

OSCAR WILDE
THE PICTURE OF DORIAN GRAY
CHAPTER 17

A week later Dorian Gray was sitting in the conservatory at Selby Royal, talking to the pretty Duchess of Monmouth, who with her husband, a jaded-looking man of sixty, was amongst his guests. It was tea-time, and the mellow light of the huge, lace-covered lamp that stood on the table lit up the delicate china and hammered silver of the service at which the duchess was presiding. Her white hands were moving daintily among the cups, and her full red lips were smiling at something that Dorian had whispered to her. Lord Henry was lying back in a silk-draped wicker chair, looking at them. On a peach-coloured divan sat Lady Narborough, pretending to listen to the duke's description of the last Brazilian beetle that he had added to his collection. Three young men in elaborate smoking-suits were handing tea-cakes to some of the women. The house-party consisted of twelve people, and there were more expected to arrive on the next day.

“What are you two talking about?” said Lord Henry, strolling over to the table and putting his cup down. “I hope Dorian has told you about my plan for rechristening everything, Gladys. It is a delightful idea.”

“But I don’t want to be rechristened, Harry,” rejoined the duchess, looking up at him with her wonderful eyes. “I am quite satisfied with my own name, and I am sure Mr. Gray should be satisfied with his.”

“My dear Gladys, I would not alter either name for the world. They are both perfect. I was thinking chiefly of flowers. Yesterday I cut an orchid, for my button-hole. It was a marvellous spotted thing, as effective as the seven deadly sins. In a thoughtless moment I asked one of the gardeners what it was called. He told me it was a fine specimen of Robinsoniana, or something dreadful of that kind. It is a sad truth, but we have lost the faculty of giving lovely names to things. Names are everything. I never quarrel with actions. My one quarrel is with words. That is the reason I hate vulgar realism in literature. The man who could call a spade a spade should be compelled to use one. It is the only thing he is fit for.”

“Then what should we call you, Harry?” she asked.

“His name is Prince Paradox,” said Dorian.

“I recognize him in a flash,” exclaimed the duchess.

“I won’t hear of it,” laughed Lord Henry, sinking into a chair. “From a label there is no escape! I refuse the title.”

“Royalties may not abdicate,” fell as a warning from pretty lips.

“You wish me to defend my throne, then?”

“Yes.”

“I give the truths of to-morrow.”

“I prefer the mistakes of to-day,” she answered.

“You disarm me, Gladys,” he cried, catching the wilfulness of her mood.

“Of your shield, Harry, not of your spear.”

“I never tilt against beauty,” he said, with a wave of his hand.

“That is your error, Harry, believe me. You value beauty far too much.”

“How can you say that? I admit that I think that it is better to be beautiful than to be good. But on the other hand, no one is more ready than I am to acknowledge that it is better to be good than to be ugly.”

“Ugliness is one of the seven deadly sins, then?” cried the duchess. “What becomes of your simile about the orchid?”

“Ugliness is one of the seven deadly virtues, Gladys. You, as a good Tory, must not underrate them. Beer, the Bible, and the seven deadly virtues have made our England what she is.”

“You don’t like your country, then?” she asked.

“I live in it.”

“That you may censure it the better.”

“Would you have me take the verdict of Europe on it?” he inquired.

“What do they say of us?”

“That Tartuffe has emigrated to England and opened a shop.”

“Is that yours, Harry?”

“I give it to you.”

“I could not use it. It is too true.”

“You need not be afraid. Our countrymen never recognize a description.”

“They are practical.”

“They are more cunning than practical. When they make up their ledger, they balance stupidity by wealth, and vice by hypocrisy.”

“Still, we have done great things.”

“Great things have been thrust on us, Gladys.”

“We have carried their burden.”

“Only as far as the Stock Exchange.”

She shook her head. “I believe in the race,” she cried.

“It represents the survival of the pushing.”

“It has development.”

“Decay fascinates me more.”

“What of art?” she asked.

“It is a malady.”

“Love?”

“An illusion.”

“Religion?”

“The fashionable substitute for belief.”

“You are a sceptic.”

“Never! Scepticism is the beginning of faith.”

“What are you?”

“To define is to limit.”

“Give me a clue.”

“Threads snap. You would lose your way in the labyrinth.”

“You bewilder me. Let us talk of some one else.”

“Our host is a delightful topic. Years ago he was christened Prince Charming.”

“Ah! don’t remind me of that,” cried Dorian Gray.

“Our host is rather horrid this evening,” answered the duchess, colouring. “I believe he thinks that Monmouth married me on purely scientific principles as the best specimen he could find of a modern butterfly.”

“Well, I hope he won’t stick pins into you, Duchess,” laughed Dorian.

“Oh! my maid does that already, Mr. Gray, when she is annoyed with me.”

“And what does she get annoyed with you about, Duchess?”

“For the most trivial things, Mr. Gray, I assure you. Usually because I come in at ten minutes to nine and tell her that I must be dressed by half-past eight.”

“How unreasonable of her! You should give her warning.”

“I daren’t, Mr. Gray. Why, she invents hats for me. You remember the one I wore at Lady Hilstone’s garden-party? You don’t, but it is nice of you to pretend that you do. Well, she made it out of nothing. All good hats are made out of nothing.”

“Like all good reputations, Gladys,” interrupted Lord Henry. “Every effect that one produces gives one an enemy. To be popular one must be a mediocrity.”

“Not with women,” said the duchess, shaking her head; “and women rule the world. I assure you we can’t bear mediocrities. We women, as some one says, love with our ears, just as you men love with your eyes, if you ever love at all.”

“It seems to me that we never do anything else,” murmured Dorian.

“Ah! then, you never really love, Mr. Gray,” answered the duchess with mock sadness.

“My dear Gladys!” cried Lord Henry. “How can you say that? Romance lives by repetition, and repetition converts an appetite into an art. Besides, each time that one loves is the only time one has ever loved. Difference of object does not alter singleness of passion. It merely intensifies it. We can have in life but one great experience at best, and the secret of life is to reproduce that experience as often as possible.”

“Even when one has been wounded by it, Harry?” asked the duchess after a pause.

“Especially when one has been wounded by it,” answered Lord Henry.

The duchess turned and looked at Dorian Gray with a curious expression in her eyes. “What do you say to that, Mr. Gray?” she inquired.

Dorian hesitated for a moment. Then he threw his head back and laughed. “I always agree with Harry, Duchess.”

“Even when he is wrong?”

“Harry is never wrong, Duchess.”

“And does his philosophy make you happy?”

“I have never searched for happiness. Who wants happiness? I have searched for pleasure.”

“And found it, Mr. Gray?”

“Often. Too often.”

The duchess sighed. “I am searching for peace,” she said, “and if I don’t go and dress, I shall have none this evening.”

“Let me get you some orchids, Duchess,” cried Dorian, starting to his feet and walking down the conservatory.

“You are flirting disgracefully with him,” said Lord Henry to his cousin. “You had better take care. He is very fascinating.”

“If he were not, there would be no battle.”

“Greek meets Greek, then?”

“I am on the side of the Trojans. They fought for a woman.”

“They were defeated.”

“There are worse things than capture,” she answered.

“You gallop with a loose rein.”

“Pace gives life,” was the riposte.

“I shall write it in my diary to-night.”

“What?”

“That a burnt child loves the fire.”

“I am not even singed. My wings are untouched.”

“You use them for everything, except flight.”

“Courage has passed from men to women. It is a new experience for us.”

“You have a rival.”

“Who?”

He laughed. “Lady Narborough,” he whispered. “She perfectly adores him.”

“You fill me with apprehension. The appeal to antiquity is fatal to us who are romanticists.”

“Romanticists! You have all the methods of science.”

“Men have educated us.”

“But not explained you.”

“Describe us as a sex,” was her challenge.

“Sphinxes without secrets.”

She looked at him, smiling. “How long Mr. Gray is!” she said. “Let us go and help him. I have not yet told him the colour of my frock.”

“Ah! you must suit your frock to his flowers, Gladys.”

“That would be a premature surrender.”

“Romantic art begins with its climax.”

“I must keep an opportunity for retreat.”

“In the Parthian manner?”

“They found safety in the desert. I could not do that.”

“Women are not always allowed a choice,” he answered, but hardly had he finished the sentence before from the far end of the conservatory came a stifled groan, followed by the dull sound of a heavy fall. Everybody started up. The duchess stood motionless in horror. And with fear in his eyes, Lord Henry rushed through the flapping palms to find Dorian Gray lying face downwards on the tiled floor in a deathlike swoon.

He was carried at once into the blue drawing-room and laid upon one of the sofas. After a short time, he came to himself and looked round with a dazed expression.

“What has happened?” he asked. “Oh! I remember. Am I safe here, Harry?” He began to tremble.

“My dear Dorian,” answered Lord Henry, “you merely fainted. That was all. You must have overtired yourself. You had better not come down to dinner. I will take your place.”

“No, I will come down,” he said, struggling to his feet. “I would rather come down. I must not be alone.”

He went to his room and dressed. There was a wild recklessness of gaiety in his manner as he sat at table, but now and then a thrill of terror ran through him when he remembered that, pressed against the window of the conservatory, like a white handkerchief, he had seen the face of James Vane watching him.