

JACK

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Jack by Coventry Dane

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CHAPTER I.

"And he set a little child in their midst."

"ANY one in?" I cry, as I put my head within the doorway of Cousin Valentine's studio in Chelsea. I am armed with a huge bunch of white narcissus. It is high May time, and London abounds in these sweet products of England's old-fashioned places. Val is busy at his easel, but the moment he hears my voice he turns and comes to me, taking my hands, narcissus and all, in welcome, in his own dear, hearty way. Val and I are first cousins, indeed we neither of us possess

any living relative but the other, and we are very fast friends we two, alone in the world as we are.

“You are welcome, my cousin,” says Val, “as a varnishing ticket in April. What flowers!” he adds, burying his well-shaped nose in the midst of my bouquet.

I have just returned to town from a three months' jaunt on the Continent, and naturally, my first visit is paid to Val; his pretty studio has always been one of my favourite haunts, and he himself my *cronie par excellence*.

“I'm glad, dear, you have not had to look in vain for your varnishing ticket this year.” There have been times, not so long ago, when my artist cousin has been unlucky in the matter of these tickets, but those evil days are past now, and I think his feet are firmly planted on fame's

uncertain ladder at last. Val's chief weapon in his warfare with fortune is his capacity for idealizing pretty women on canvas, and his ability to meet this requirement of his day has helped to start him on the high-road to celebrity.

He is looking at me now with real pleasure in his handsome blue eyes. Val's eyes have a way of saying much more than their owner intends at times, but their meaning is genuine to-day. Val and I have seen joy and sorrow together, and the sincere love that looks out of both our faces belongs to that feeling which some say cannot exist between two people of opposite sexes. To us it is a very strong and precious thing, though it is not "the love of men and women when they love their best," and it has grown with our growth since we were children together.

“Audrey,” he says presently, “if I thought you would not misunderstand me, I should say the *rôle* of pretty, prosperous widow suited you remarkably well. I never saw you looking more comely.”

I experience a half-guilty feeling that what he says is perfectly true. Never have I felt so light-hearted as I do to-day since Robert died. Robert was my husband. He and Val were not kindred spirits, and I know that, in his inmost heart, my cousin is at this moment rejoicing in my emancipation from the bonds of holy matrimony. Robert was many years older than I, and looked upon cousinship, especially artistic cousinship, with the eye of suspicion, as well as on all paths which pointed in the faintest degree in the direction of fair Bohemia.

Mr. Fane despised artists, gazing on them askance from a lofty standpoint of

matter-of-fact superiority. I believe, in his own private mind, he held that the winner of the champion billiard match and the P. R. A. were persons with equal claims to distinction and honour among the sons of men. Val resented these sentiments on behalf of his fraternity more than on his own account, and naturally my marriage was the signal for a break in the happy terms which had hitherto existed between my cousin and myself. Since the day, ten years ago, when he handed me over at the altar to my husband's care, Val and I had gone pretty much our own ways; he to struggle on a small income for a name on the lips of men, and I on a large one to pass the years in all the inglorious idleness of an old man's darling. We met seldom during those days, but our friendship never waned; and now that poor Robert's prejudices are

no longer here to be considered, we have lapsed once more into the old, cheery companionship of former times.

“ You always say pleasant things, and generally mean them, Val,” I reply to his little speech about my looks ; “ but any way, you and I will never grow old and ugly to each other,” and verily, as my eye dwells upon his handsome *physique*, it strikes me there is something terribly incongruous in the thought of Val and old age. Old age, on which many are given to descant poetically, pointing out the sweetness and beauty of the decline of life in language of much pathos and tenderness, but it always seems to me to be a poetry suggestive of nothing else so much as gout and hot flannels, toothlessness and ear-trumpets.

When I have taken stock of my companion, I turn to look at the subject of

his work. Val's *specialité* is female loveliness, but no dream of fair women gazes at me from his canvas to-day, only the roughly-sketched-in form of a young child, with some lines behind him, intended by-and-by to develop into another figure, but as yet it is impossible to tell of what character.

"There is my model," says Val, pointing over his shoulder; and turning, I see a child lying among the cushions of a couch in a distant corner of the room. The little fellow has thick, gold hair, which stands out around his lovely face in picturesque profusion. Big, heavily-lashed, grey eyes look up at me from under his curls, and as I watch him, the vague memory of some other face I have seen somewhere darts through my mind, but escapes again before I can catch whose face it is the baby recalls. He is