Muslin — Chapter 12

London: William Heinemann, 16 September 1915, pages 116-126, 2,686 words

XII

The result of this missive was that next morning the servants whispered that someone had been about the house on the preceding evening. Olive and Barnes sat talking for hours; and one day, unable to keep her counsel any longer, Olive told her sister what had happened. The letter that Barnes had taken across the field for her had, she declared, frightened Edward out of his senses; he had come rushing through the snow, and had spoken with her for full five minutes under her window. He loved her to distraction; and the next day she had received a long letter, full of references to his colonel, explaining how entirely against his will and desire he had been forced to accept the invitation to go and shoot at the Lawlers'. Alice listened quietly; as if she doubted whether Captain Hibbert would have died of consumption or heartache if Olive had acted otherwise, and then advised her sister quietly; and, convinced that her duty was to tell her mother everything, she waited for an occasion to speak. Mr. Barton was passing down the passage to his studio, Olive was racing upstairs to Barnes, Mrs. Barton had her hand on the drawing-room door; and she looked round surprised when she saw that her daughter was following her.

'I want to speak to you, mamma.'

'Come in, dear.'

Alice shut the door behind her.

'How bare and untidy the room looks at this season of the year; really you and Olive ought to go into the conservatory and see if you can't get some geraniums.'

'Yes, mamma, I will presently; but it was about Olive that I wanted to speak,' said Alice, in a strained and anxious way.

'What a bore that girl is with her serious face,' thought Mrs. Barton; but she laughed coaxingly, and said:

'And what has my grave-faced daughter to say — the learned keeper of the family's wisdom?'

Even more than Olive's — for they were less sincere — Mrs. Barton's trivialities jarred, and Alice's ideas had already begun to slip from her, and feeling keenly the inadequacy of her words, she said:

Source: Curated by George Moore Interactive LLC (georgemooreinteractive.org) — Shared for research, educational, and personal use.

‘Well, mamma, I wanted to ask you if Olive is going to marry Captain Hibbert?’

It was now for Mrs. Barton to look embarrassed.

‘Well, really, I don’t know; nothing is arranged — I never thought about the matter. What could have made you think she was going to marry Captain Hibbert? In my opinion they aren’t at all suited to each other. Why do you ask me?’

‘Because I have heard you speak of Lord Kilcarney as a man you would like Olive to marry, and, if this be so, I thought I had better tell you about Captain Hibbert. I think she is very much in love with him.’

‘Oh! nonsense; it is only to kill time. A girl must amuse herself somehow.’

It was on Alice’s lips to ask her mother if she thought such conduct quite right, but, checking herself, she said:

‘I am afraid people are talking about it, and that surely is not desirable.’

‘But why do you come telling me these stories?' she said.

‘Why, mamma, because I thought it right to do so.’

The word ‘right’ was unpleasant; but, recovering her temper, which for years before had never failed her, Mrs. Barton returned to her sweet little flattering manners.

‘Of course, of course, my dear girl; but you do not understand me. What I mean to say is, Have you any definite reason for supposing that Olive is in love with Captain Hibbert, and that people are talking about it?’

‘I think so, mamma,’ said the girl, deceived by this expression of goodwill. ‘You remember when the Scullys came here? Well, Violet was up in our room, and we were showing her our dresses; the conversation somehow turned on Captain Hibbert, and when Violet said that she had seen him that day, as they came along in the carriage, shooting with the Lawlers, Olive burst out crying and rushed out of the room. It was very awkward. Violet said she was very sorry and all that, but — ’

‘Yes, yes, dear; but why was Olive angry at hearing that Captain Hibbert went out shooting with the Lawlers?’

‘Because, it appears, she had previously forbidden him to go there, you know, on account of Mrs. Lawler.’

‘And what happened then?’

Source: Curated by George Moore Interactive LLC (georgemooreinteractive.org) — Shared for research, educational, and personal use.

‘Well, that’s the worst of it. I don’t mean to say it was all Olive’s fault; I think she must have lost her head a little, for she sent Barnes over that evening to the Lawlers’ with a note, telling Captain Hibbert that he must come at once and explain. It was eleven o’clock at night, and they had a long talk through the window.’

Mrs. Barton did not speak for some moments. The peat-fire was falling into masses of white ash, and she thought vaguely of putting on some more turf; then her attention was caught by the withering ferns in the flower-glasses, then by the soaking pasture-lands, then by the spiky branches of the chestnut-trees swinging against the grey, dead sky.

‘But tell me, Alice,’ she said at last, ‘for of course it is important that I should know — do you think that Olive is really in love with Captain Hibbert?’

‘She told me, as we were going to bed the other night, mamma, that she never could care for anyone else; and — and — ’

‘And what, dear?’

‘I don’t like to betray my sister’s confidence,’ Alice answered, ‘but I’m sure I had better tell you all: she told me that he had kissed her many times, and no later than yesterday, in the conservatory.’

‘Indeed! you did very well to let me know of this,’ said Mrs. Barton, becoming as earnestly inclined as her daughter Alice. ‘I am sorry that Olive was so foolish; I must speak to her about it. This must not occur again. I think that if you were to tell her to come down here — ’

‘Oh no, mamma; Olive would know at once that I had been speaking about her affairs; you must promise me to make only an indirect use of what I have told you.’

‘Of course — of course, my dear Alice; no one shall ever know what has passed between us. You can depend upon me. I will not speak to Olive till I get a favourable opportunity. And now I have to go and see after the servants. Are you going upstairs?’

On Alice, tense with the importance of the explanation, this dismissal fell not a little chillingly; but she was glad that she had been able to induce her mother to consider the matter seriously.

A few minutes passed dreamily, almost unconsciously; Mrs. Barton threw two sods of turf on the fire, and resumed her thinking. Her first feeling of resentment against her eldest daughter had vanished; and she now thought solely of the difficulty she was in, and how she could best extricate herself from it. ‘So Olive was foolish enough to allow Captain Hibbert to kiss her in the conservatory!' Mrs. Barton murmured to herself. The morality of the question interested her profoundly. She had never allowed anyone to kiss her before she was married; and she was full of pity and presentiment for the future of a young girl who could thus compromise herself. But in

Source: Curated by George Moore Interactive LLC (georgemooreinteractive.org) — Shared for research, educational, and personal use.

Olive's love for Captain Hibbert Mrs. Barton was concerned only so far as it affected the labour and time that would have to be expended in persuading her to cease to care for him. That this was the right thing to do Mrs. Barton did not for a moment doubt. Her daughter was a beautiful girl, would probably be the belle of the season; therefore to allow her, at nineteen, to marry a thousand-a-year captain would be, Mrs. Barton thought, to prove herself incapable, if not criminal, in the performance of the most important duty of her life. Mrs. Barton trembled when she thought of the sending of the letter: if the story were to get wind in Dublin, it might wreck her hopes of the marquis. Therefore, to tell Barnes to leave the house would be fatal. Things must be managed gently, very gently. Olive must be talked to, how far her heart was engaged in the matter must be found out, and she must be made to see the folly, the madness of risking her chance of winning a coronet for the sake of a beggarly thousand-a-year captain. And, good heavens! the chaperons: what would they say of her, Mrs. Barton, were such a thing to occur? Mrs. Barton turned from the thought in horror; and then, out of the soul of the old coquette arose, full-fledged, the chaperon, the satellite whose light and glory is dependent on that of the fixed star around which she revolves.

At this moment Olive, her hands filled with ferns, bounced into the room.

'Oh! here you are, mamma! Alice told me you wanted a few ferns and flowers to brighten up the room.'

'I hope you haven't got your feet wet, my dear; if you have, you had better go up at once and change.'

Olive was now more than ever like her father. Her shoulders had grown wider, and the blonde head and scarlet lips had gained a summer brilliance and beauty.

'No, I am not wet,' she said, looking down at her boots; ' it isn't raining; but if it were Alice would send me out all the same.'

'Where is she now?'

'Up in her room reading, I suppose; she never stirs out of it. I thought when we came home from school the last time that we would be better friends; but, do you know what I think: Alice is a bit sulky. What do you think, mamma?'

To talk of Alice, to suggest that she was a little jealous, to explain the difficulty of the position she occupied, to commiserate and lavish much pity upon her was, no doubt, a fascinating subject of conversation, it had burned in the brains of mother and daughter for many months; but, too wise to compromise herself with her children, Mrs. Barton resisted the temptation to gratify a vindictiveness that rankled in her heart. She said:

Source: Curated by George Moore Interactive LLC (georgemooreinteractive.org) — Shared for research, educational, and personal use.

‘Alice has not yet found her *beau cavalier*; we shall see when we are at the Castle if she will remain faithful to her books. I am afraid that Miss Alice will then prefer some gay, dashing young officer to her *Marmion* and her *Lara*.'

‘I should think so, indeed. She says that the only man she cares to speak to in the county is Dr. Reed, that little frumpy fellow with his medicines. I can’t understand her. I couldn’t care for anyone but an officer.’

This was the chance Mrs. Barton required, and she instantly availed herself of it. ‘The red-coat fever!’ she exclaimed, waving her hands. ‘There is no one like officers *pour faire passer le temps.*'

‘Yes, ma!’ cried Olive, proud of having understood so much French; ‘ doesn’t time pass quickly with them?’

‘It flies, my dear, and they fly away, and then we take up with another. They are all nice; their profession makes them that.’

‘But some are nicer than others; for instance, I am sure they are not all as handsome as Captain Hibbert.’

‘Oh! indeed they are,’ said Mrs. Barton, laughing; ‘wait until we get to Dublin; you have no idea what charming men we shall meet there. We shall find a lord or an earl, or perhaps a marquis, who will give a coroneted carriage to my beautiful girl to drive in.’

Olive tossed her head, and her mother looked at her admiringly, and there was love in the sweet brown deceit of the melting eyes; a hard, worldly affection, but a much warmer one than any Mrs. Barton could feel for Alice, in whom she saw nothing but failure, and in the end spiritual spinsterhood. After a pause she said:

‘What a splendid match Lord Kilcarney would be, and where would he find a girl like my Olive to do the honours of his house?’

‘Oh! mamma, I never could marry him!’

‘And why not, my dear girl?’

‘I don’t know, he’s a silly little fool; besides, I like Captain Hibbert.’

‘Yes, you like Captain Hibbert, so do I; but a girl like you could not throw herself away on a thousand-a-year captain in the army.’

Source: Curated by George Moore Interactive LLC (georgemooreinteractive.org) — Shared for research, educational, and personal use.

'And why not, mamma?' said Olive, who had already begun to whimper; 'Captain Hibbert loves me, I know, very dearly, and I like him; he is of very good family, and he has enough to support me.'

The moment was a supreme one, and Mrs. Barton hesitated to strike and bring the matter to a head. Would it be better, she asked herself, to let things go by and use her influence for the future in one direction? After a brief pause she decided on the former course. She said:

'My dear child, neither your father nor myself could ever consent to see you throw yourself away on Captain Hibbert. I am afraid you have seen too much of him, and have been led away into caring for him. But take my word for it, a girl's love is only *à fleur de peau*. When you have been to a few of the Castle balls you'll soon forget all about him. Remember, you are not twenty yet; it would be madness.'

'Oh! mamma, I didn't think you were so cruel!' exclaimed Olive, and she rushed out of the room.

Mrs. Barton made no reply, but her resolve was rapidly gaining strength in her mind: Olive's flirtation was to be brought at once to a close. Captain Hibbert she would admit no more, and the girl was in turn to be wheedled and coerced.

Nor did Mrs. Barton for a moment doubt that she would succeed; she had never tasted failure; and she stayed only a moment to regret, for she was too much a woman of the world to waste time in considering her mistakes. The needs of the moment were ever present to her, and she now devoted herself entirely to the task of consoling her daughter. Barnes, too, was well instructed, and henceforth she spoke only of the earls, dukes, lords, and princes who were waiting for Olive at the Castle.

In the afternoon Mrs. Barton called Olive into the drawing-room, where woman was represented as a triumphant creature walking over the heads and hearts of men. '*Le génie de la femme est la beauté*,' declared Milord, and again: '*Le coeur de l'homme ne pent servir que de piédestal pour l'idole*.'

'Oh! Milord, Milord!' said Mrs. Barton. 'So in worshipping us you are idolaters. I'm ashamed of you.'

'*Pardon, pardon, madame: Devant un amour faux on est idolâtre, mais à l'autel d'un vrai, on est chrétien*.'

And in such lugubrious gaiety the girl grieved. Captain Hibbert had been refused admission; he had written, but his letters had been intercepted; and holding them in her hand Mrs. Barton explained she could not consent to such a marriage, and continued to dazzle the girl with visions of the honours that awaited the future Marchioness of Kilcarney. 'An engaged girl is not noticed at the Castle. You don't know what nice men you'll meet there; have your fun out first,' were the arguments most frequently put forward; and, in the excitement of breaking off Olive's

Source: Curated by George Moore Interactive LLC (georgemooreinteractive.org) — Shared for research, educational, and personal use.

engagement, even the Land League was forgotten. Olive hesitated, but at length allowed herself to be persuaded to at least try to captivate the marquis before she honoured the captain with her hand. No sooner said than done. Mrs. Barton lost not a moment in writing to Captain Hibbert, asking him to come and see them the following day, if possible, between eleven and twelve. She wanted to speak to him on a matter which had lately come to her knowledge, and which had occasioned her a good deal of surprise.

Source: Curated by George Moore Interactive LLC (georgemooreinteractive.org) — Shared for research, educational, and personal use.