

"COPY"

A DIALOGUE

By Edith Wharton

MRS. AMBROSE DALE—*forty, slender, still young—sits in her drawing-room at the tea-table. The winter twilight is falling, a lamp has been lit, there is a fire on the hearth, and the room is pleasantly dim and flower-scented. Books are scattered everywhere—mostly with autograph inscriptions "From the Author"—and a large portrait of MRS. DALE, at her desk, with papers strewn about her, takes up one of the wall-panels. Before MRS. DALE stands HILDA, fair and twenty, her hands full of letters.*

MRS. DALE. Ten more applications for autographs? Isn't it strange that people who'd blush to borrow twenty dollars don't scruple to beg for an autograph?

HILDA (*reproachfully*). Oh——

MRS. DALE. What's the difference, pray?

HILDA. Only that *your* last autograph sold for fifty——

MRS. DALE (*not displeased*). Ah?—I sent for you, Hilda, because I'm dining out to-night, and if there's nothing important to attend to among these letters you needn't sit up for me.

HILDA. You don't mean to work?

MRS. DALE. Perhaps; but I sha'n't need you. You'll see that my cigarettes and coffee-machine are in place, and that I don't have to crawl about the floor in search of my pen-wiper? That's all. Now about these letters——

HILDA (*impulsively*). Oh, Mrs. Dale

MRS. DALE. Well?

HILDA. I'd rather sit up for you.

MRS. DALE. Child, I've nothing for you to do. I shall be blocking out the tenth chapter of "Winged Purposes," and it won't be ready for you till next week.

HILDA. It isn't that—but it's so beautiful to sit here, watching and listening, all alone in the night, and to feel that you're in there (*she points to the study-door*) creating—. (*Impulsively.*) What do I care for sleep?

MRS. DALE (*indulgently*). Child—silly child!—Yes, I should have felt so at your age—it would have been an inspiration——

HILDA (*rapt*). It is!

MRS. DALE. But you must go to bed; I must have you fresh in the morning; for you're still at the age when one is fresh in the morning! (*She sighs.*) The letters? (*Abruptly.*) Do you take notes of what you feel, Hilda—here, all alone in the night, as you say?

HILDA (*shyly*). I have——

MRS. DALE (*smiling*). For the diary?

HILDA (*nods and blushes*).

MRS. DALE (*caressingly*). Goose!—Well, to business. What is there?

HILDA. Nothing important, except a letter from Stroud & Fayerweather to say that the question of the royalty on "Pomegranate Seed" has been settled in your favor. The English publishers of "Immolation" write to consult you about a six-shilling edition; Olafson, the Copenhagen publisher, applies for permission to bring out a Danish translation of "The Idol's Feet"; and the editor of the *Semaphore* wants a new serial—I think that's all; except that *Woman's Sphere* and *The Droplight*, ask for interviews—with photographs——

MRS. DALE. The same old story! I'm so tired of it all. (*To herself, in an undertone.*) But how should I feel if it all stopped? (*The servant brings in a card.*)

MRS. DALE (*reading it*). Is it possible? Paul Ventnor? (*To the servant.*) Show Mr. Ventnor up. (*To herself.*) Paul Ventnor!

HILDA (*breathless*). Oh, Mrs. Dale—the Mr. Ventnor?

MRS. DALE (*smiling*). I fancy there's only one.

HILDA. The great, great poet ? (*Irresolute.*) No, I don't dare——

MRS. DALE (*with a tinge of impatience*). What ?

HILDA (*fervently*). Ask you—if I might—oh, here in this corner, where he can't possibly notice me—stay just a moment ? Just to see him come in ? To see the meeting between you—the greatest novelist and the greatest poet of the age ? Oh, it's too much to ask ! It's an historic moment.

MRS. DALE. Why, I suppose it is. I hadn't thought of it in that light. Well (*smiling*), for the diary——

HILDA. Oh, thank you, *thank you* ! I'll be off the very instant I've heard him speak.

MRS. DALE. The very instant, mind. (*She rises, looks at herself in the glass, smooths her hair, sits down again, and rattles the tea-caddy.*) Isn't the room very warm ?— (*She looks over at her portrait.*) I've grown stouter since that was painted— You'll make a fortune out of that diary, Hilda——

HILDA (*modestly*). Four publishers have applied to me already——

THE SERVANT (*announces*). Mr. Paul Ventnor.

(*Tall, nearing fifty, with an incipient stoutness buttoned into a masterly frock-coat, VENTNOR drops his glass and advances vaguely, with a short-sighted stare.*)

VENTNOR. Mrs. Dale ?

MRS. DALE. My dear friend ! This is kind. (*She looks over her shoulder at HILDA, who vanishes through the door to the left.*) The papers announced your arrival, but I hardly hoped——

VENTNOR (*whose short-sighted stare is seen to conceal a deeper embarrassment*). You hadn't forgotten me, then ?

MRS. DALE. Delicious ! Do you forget that you're public property ?

VENTNOR. Forgotten, I mean, that we were old friends ?

MRS. DALE. Such old friends ! May I remind you that it's nearly twenty years since we've met ? Or do you find cold reminiscences indigestible ?

VENTNOR. On the contrary, I've come to ask you for a dish of them—we'll warm them up together. You're my first visit.

MRS. DALE. How perfect of you !

So few men visit their women friends in chronological order ; or at least they generally do it the other way round, beginning with the present day and working back—if there's time—to prehistoric woman.

VENTNOR. But when prehistoric woman has become historic woman——?

MRS. DALE. Oh, it's the reflection of my glory that has guided you here, then ?

VENTNOR. It's a spirit in my feet that has led me, at the first opportunity, to the most delightful spot I know.

MRS. DALE. Oh, the first opportunity——!

VENTNOR. I might have seen you very often before ; but never just in the right way.

MRS. DALE. Is this the right way ?

VENTNOR. It depends on you to make it so.

MRS. DALE. What a responsibility ! What shall I do ?

VENTNOR. Talk to me—make me think you're a little glad to see me ; give me some tea and a cigarette ; and say you're out to everyone else.

MRS. DALE. Is that all ? (*She hands him a cup of tea.*) The cigarettes are at your elbow— And do you think I shouldn't have been glad to see you before ?

VENTNOR. No ; I think I should have been too glad to see you.

MRS. DALE. Dear me, what precautions ! I hope you always wear goloshes when it looks like rain, and never by any chance expose yourself to a draught. But I had an idea that poets courted the emotions——

VENTNOR. Do novelists ?

MRS. DALE. If you ask me—on paper !

VENTNOR. Just so ; that's safest. My best things about the sea have been written on shore. (*He looks at her thoughtfully.*) But it wouldn't have suited us in the old days, would it ?

MRS. DALE (*sighing*). When we were real people !

VENTNOR. Real people ?

MRS. DALE. Are you, now ? I died years ago. What you see before you is a figment of the reporter's brain—a monster manufactured out of newspaper paragraphs, with ink in its veins. A keen sense of copyright is my nearest approach to an emotion.

VENTNOR (*sighing*). Ah, well, yes—As you say, we’re public property.

MRS. DALE. If one shared equally with the public! But the last shred of my identity is gone.

VENTNOR. Most people would be glad to part with theirs on such terms. I have followed your work with immense interest. “Immolation” is a masterpiece. I read it last summer when it first came out.

MRS. DALE (*with a shade less warmth*). “Immolation” has been out three years.

VENTNOR. Oh, by Jove—no? Surely not— But one is so overwhelmed—one loses count. (*Reproachfully*.) Why have you never sent me your books?

MRS. DALE. For that very reason.

VENTNOR (*deprecatingly*). You know I didn’t mean it for you! And my first book—do you remember—was dedicated to you.

MRS. DALE. “Silver Trumpets”——

VENTNOR (*much interested*). Have you a copy still, by any chance? The first edition, I mean? Mine was stolen years ago. Do you think you could put your hand on it?

MRS. DALE (*taking a small shabby book from the table at her side*). It’s here.

VENTNOR (*eagerly*). May I have it? Ah, thanks. This is *very* interesting. The last copy sold in London for £40, and they tell me the next will fetch twice as much. It’s quite *introuvable*.

MRS. DALE. I know that. (*A pause. She takes the book from him, opens it, and reads, half to herself—*)

*How much we two have seen together,
Of other eyes unmet,
Dear as in days of leafless weather
The willow’s saffron mist,*

*Strange as the hour when Hesper swings
A-sea in beryl green,
While overhead on dalliant wings
The daylight hangs serene,*

*And thrilling as a meteor’s fall
Through depths of lonely sky,
When each to each two watchers call—
I saw it!—So did I.*

VENTNOR. Thin, thin—the troubadour tinkle. Odd how little promise there is in first volumes!

MRS. DALE (*with irresistible emphasis*). I thought there was a distinct promise in this!

VENTNOR (*seeing his mistake*). Ah—the one you would never let me fulfil? (*Sentimentally*.) How inexorable you were! You never dedicated a book to me.

MRS. DALE. I hadn’t begun to write when we were—dedicating things to each other.

VENTNOR. Not for the public—but you wrote for me; and, wonderful as you are, you’ve never written anything since that I care for half as much as——

MRS. DALE (*interested*). Well?

VENTNOR. Your letters.

MRS. DALE (*in a changed voice*). My letters—do you remember them?

VENTNOR. When I don’t, I reread them.

MRS. DALE (*incredulous*). You have them still?

VENTNOR (*unguardedly*). You haven’t mine, then?

MRS. DALE (*playfully*). Oh, you were a celebrity already. Of course I kept them! (*Smiling*.) Think what they are worth now! I always keep them locked up in my safe over there. (*She indicates a cabinet*).

VENTNOR (*after a pause*). I always carry yours with me.

MRS. DALE (*laughing*). You——

VENTNOR. Wherever I go. (*A longer pause. She looks at him fixedly*.) I have them with me now.

MRS. DALE (*agitated*). You—have them with you—now?

VENTNOR (*embarrassed*). Why not? One never knows——

MRS. DALE. Never knows——?

VENTNOR (*humorously*). Gad—when the bank-examiner may come round. You forget I’m a married man.

MRS. DALE. Ah—yes.

VENTNOR (*sits down beside her*). I speak to you as I couldn’t to anyone else—without deserving a kicking. You know how it all came about. (*A pause*.) You’ll bear witness that it wasn’t till you denied me all hope——

MRS. DALE (*a little breathless*). Yes, yes——

VENTNOR. Till you sent me from you——

MRS. DALE. It’s so easy to be heroic when one is young! One doesn’t realize how long life is going to last afterward.

(*Musing.*) Nor what weary work it is gathering up the fragments.

VENTNOR. But the time comes when one sends for the china-mender, and has the bits riveted together, and turns the cracked side to the wall—

MRS. DALE. And denies that the article was ever damaged?

VENTNOR. Eh? Well, the great thing, you see, is to keep one's self out of reach of the housemaid's brush. (*A pause.*) If you're married you can't—always. (*Smiling.*) Don't you hate to be taken down and dusted?

MRS. DALE (*with intention*). You forget how long ago my husband died. It's fifteen years since I've been an object of interest to anybody but the public.

VENTNOR (*smiling*). The only one of your admirers to whom you've ever given the least encouragement!

MRS. DALE. Say rather the most easily pleased!

VENTNOR. Or the only one you cared to please?

MRS. DALE. Ah, you *haven't* kept my letters!

VENTNOR (*gravely*). Is that a challenge? Look here, then! (*He draws a packet from his pocket and holds it out to her*).

MRS. DALE (*taking the packet and looking at him earnestly*). Why have you brought me these?

VENTNOR. I didn't bring them; they came because I came—that's all. (*Tentatively.*) Are we unwelcome?

MRS. DALE (*who has undone the packet and does not appear to hear him*). The very first I ever wrote you—the day after we met at the concert. How on earth did you happen to keep it? (*She glances over it.*) How perfectly absurd! Well, it's not a compromising document.

VENTNOR. I'm afraid none of them are.

MRS. DALE (*quickly*). Is it to that they owe their immunity? Because one could leave them about like safety matches?—Ah, here's another I remember—I wrote that the day after we went skating together for the first time. (*She reads it slowly.*) How odd! How very odd!

VENTNOR. What?

MRS. DALE. Why, it's the most curious

thing—I had a letter of this kind to do the other day, in the novel I'm at work on now—the letter of a woman who is just—just beginning—

VENTNOR. Yes—just beginning—?

MRS. DALE. And, do you know, I find the best phrase in it, the phrase I somehow regarded as the fruit of—well, of all my subsequent discoveries—is simply plagiarized, word for word, from this!

VENTNOR (*eagerly*). I told you so! You were all there!

MRS. DALE (*critically*). But the rest of it's poorly done—very poorly. (*Reads the letter over.*) H'm—I didn't know how to leave off. It takes me forever to get out of the door.

VENTNOR (*gayly*). Perhaps I was there to prevent you! (*After a pause.*) I wonder what I said in return?

MRS. DALE (*interested*). Shall we look? (*She rises.*) Shall we—really? I have them all here, you know. (*She goes toward the cabinet.*)

VENTNOR (*following her with repressed eagerness*). Oh—all!

MRS. DALE (*throws open the door of the cabinet, revealing a number of packets*). Don't you believe me now?

VENTNOR. Good heavens! How I must have repeated myself! But then you were so very deaf.

MRS. DALE (*takes out a packet and returns to her seat. VENTNOR extends an impatient hand for the letters*). No—no; wait! I want to find your answer to the one I was just reading. (*After a pause.*) Here it is—yes, I thought so!

VENTNOR. What did you think?

MRS. DALE (*triumphantly*). I thought it was the one in which you quoted "Epipsychidion"—

VENTNOR. Mercy! Did I quote things? I don't wonder you were cruel.

MRS. DALE. Ah, and here's the other—the one I—the one I didn't answer—for a long time. Do you remember?

VENTNOR (*with emotion*). Do I remember? I wrote it the morning after we heard "Isolde"—

MRS. DALE (*disappointed*). No—no. That wasn't the one I didn't answer! Here—this is the one I mean.

VENTNOR (*takes it curiously*). Ah—h'm—this is very like unrolling a mummy

—(*he glances at her*)—with a live grain of wheat in it, perhaps?— Oh, by Jove!

MRS. DALE. What?

VENTNOR. Why, this is the one I made a sonnet out of afterward! By Jove, I'd forgotten where that idea came from. You may know the lines perhaps? They're in the fourth volume of my *complete edition*—It's the thing beginning

Love came to me with unrelenting eyes—

one of my best, I rather fancy. Of course, here, it's very crudely put—the values aren't brought out—ah! this touch is good though—very good. H'm, I daresay there might be other material. (*He glances toward the cabinet.*)

MRS. DALE (*dryly*). The live grain of wheat, as you said!

VENTNOR. Ah, well—my first harvest was sown on rocky ground—*now* I plant for the fowls of the air. (*Rising and walking toward the cabinet.*) When can I come and carry off all this rubbish?

MRS. DALE. Carry it off?

VENTNOR (*embarrassed*). My dear lady, surely between you and me explicitness is a burden. You must see that these letters of ours can't be left to take their chance like an ordinary correspondence—you said yourself we were public property.

MRS. DALE. To take their chance? Do you suppose that, in my keeping, your letters take any chances? (*Suddenly.*) Do mine—in yours?

VENTNOR (*still more embarrassed*). Helen—! (*He takes a turn through the room.*) You force me to remind you that you and I are differently situated—that in a moment of madness I sacrificed the only right you ever gave me—the right to love you better than any other woman in the world. (*A pause. She says nothing and he continues, with increasing difficulty—*) You asked me just now why I carried your letters about with me—kept them, literally, in my own hands. Well, suppose it's to be sure of their not falling into some one else's?

MRS. DALE. Oh!

VENTNOR (*throws himself into a chair*). For God's sake don't pity me!

MRS. DALE (*after a long pause*). Am

I dull—or are you trying to say that you want to give me back my letters?

VENTNOR (*starting up*). I? Give you back—? God forbid! Your letters? Not for the world! The only thing I have left! But you can't dream that in my hands—

MRS. DALE (*suddenly*). You want yours, then?

VENTNOR (*repressing his eagerness*). My dear friend, if I'd ever dreamed that you'd kept them—!

MRS. DALE (*accusingly*). You *do* want them. (*A pause. He makes a deprecatory gesture.*) Why should they be less safe with me than mine with you? I never forfeited the right to keep them.

VENTNOR (*after another pause*). It's compensation enough, almost, to have you reproach me! (*He moves nearer to her, but she makes no response.*) You forget that I've forfeited *all* my rights—even that of letting you keep my letters.

MRS. DALE. You *do* want them! (*She rises, throws all the letters into the cabinet, locks the door and puts the key in her pocket.*) There's my answer.

VENTNOR. Helen—!

MRS. DALE. Ah, I paid dearly enough for the right to keep them, and I mean to! (*She turns to him passionately.*) Have you ever asked yourself how I paid for it? With what months and years of solitude, what indifference to flattery, what resistance to affection?—Oh, don't smile because I said affection, and not love. Affection's a warm cloak in cold weather; and I *have* been cold; and I shall keep on growing colder! Don't talk to me about living in the hearts of my readers! We both know what kind of a domicile that is. Why, before long I shall become a classic! Bound in sets and kept on the top book-shelf—brr, doesn't that sound freezing? I foresee the day when I shall be as lonely as an Etruscan museum! (*She breaks into a laugh.*) That's what I've paid for the right to keep your letters. (*She holds out her hand.*) And now give me mine.

VENTNOR. Yours?

MRS. DALE (*haughtily*). Yes; I claim them.

VENTNOR (*in the same tone*). On what ground?

MRS. DALE. Hear the man!—Because I wrote them, of course.

VENTNOR. But it seems to me that—under your inspiration, I admit—I also wrote mine.

MRS. DALE. Oh, I don't dispute their authenticity—it's yours I deny!

VENTNOR. Mine?

MRS. DALE. You voluntarily ceased to be the man who wrote me those letters—you've admitted as much. You traded paper for flesh and blood. I don't dispute your wisdom—only you must hold to your bargain! The letters are *all* mine.

VENTNOR (*groping between two tones*). Your arguments are as convincing as ever. (*He hazards a faint laugh.*) You're a marvellous dialectician—but, if we're going to settle the matter in a spirit of arbitration treaty, why, there are accepted conventions in such cases. It's an odious way to put it, but since you won't help me, one of them is——

MRS. DALE. One of them is——?

VENTNOR. That it is usual—that technically, I mean, the letter—belongs to its writer——

MRS. DALE (*after a pause*). Such letters as *these*?

VENTNOR. Such letters especially——

MRS. DALE. But you couldn't have written them if I hadn't—been willing to read them. Surely there's more of myself in them than of you.

VENTNOR. Surely there's nothing in which a man puts more of himself than in his love-letters!

MRS. DALE (*with emotion*). But a woman's love-letters are like her child. They belong to her more than to anybody else——

VENTNOR. And a man's?

MRS. DALE (*with sudden violence*). Are all he risks!— There, take them. (*She flings the key of the cabinet at his feet and sinks into a chair.*)

VENTNOR (*starts as though to pick up the key; then approaches and bends over her*). Helen—oh, Helen!

MRS. DALE (*she yields her hands to him, murmuring:*) Paul! (*Suddenly she straightens herself and draws back illuminated.*) What a fool I am! I see it all now. You want them for your memoirs!

VENTNOR (*disconcerted*). Helen——

MRS. DALE (*agitated*). Come, come——

the rule is to unmask when the signal's given! You want them for your memoirs.

VENTNOR (*with a forced laugh*). What makes you think so?

MRS. DALE (*triumphantly*). Because I want them for mine!

VENTNOR (*in a changed tone*). Ah—. (*He moves away from her and leans against the mantelpiece. She remains seated, with her eyes fixed on him.*)

MRS. DALE. I wonder I didn't see it sooner. Your reasons were lame enough.

VENTNOR (*ironically*). Yours were masterly. You're the more accomplished actor of the two. I was completely deceived.

MRS. DALE. Oh, I'm a novelist. I can keep up that sort of thing for five hundred pages!

VENTNOR. I congratulate you. (*A pause.*)

MRS. DALE (*moving to her seat behind the tea-table*). I've never offered you any tea. (*She bends over the kettle.*) Why don't you take your letters?

VENTNOR. Because you've been clever enough to make it impossible for me. (*He picks up the key and hands it to her. Then abruptly*)—Was it all acting—just now?

MRS. DALE. By what right do you ask?

VENTNOR. By right of renouncing my claim to my letters. Keep them—and tell me.

MRS. DALE. I give you back your claim—and I refuse to tell you.

VENTNOR (*sadly*). Ah, Helen, if you deceived me, you deceived yourself also.

MRS. DALE. What does it matter, now that we're both undeceived? I played a losing game, that's all.

VENTNOR. Why losing—since all the letters are yours?

MRS. DALE. The letters? (*Slowly.*) I'd forgotten the letters——

VENTNOR (*exultant*). Ah, I knew you'd end by telling me the truth!

MRS. DALE. The truth? Where is the truth? (*Half to herself.*) I thought I was lying when I began—but the lies turned into truth as I uttered them! (*She looks at VENTNOR.*) I *did* want your letters for my memoirs—I *did* think I'd kept them for that purpose—and I wanted to get

mine back for the same reason—but now *(she puts out her hand and picks up some of her letters, which are lying scattered on the table near her)*—how fresh they seem, and how they take me back to the time when we lived instead of writing about life!

VENTNOR *(smiling)*. The time when we didn't prepare our impromptu effects beforehand and copyright our remarks about the weather!

MRS. DALE. Or keep our epigrams in cold storage and our adjectives under lock and key!

VENTNOR. When our emotions weren't worth ten cents a word, and a signature wasn't an autograph. Ah, Helen, after all, there's nothing like the exhilaration of spending one's capital!

MRS. DALE. Of wasting it, you mean. *(She points to the letters.)* Do you suppose we could have written a word of these if we'd known we were putting our dreams out at interest? *(She sits musing, with her eyes on the fire, and he watches her in silence.)* Paul, do you remember the deserted garden we sometimes used to walk in?

VENTNOR. The old garden with the high wall at the end of the village street? The garden with the ruined box-borders and the broken-down arbor? Why, I remember every weed in the paths and every patch of moss on the walls!

MRS. DALE. Well—I went back there the other day. The village is immensely improved. There's a new hotel with gas-fires, and a trolley in the main street; and the garden has been turned into a public park, where excursionists sit on

cast-iron benches admiring the statue of an Abolitionist.

VENTNOR. An Abolitionist—how appropriate!

MRS. DALE. And the man who sold the garden has made a fortune that he doesn't know how to spend—

VENTNOR *(rising impulsively)*. Helen, *(he approaches and lays his hand on her letters)*, let's sacrifice our fortune and keep the excursionists out!

MRS. DALE *(with a responsive movement)*. Paul, do you really mean it?

VENTNOR *(gayly)*. Mean it? Why, I feel like a landed proprietor already! It's more than a garden—it's a park.

MRS. DALE. It's more than a park, it's a world—as long as we keep it to ourselves!

VENTNOR. Ah, yes—even the pyramids look small when one sees a Cook's tourist on top of them! *(He takes the key from the table, unlocks the cabinet and brings out his letters, which he lays beside hers.)* Shall we burn the key to our garden?

MRS. DALE. Ah, then it will indeed be boundless! *(Watching him while he throws the letters into the fire.)*

VENTNOR *(turning back to her with a half-sad smile)*. But not too big for us to find each other in?

MRS. DALE. Since we shall be the only people there! *(He takes both her hands and they look at each other a moment in silence. Then he goes out by the door to the right. As he reaches the door she takes a step toward him, impulsively; then turning back she leans against the chimney-piece, quietly watching the letters burn.)*

THE UNFINISHED PORTRAIT

By Edith M. Thomas

BLITHE the red lip, and arch the laughing eye
Of her he loved, yet tears in ambush lie.
The plaintive mystery wouldst thou understand?
Midway his task death touched the painter's hand.