A Symphony in Lavender

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Table of Contents

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It was quite late in the evening, dark and rainy, when I arrived, and I suppose the first object in Ware, outside of my immediate personal surroundings, which arrested my attention was the Munson house. When I looked out of my window the next morning it loomed up directly opposite, across the road, dark and moist from the rain of the night before. There were so many elm−trees in front of it and in front of the house I was in, that the little pools of rain−water, still standing in the road here and there, did not glisten and shine at all, although the sun was bright and quite high. The house itself stood back far enough to allow of a good square yard in front, and was raised from the street−level the height of a face−wall. Three or four steps led up to the front walk. On each side of the steps, growing near the edge of the wall, was an enormous lilac−tree in full blossom. I could see them tossing their purple clusters between the elm branches: there was quite a wind blowing that morning. A hedge of lilacs, kept low by constant cropping, began at the blooming lilac−trees, and reached around the rest of the yard at the top of the face wall. The yard was gay with flowers, laid out in fantastic little beds, all bordered trimly with box. The house was one of those square, solid, white−painted, green−blinded edifices which marked the wealth and importance of the dweller therein a half−century or so ago, and still cast a dim halo of respect over his memory. It had no beauty in itself, being boldly plain and glaring, like all of its kind but the green waving boughs of the elms and lilacs and the undulating shadows they cast toned it down, and gave it an air of coolness and quiet and lovely reserve. I began to feel a sort of pleasant, idle curiosity concerning it as I stood there at my chamber window, and after breakfast, when I had gone into the sitting−room, whose front windows also faced that way, I took occasion to ask my hostess, who had come in with me, who lived there.

"Of course it is nobody I have ever seen or heard of," said I; "but I was looking at the house this morning, and have taken a fancy to know."

Mrs. Leonard gazed reflectively across at the house, and then at me. It was an odd way she always had before speaking.

"There's a maiden lady lives there," she answered, at length, turning her gaze from me to the house again, "all alone; that is, all alone except old Margaret. She's always been in the family−−ever since Caroline was a baby, I guess: a faithful old creature as ever lived, but she's pretty feeble now. I reckon Caroline has to do pretty much all the work, and I don't suppose she's much company, or much of anything but a care. There she comes now."

"Who?" said I, feeling a little bewildered.

"Why, Caroline−−Caroline Munson."

A slim, straight little woman, with a white pitcher in her band, was descending the stone steps between the blooming lilac−trees opposite. She had on a lilac−colored calico dress and a white apron. She wore no hat or bonnet, and her gray hair seemed to be arranged in a cluster of soft little curls at the top of her head. Her face, across the street, looked like that of a woman of forty, fair and pleasing.

"She's going down to Mrs. Barnes's after milk," Mrs. Leonard explained. "She always goes herself, every morning just about this time. She never sends old Margaret ; I reckon she ain't fit to go. I guess she can do some things about the house, but when it comes to travelling outside Caroline has to do it herself."

Then Mrs. Leonard was called into the kitchen, and I thought over the information, at once vague and definite, I had received, and watched Miss Caroline Munson walk down the shady street. She had a pretty, gentle gait.

About a week later I received an invitation to take tea with her. I was probably never more surprised in my life, as I had not the slightest acquaintance with her. I had sometimes happened to watch her morning pilgrimages down the street after milk, and occasionally had observed her working over her flower−beds in her front yard. That was all, so far as I was concerned; and I did not suppose she knew there was such a person as myself in existence. But Mrs. Leonard, who was also bidden, explained it.

"It's Caroline's way," said she. "She's always had a sort of mania for asking folks to tea. Why, I reckon there's

hardly a fortnight, on an average, the year round, but what she invites somebody or other to tea. I suppose she gets kind of dull, and there's a little excitement about it, getting ready for company. Anyhow, she must like it, or she wouldn't ask people. She probably has heard you were going to board here this summer−−Ware's a little place you know, and folks hear everything about each other−−and thought she would invite you over with me. You had better go; you'll enjoy it. It's a nice place to go to, and she's a beautiful cook, or Margaret is; I don't know which does the cooking, but I guess they both have a hand in it. Anyhow, you'll have a pleasant time. We'll take our sewing, and go early−−by three o'clock. That's the way people go out to take tea in Ware."

So the next afternoon, at three o'clock, Mrs. Leonard and I sallied across the street to Miss Caroline Munson's. She met us at the door, in response to a tap of the old−fashioned knocker. Her manner of greeting us was charming from its very quaintness. She hardly said three words, but showed at the same time a simple courtesy and a pleased shyness, like a child overcome with the delight of a tea−party in her honor. She ushered us into a beautiful old parlor on the right of the hall, and we seated ourselves with our sewing. The conversation was not very brisk nor very general so far as I was concerned. There was scarcely any topic of common interest to the three of us, probably. Mrs. Leonard was one of those women who converse only of matters pertaining to themselves or their own circle of acquaintances, and seldom digress. Miss Munson I could not judge of as to conversational habits, of course; she seemed now to be merely listening with a sort of gentle interest, scarcely saying a word herself, to Mrs. Leonard's remarks. I was a total stranger to Ware and Ware people, and consequently could neither talk nor listen to much purpose.

But I was interested in observing Miss Munson. She was a nice person to observe, for if she was conscious of being an object of scrutiny, she did not show it. Her eyes never flashed up and met mine fixed upon her, with a suddenness startling and embarrassing to both of us. I could stare at her as guilelessly and properly as I could at a flower.

Indeed, Miss Munson did make me think of a flower, and of one prevalent in her front yard, too−−a lilac: there was that same dull bloom about her, and a shy, antiquated grace. A lilac always does seem a little older than some other flowers. Miss Munson, I could now see, was probably nearer fifty than forty. There were little lines and shadows in her face that one could not discern across the street. It seemed to me that she must have been very lovely in her youth, with that sort of loveliness which does not demand attention, but holds it with no effort. An exquisite, delicate young creature, she ought to have been, and had been, unless her present appearance told lies.

Lilac seemed to be her favorite color for gowns, for she wore that afternoon a delicious old−fashioned lilac muslin that looked as if it had been laid away in lavender every winter for the last thirty years. The waist was cut surplice fashion, and she wore a dainty lace handkerchief tucked into it. Take it altogether, I suppose I never spent a pleasanter afternoon in my life, although it was pleasant in a quiet, uneventful sort of a way. There was an atmosphere of gentle grace and comfort about everything about Miss Munson, about the room, and about the lookout from the high, deep−seated windows. There was not one vivid tint in that parlor; everything had the dimness of age over it. All the brightness was gone out of the carpet. Large, shadowy figures sprawled over the floor, their indistinctness giving them the suggestion of grace, and the polish on the mahogany furniture was too dull to reflect the light. The gilded scrolls on the wall−paper no longer shone, and over some of the old engravings on the walls a half−transparent film that looked like mist had spread. Outside, a cool green shadow lay over the garden, and soft, lazy puffs of lilac−scented air came in at the windows. Oh, it was all lovely, and it was so little trouble to enjoy it.

I liked, too, the tea which came later. The dining−room was as charming in its way as the parlor, large and dark and solid, with some beautiful quaint pieces of furniture in it. The china was pink and gold; and I fancied to myself that Miss Munson's grandmother had spun the table linen, and put it away in a big chest, with rose leaves between the folds. I do believe the surroundings and the circumstances imparted a subtle flavor to everything I tasted, which gave rise to something higher than mere gustatory delight, or maybe it was my mood; but it certainly seemed to me that I had never before enjoyed a tea so much.

After that day, Miss Munson and I became very well acquainted. I got into the habit of running over there very often; she seldom came to see me. It was tacitly understood between us that it was pleasanter for me to do the visiting.

I do not know how she felt towards me−−I think she liked me−−but I began to feel an exceeding, even a loving, interest in her. All that I could think of sometimes, when with her, was a person walking in a garden and

getting continually delicious little sniffs of violets, so that he certainly knew they were near him, although they were hidden somewhere under the leaves, and he could not see them. There would not be a day that Miss Munson would not say things that were so many little hints of a rare sweetness and beauty of nature, which her shyness and quietness did not let appear all at once.

She was rather chary always of giving very broad glimpses of herself. I was always more or less puzzled and evaded by her, though she was evidently a sincere, childlike woman, with a liking for simple pleasures. She took genuine delight in picking a little bunch of flowers in her garden for a neighbor, and in giving those little tea−parties. She was religious in an innocent, unquestioning way, too. I oftener than not found an open Bible near her when I came in, and she talked about praying as simply as one would about breathing.

But the day before I left Ware she told me a very peculiar story, by which she displayed herself to me all at once in a fuller light, although she revealed such a character that I was, in one way, none the less puzzled. She and I were sitting in her parlor. She was feeling sad about my going, and perhaps that led her to confide in me. Anyway, she looked up, suddenly, after a little silence.

"Do you," she said, "believe in dreams?"

"That is a question I can't answer truthfully," I replied, laughing. I don't really know whether I believe in dreams or not."

"I don't know either," she said, slowly, and she shuddered a little. "I have a mind to tell you," she went on, "about a dream I had once, and about something that happened to me afterwards. I never did tell any one, and I believe I would like to. That is, if you would like to have me," she asked, as timidly as a child afraid of giving trouble.

I assured her that I would, and, after a little pause, she told me this:

"I was about twenty−two," she said, " and father and mother had been dead, one four, the other six years. I was living alone here with Margaret, as I have ever since. I have thought sometimes that it was my living alone so much, and not going about with other girls more, that made me dream as much as I did, but I don't know. I always used to have a great many dreams, and some of them seemed as if they must mean something; but this particular one, in itself and in its effect on my after−life, was very singular."

"It was in spring, and the lilacs were just in bloom, when I dreamed it. I thought I was walking down the road there under the elm−trees. I had on a lilac muslin gown, and I carried a basket of flowers on my arm. They were mostly white, or else the very faintest pink−lilies and roses. I had gone down the street a little way, when I saw a young man coming towards me. He had on a broad−brimmed soft hat and a velvet coat, and carried something that looked odd under his arm. When he came nearer I could see that he had a handsome dark face, and that he was carrying an artist's easel. When he reached me he stopped and looked down into my face and then at my basket of flowers. I stopped too−−I could not seem to help it in my dream−−and gazed down at the ground. I was afraid to look at him, and I trembled so that the lilies and roses in my basket quivered.

Finally he spoke. "Won't you give me one of your flowers," he said−−'just one?'

I gathered courage to glance up at him then, and when his eyes met mine it did seem to me that I wanted to give him one of those flowers more than anything else in the world. I looked into my basket, and had my fingers on the stem of the finest lily there, when something came whirring and fanning by my face and settled on my shoulder, and when I turned my head, with my heart beating loud, there was a white dove.

"But, somehow, I seemed in my dream to forget all about the dove in a minute, and I looked away in the young man's face again, and lifted the lily from the basket as I did so.

"But his face did not look to me as it did before, though I still wanted to give him the lily just as much. I stood still, gazing at him, for a moment; there was, in my dream, a sort of fascination over me which would not let me take my eyes from him. As I gazed, his face changed more and more to me, till finally−−I cannot explain it−−it looked at once beautiful and repulsive. I wanted at once to give him the lily and would have died rather than give it to him, and I turned and fled, with my basket of flowers and my dove on my shoulder, and a great horror of something, I did not know what, in my heart. Then I woke up all of a tremble."

Miss Munson stopped. "What do you think of the dream?" she said, in a few minutes. "Do you think it possible that it could have had any especial significance, or should you think it merely a sleeping vagary of a romantic, imaginative girl?"

"I think that would depend entirely upon after−events," I answered; "they might or might not prove its

significance."

"Do you think so?" she said, eagerly. "Well, it seemed to me that they did, but the worst of it has been I have never been quite sure−−never quite sure. But I will tell you, and you shall judge. A year from the time I dreamed that dream, I actually met that same young man one morning in the street. I had on my lilac gown, and I held a sprig of lilac in my hand; I had broken it off the bush as I came along. He almost stopped for a second when he came up to me, and looked down into my face. I was terribly startled, for I recognized at once the man of my dream, and I can't tell you how horrible and uncanny it all seemed for a minute. There was the same handsome dark face; there were the broad hat, and the velvet coat, and the easel under the arm. Well, he passed on, and I did; but I was in a flutter all day, and his eyes seemed to be looking into mine continually.

"A few days afterwards he called upon me with Mrs. Graves, a lady who used to live in Ware and take boarders: she moved away some years ago. I learned that he was an artist. His name was−−no, I will not tell you his name: he is from your city, and well known. He had engaged board with Mrs. Graves for the summer. After that there was scarcely a day but I saw him. We were both entirely free to seek each other's society, and we were together a great deal. He used to take me sketching with him, and he would come here at all hours of the day as unconcernedly as a brother might. He would sit beside me in the parlor and watch me sew, and in the kitchen and watch me cook. He was very boyish and unconventional in his ways, and I used to think it charming. We soon grew to care a great deal about each other, of course, although he said nothing about it to me for a long time. I knew from the first that I loved him dearly, but from the first there was, as there was in my dream, a kind of horror of him along with the love: it kept me from being entirely happy. The night before he went away he spoke. We had been to walk, and were standing here at my door. He asked me to marry him. I looked up in his face, and felt just as I did in my dream about giving him the flower, when all of a sudden his face looked different to me, just as it did in the dream. I cannot explain it. It was as if I saw no more of the kindness and the love in it, only something else−−evil−−and the same horror came over me.

"I don't know how I looked to him as I stood gazing up at him, but he turned very pale, and started back. 'My God! Caroline,' he said, 'what is it?'

"I don't know what I said, but it must have expressed my sudden repulsion very strongly; for, after a few bitter words, he left me, and I went into the house. I never saw him again. I have seen his name in the papers, and that is all.

"Now I want to know," Miss Munson went on, "if you think that my dream was really sent to me as a warning, or that I fancied it all, and wrecked−−no, I won't say wrecked−−dulled the happiness of my whole life for a nervous whim?"

She looked questioningly at me, an expression at once serious and pitiful on her delicate face. I hardly knew what to say. It was obvious that I could form no correct opinion unless I knew the man. I wondered if I did. There was an artist of about the right age whom I thought of. If he were the one−−well, I think Miss Munson was right.

She saw that I hesitated. "Never mind," she said, rising with her usual quiet, gentle smile on her lips, "you don't know any more than I do, and I never shall know in this world. All I hope is that it was what God meant, and not what I imagined. We won't talk any more about it. I liked to tell you, for some reason or other, that is all. Now I am going to take you into the garden and pick your last poesy for you."

After I had gone down the stone steps with my hands full of verbenas and pansies, I turned and looked up at her standing so mild and sweet between the lilac−trees, and said good−bye again. That was the last time I saw her.

The next summer when I came to Ware the blinds on the front of the Munson house were all closed, and the little flower−beds in the front yard were untended; only the lilacs were in blossom, for they had the immortal spring for their gardener.

"Miss Munson died last winter," said Mrs. Leonard looking reflectively across the street. "She was laid out in a lilac−colored cashmere gown; it was her request. She always wore lilac, you know. Well" (with a sigh), "I do believe that Caroline Munson, if she is an angel−−and I suppose she is−−doesn't look much more different from what she did before than those lilacs over there do from last year's ones."