

MISS VEDDER.

"THEY live across the river, in the Palmer house."

"That old shell?"

"Yes," replied Miss Vedder. "They do not seem to mind its condition; but that is explained by their Southern origin, I think. The old-time Southern country houses always looked dilapidated to Northern eyes; the inmates seemed to be quite indifferent to broken locks and latches and sagged piazzas. But it did not come from want of money; on the contrary, they were the richest people I ever knew."

"She has a curiously unworldly look," said Dwight, in a musing tone.

Miss Vedder came back to personal applications; she spent a good part of her time in coming back. Her tendency was to generalize, to take broad views of subjects, but she found that almost every body else preferred personal applications, and instead of looking at the whole South, for instance, brought the matter down to Penny Singleton.

"That is because she is unworldly," she answered.

Dwight shrugged his shoulders, and sent a spiral of cigar smoke up into the air above his head. He was leaning back in an arm-chair before a cheery little wood fire which lit up the cavernous recesses of the old fireplace, whose fire-dogs were two stiff little Continental soldiers steadfastly presenting arms. Not much fire was needed, since it was still early October, and not really cold. Households that live by rule, and those unpleasant and leathery-hearted persons who are "never cold," would have scorned a fire. But Miss Vedder loved fire-light, and preferred to burn her wood and open the windows rather than to sit with them closed before a dark and neutral hearth. Wax candles burned in the chandelier overhead, their soft light screened by porcelain shades; the room was very clearly lighted, yet there was no glare. There was rich and solid coloring, and plenty of open space; no small tables or floor vases for people to stumble over, no array of knickknacks. It will be seen from the fire and the cigar smoke that it was a parlor given over to comfort; from the lights, that even a plain woman could look well there; from the luxury, that its owner was rich.

"You may shrug your shoulders, but she is unworldly, Howell."

"Then she is rarely ignorant."

"No."

"Or a fool?"

"Neither."

"The old subject," said Dwight, looking up with a smile. "For how many years, Rachel, have we discussed old subjects?"

"For about twenty-five," replied Miss Vedder.

Dwight put up his hand as if to ward off the figures.

"I was ten years old and you sixteen when we first met, Howell; I am now thirty-five, and you—"

"Never mind me; a man is always young. I still look young."

"Not so young as you might."

"What do you mean?"

"You are not quite straight."

Dwight threw back his shoulders.

"You have grown carelessly in dress and attitude."

He surveyed himself.

"And you will soon be what is called stout."

"The last I deny," said Dwight, with decision. He left his arm-chair, went over to the long mirror, and looked at himself critically. He had been a fine young man, with brown eyes and hair strong, well-cut features, a tall, broad person, and an appearance of vigorous health; at forty he impressed one as carelessly dressed and large, and older than he really was, older than many a man of his own age who was lean and active and had taken care of himself. "Oh, I look well enough, Rachel," he said; "you are mistaken."

"You only see the front view," replied Miss Vedder; "the face is comparatively unchanged. But the back view and side view are very different."

"I am glad you acknowledge at least the face," said Dwight, coming back to his chair. "I was always a handsome fellow, and I am now, but you like to put me down." He spoke in his usual half-bantering way, and resumed his cigar. After a while he asked her to play. She put down her knitting, went over to the piano, and played selections from Beethoven and Schumann with remarkable exactness, but with under rather than over expression. She never allowed herself the least personal feeling in her music. "It is a pity you do not sing," said Dwight.

"Yes, I am sorry I do not," she replied, coming back to her seat. "But you like what I played." She spoke affirmatively; and it was true. Howell Dwight entertained the idea that it was his natural delicacy in all artistic matters that gave him his comprehension of classical music, but in reality it was the persistence of his cousin Rachel. It began in childhood; when she comprehended a new passage and enjoyed it, she never rested until he comprehended and enjoyed it also. It was like teaching Shakspeare's plays orally to a person who can not read; the scholar learned more by the teacher's patience than by any effort of his own. Still he learned.

At ten o'clock a maid brought in supper. "Isn't it rather early?" said Dwight, glancing discontentedly at the tray.