“What are you two talking about?” said Lord Henry, strolling over to the table and putting his cup down. “I hope Dorian has told you about my plan for rechristening everything, Gladys. It is a delightful idea.”

“But I don’t want to be rechristened, Harry,” rejoined the duchess, looking up at him with her wonderful eyes. “I am quite satisfied with my own name, and I am sure Mr. Gray should be satisfied with his.”

“My dear Gladys, I would not alter either name for the world. They are both perfect. I was thinking chiefly of flowers. Yesterday I cut an orchid, for my button-hole. It was a marvellous spotted thing, as effective as the seven deadly sins. In a thoughtless moment I asked one of the gardeners what it was called. He told me it was a fine specimen of Robinsoniana, or something dreadful of that kind. It is a sad truth, but we have lost the faculty of giving lovely names to things. Names are everything. I never quarrel with actions. My one quarrel is with words. That is the reason I hate vulgar realism in literature. The man who could call a spade a spade should be compelled to use one. It is the only thing he is fit for.”

“Then what should we call you, Harry?” she asked.

“His name is Prince Paradox,” said Dorian.

“I recognize him in a flash,” exclaimed the duchess.

“I won’t hear of it,” laughed Lord Henry, sinking into a chair. “From a label there is no escape! I refuse the title.”

“Royalties may not abdicate,” fell as a warning from pretty lips.

“You wish me to defend my throne, then?”

“Yes.”

“I give the truths of to-morrow.”

“I prefer the mistakes of to-day,” she answered.

“You disarm me, Gladys,” he cried, catching the wilfulness of her mood.

“Of your shield, Harry, not of your spear.”

“I never tilt against beauty,” he said, with a wave of his hand.

“That is your error, Harry, believe me. You value beauty far too much.”

“How can you say that? I admit that I think that it is better to be beautiful than to be good. But on the other hand, no one is more ready than I am to acknowledge that it is better to be good than to be ugly.”

“Ugliness is one of the seven deadly sins, then?” cried the duchess. “What becomes of your simile about the orchid?”

“Ugliness is one of the seven deadly virtues, Gladys. You, as a good Tory, must not underrate them. Beer, the Bible, and the seven deadly virtues have made our England what she is.”

“You don’t like your country, then?” she asked.

“I live in it.”

“That you may censure it the better.”

“Would you have me take the verdict of Europe on it?” he inquired.

“What do they say of us?”

“That Tartuffe has emigrated to England and opened a shop.”

“Is that yours, Harry?”

“I give it to you.”

“I could not use it. It is too true.”

“You need not be afraid. Our countrymen never recognize a description.”

“They are practical.”

“They are more cunning than practical. When they make up their ledger, they balance stupidity by wealth, and vice by hypocrisy.”

“Still, we have done great things.”

“Great things have been thrust on us, Gladys.”

“We have carried their burden.”

“Only as far as the Stock Exchange.”

She shook her head. “I believe in the race,” she cried.

“It represents the survival of the pushing.”

“It has development.”

“Decay fascinates me more.”

“What of art?” she asked.

“It is a malady.”

“Love?”

“An illusion.”

“Religion?”

“The fashionable substitute for belief.”

“You are a sceptic.”

“Never! Scepticism is the beginning of faith.”

“What are you?”

“To define is to limit.”

“Give me a clue.”

“Threads snap. You would lose your way in the labyrinth.”

“You bewilder me. Let us talk of someone else.”

“Our host is a delightful topic. Years ago he was christened Prince Charming.”

“Ah! don’t remind me of that,” cried Dorian Gray.

“Our host is rather horrid this evening,” answered the duchess, coloring. “I believe he thinks that Monmouth married me on purely scientific principles as the best specimen he could find of a modern butterfly.”

“Well, I hope he won’t stick pins into you, Duchess,” laughed Dorian.

“Oh! my maid does that already, Mr. Gray, when she is annoyed with me.”

“And what does she get annoyed with you about, Duchess?”

“For the most trivial things, Mr. Gray, I assure you. Usually because I come in at ten minutes to nine and tell her that I must be dressed by half-past eight.”

“How unreasonable of her! You should give her warning.”

“I daren’t, Mr. Gray. Why, she invents hats for me. You remember the one I wore at Lady Hilstone’s garden-party? You don’t, but it is nice of you to pretend that you do. Well, she made if out of nothing. All good hats are made out of nothing.”

“Like all good reputations, Gladys,” interrupted Lord Henry. “Every effect that one produces gives one an enemy. To be popular one must be a mediocrity.”

“Not with women,” said the duchess, shaking her head; “and women rule the world. I assure you we can’t bear mediocrities. We women, as someone says, love with our ears, just as you men love with your eyes, if you ever love at all.”