar the many-candled lustres reflected in the polished parquetry, and beyond that the depths of a conservatory where camellias and tree-ferns arched their costly foliage over seats of black and gold bamboo.

Newland Archer, as became a young man of his position, strolled in somewhat late. He had left his overcoat with the silk-stockinged footmen (the stockings were one of Beaufort's few fatuities), had dawdled a while in the library hung with Spanish leather and furnished with buhl and malachite, where a few men were chatting and putting on their dancing-gloves, and had finally joined the line of guests whom Mrs. Beaufort was receiving on the threshold of the crimson drawing-room.

Archer was distinctly nervous. He had not gone back to his club after the Opera (as the young bloods usually did), but, the night being fine, had walked for some distance up Fifth Avenue before turning back in the direction of the Beauforts' house. He was definitely afraid that the Mingott's might be going too far; that, in fact, they might have Granny Mingott's orders to bring the Countess Olenska to the ball.

From the tone of the club box he had perceived how grave a mistake that would be; and, though he was more than ever determined to "see the thing

through,” he felt less chivalrously eager to champion his betrothed’s cousin than before their brief talk at the Opera.

Wandering on to the *bouton d’or* drawing-room (where Beaufort had had the audacity to hang “Love Victorious,” the much-discussed nude of Bouguereau) Archer found Mrs. Welland and her daughter standing near the ball-room door. Couples were already gliding over the floor beyond: the light of the wax candles fell on revolving tulle skirts, on girlish heads wreathed with modest blossoms, on the dashing aigrettes and ornaments of the young married women’s coiffures, and on the glitter of highly glazed shirt-fronts and fresh glacé gloves.

Miss Welland, evidently about to join the dancers, hung on the threshold, her lilies-of-the-valley in her hand (she carried no other bouquet), her face a little pale, her eyes burning with a candid excitement. A group of young men and girls were gathered about her, and there was much hand-clasping, laughing and pleasantry on which Mrs. Welland, standing slightly apart, shed the beam of a qualified approval. It was evident that Miss Welland was in the act of announcing her engagement, while her mother affected the air of parental reluctance considered suitable to the occasion.

Archer paused a moment. It was at his express wish that the announcement had been made, and yet it was not thus that he would have wished to have his happiness known. To proclaim it in the heat and noise of a crowded ball-room was to rob it of the fine bloom of privacy which should belong to things nearest the heart. His joy was so deep that this blurring of the surface left its essence untouched; but he would have liked to keep the surface pure too. It was something of a satisfaction to find that May Welland shared this feeling. Her eyes fled to his beseechingly, and their look said: “Remember, we’re doing this because it’s right.”

No appeal could have found a more immediate response in Archer’s breast; but he wished that the necessity of their action had been represented by some ideal reason, and not simply by poor Ellen Olenska. The group about Miss Welland made way for him with significant smiles, and after taking his share of the felicitations he drew his betrothed into the middle of the ball-room floor and put his arm about her waist.

“Now we shan’t have to talk,” he said, smiling into her candid eyes, as they floated away on the soft waves of the Blue Danube.

She made no answer. Her lips trembled into a smile, but the eyes remained distant and serious, as if bent on some ineffable vision. “Dear,” Archer whispered, pressing her to him: it was borne in on him that the first hours of being engaged, even if spent in a ball-room, had in them something grave and sacramental. What a new life it was going to be, with this whiteness, radiance, goodness at one’s side!

The dance over, the two, as became an affianced couple, wandered into the conservatory; and sitting behind a tall screen of tree-ferns and camellias Newland pressed her gloved hand to his lips.

“You see I did as you asked me to,” she said.

“Yes, I couldn’t wait,” he answered smiling. After a moment he added: “Only I wish it hadn’t had to be at a ball.”

“Yes, I know.” She met his glance comprehendingly. “But after all—even here we’re alone together, aren’t we?”

“Oh, dearest—always!” Archer cried.

Evidently she was always going to understand; she was always going to say the right thing. The discovery made the cup of his bliss overflow, and he went on gaily: “The worst of it is that I want to kiss you and I can’t.” As he spoke he took a swift glance about the conservatory, assured himself of their momentary privacy, and catching her to him laid a fugitive pressure on her lips. To counteract the audacity of this proceeding he led her to a bamboo sofa in a less secluded part of the conservatory, and sitting down beside her broke a lily-of-the-valley from her bouquet. She sat silent, and the world lay like a sunlit valley at their feet.

“Did you tell my cousin Ellen?” she asked presently, as if she spoke through a dream.

He roused himself, and remembered that he had not done so. Some invincible repugnance to speak of such things to the strange foreign woman had checked the words on his lips.

“No—I hadn’t the chance after all,” he said, fibbing hastily.

“Ah.” She looked disappointed, but gently resolved on gaining her point.

“You must, then, for I didn’t either; and I shouldn’t like her to think—”

“Of course not. But aren’t you, after all, the person to do it?”

She pondered on this. “If I’d done it at the right time, yes: but now that there’s been a delay I think you must explain that I’d asked you to tell her at the Opera, before our speaking about it to everybody here. Otherwise she might think I had forgotten her. You see, she’s one of the family, and she’s been away so long that she’s rather—sensitive.”

Archer looked at her glowingly. “Dear and great angel! Of course I’ll tell her.” He glanced a trifle apprehensively toward the crowded ball-room. “But I haven’t seen her yet. Has she come?”

“No; at the last minute she decided not to.”

“At the last minute?” he echoed, betraying his surprise that she should ever have considered the alternative possible.

“Yes. She’s awfully fond of dancing,” the young girl answered simply. “But suddenly she made up her mind that her dress wasn’t smart enough for a ball, though we thought it so lovely; and so my aunt had to take her home.”

“Oh, well—” said Archer with happy indifference. Nothing about his betrothed pleased him more than her resolute determination to carry to its utmost limit that ritual of ignoring the “unpleasant” in which they had both been brought up.

“She knows as well as I do,” he reflected, “the real reason of her cousin’s staying away ; but I shall never let her see by the least sign that I am conscious of there being a shadow of a shade on poor Ellen Olenska’s reputation.”