

Chapter III - The Banner of Beacon

All next day at Beacon House there was a crazy sense that it was everybody's birthday. It is the fashion to talk of institutions as cold and cramping things. The truth is that when people are in exceptionally high spirits, really wild with freedom and invention, they always must, and they always do, create institutions. When men are weary they fall into anarchy; but while they are gay and vigorous they invariably make rules. This, which is true of all the churches and republics of history, is also true of the most trivial parlour game or the most unsophisticated meadow romp. We are never free until some institution frees us; and liberty cannot exist till it is declared by authority. Even the wild authority of the harlequin Smith was still authority, because it produced everywhere a crop of crazy regulations and conditions. He filled every one with his own half-lunatic life; but it was not expressed in destruction, but rather in a dizzy and toppling construction. Each person with a hobby found it turning into an institution. Rosamund's songs seemed to coalesce into a kind of opera; Michael's jests and paragraphs into a magazine. His pipe and her mandoline seemed between them to make a sort of smoking concert. The bashful and bewildered Arthur Inglewood almost struggled against his own growing importance. He felt as if, in spite of him, his photographs were turning into a picture gallery, and his bicycle into a gymkhana. But no one had any time to criticize these impromptu estates and offices, for they followed each other in wild succession like the topics of a rambling talker.

Existence with such a man was an obstacle race made out of pleasant obstacles. Out of any homely and trivial object he could drag reels of exaggeration, like a conjurer. Nothing could be more shy and impersonal than poor Arthur's photography. Yet the preposterous Smith was seen assisting him eagerly through sunny morning hours, and an indefensible sequence described as "Moral Photography" began to unroll about the boarding-house. It was only a version of the old photographer's joke which produces the same figure twice on one plate, making a man play chess with himself, dine with himself, and so on. But these plates were more hysterical and ambitious--as, "Miss Hunt forgets Herself," showing that lady answering her own too rapturous recognition with a most appalling stare of ignorance; or "Mr. Moon questions Himself," in which Mr. Moon appeared as one driven to madness under his own legal cross-examination, which was conducted with a long forefinger and an air of ferocious waggery. One highly successful trilogy--representing Inglewood recognizing Inglewood, Inglewood prostrating himself before Inglewood, and Inglewood severely beating Inglewood with an umbrella-- Innocent Smith wanted to have enlarged and put up in the hall, like a sort of fresco, with the inscription,--

"Self-reverence, self-knowledge, self-control-- These three alone will
make a man a prig."

-- Tennyson.

Nothing, again, could be more prosaic and impenetrable than the domestic energies of Miss Diana Duke. But Innocent had somehow blundered on the discovery that her thrifty dressmaking went with a considerable feminine care for dress--the one feminine thing that had never failed her solitary self-respect. In consequence Smith pestered her with a theory (which he really seemed to take seriously) that ladies might combine economy with magnificence if they would draw light chalk patterns on a plain dress and then dust them off again. He set up "Smith's Lightning Dressmaking Company," with two screens, a cardboard placard, and box of bright soft crayons; and Miss Diana actually threw him an abandoned black overall or working dress on which to exercise the talents of a modiste. He promptly produced for her a garment aflame with red and gold sunflowers; she held it up an instant to her shoulders, and looked like an empress. And Arthur Inglewood, some hours afterwards cleaning his bicycle (with his usual air of being inextricably hidden in it), glanced up; and his hot face grew hotter, for Diana stood laughing for one flash in the doorway, and her dark robe was rich with the green and purple of great decorative peacocks, like a secret garden in the "Arabian Nights." A pang too swift to be named pain or pleasure went through his heart like an old-world rapier. He remembered how pretty he thought her years ago, when he was ready to fall in love with anybody; but it was like remembering a worship of some Babylonian princess in some previous existence. At his next glimpse of her (and he caught himself awaiting it) the purple and green chalk was dusted off, and she went by quickly in her working clothes.

As for Mrs. Duke, none who knew that matron could conceive her as actively resisting this invasion that had turned her house upside down. But among the most exact observers it was seriously believed that she liked it. For she was one of those women who at bottom regard all men as equally mad, wild animals of some utterly separate species. And it is doubtful if she really saw anything more eccentric or inexplicable in Smith's chimney-pot picnics or crimson sunflowers than she had in the chemicals of Inglewood or the sardonic speeches of Moon. Courtesy, on the other hand, is a thing that anybody can understand, and Smith's manners were as courteous as they were unconventional. She said he was "a real gentleman," by which she simply meant a kind-hearted man, which is a very different thing. She would sit at the head of the table with fat, folded hands and a fat, folded smile for hours and hours, while every one else was talking at once. At least, the only other exception was Rosamund's companion, Mary Gray,

whose silence was of a much more eager sort. Though she never spoke she always looked as if she might speak any minute. Perhaps this is the very definition of a companion. Innocent Smith seemed to throw himself, as into other adventures, into the adventure of making her talk. He never succeeded, yet he was never snubbed; if he achieved anything, it was only to draw attention to this quiet figure, and to turn her, by ever so little, from a modesty to a mystery. But if she was a riddle, every one recognized that she was a fresh and unspoilt riddle, like the riddle of the sky and the woods in spring. Indeed, though she was rather older than the other two girls, she had an early morning ardour, a fresh earnestness of youth, which Rosamund seemed to have lost in the mere spending of money, and Diana in the mere guarding of it. Smith looked at her again and again. Her eyes and mouth were set in her face the wrong way--which was really the right way. She had the knack of saying everything with her face: her silence was a sort of steady applause.

But among the hilarious experiments of that holiday (which seemed more like a week's holiday than a day's) one experiment towers supreme, not because it was any sillier or more successful than the others, but because out of this particular folly flowed all of the odd events that were to follow. All the other practical jokes exploded of themselves, and left vacancy; all the other fictions returned upon themselves, and were finished like a song. But the string of solid and startling events-- which were to include a hansom cab, a detective, a pistol, and a marriage licence--were all made primarily possible by the joke about the High Court of Beacon.

It had originated, not with Innocent Smith, but with Michael Moon. He was in a strange glow and pressure of spirits, and talked incessantly; yet he had never been more sarcastic, and even inhuman. He used his old useless knowledge as a barrister to talk entertainingly of a tribunal that was a parody on the pompous anomalies of English law. The High Court of Beacon, he declared, was a splendid example of our free and sensible constitution. It had been founded by King John in defiance of the Magna Carta, and now held absolute power over windmills, wine and spirit licences, ladies traveling in Turkey, revision of sentences for dog-stealing and parricide, as well as anything whatever that happened in the town of Market Bosworth. The whole hundred and nine seneschals of the High Court of Beacon met once in every four centuries; but in the intervals (as Mr. Moon explained) the whole powers of the institution were vested in Mrs. Duke. Tossed about among the rest of the company, however, the High Court did not retain its historical and legal seriousness, but was used somewhat unscrupulously in a riot of domestic detail. If somebody spilt the Worcester Sauce on the tablecloth, he was quite sure it was a rite without which the sittings and findings of the Court would be invalid; or if somebody wanted a window to remain shut, he would suddenly remember that none but the third son of the lord of the manor of Penge

had the right to open it. They even went to the length of making arrests and conducting criminal inquiries. The proposed trial of Moses Gould for patriotism was rather above the heads of the company, especially of the criminal; but the trial of Inglewood on a charge of photographic libel, and his triumphant acquittal upon a plea of insanity, were admitted to be in the best tradition of the Court.

But when Smith was in wild spirits he grew more and more serious, not more and more flippant like Michael Moon. This proposal of a private court of justice, which Moon had thrown off with the detachment of a political humourist, Smith really caught hold of with the eagerness of an abstract philosopher. It was by far the best thing they could do, he declared, to claim sovereign powers even for the individual household.

"You believe in Home Rule for Ireland; I believe in Home Rule for homes," he cried eagerly to Michael. "It would be better if every father COULD kill his son, as with the old Romans; it would be better, because nobody would be killed. Let's issue a Declaration of Independence from Beacon House. We could grow enough greens in that garden to support us, and when the tax-collector comes let's tell him we're self-supporting, and play on him with the hose.... Well, perhaps, as you say, we couldn't very well have a hose, as that comes from the main; but we could sink a well in this chalk, and a lot could be done with water-jugs.... Let this really be Beacon House. Let's light a bonfire of independence on the roof, and see house after house answering it across the valley of the Thames! Let us begin the League of the Free Families! Away with Local Government! A fig for Local Patriotism! Let every house be a sovereign state as this is, and judge its own children by its own law, as we do by the Court of Beacon. Let us cut the painter, and begin to be happy together, as if we were on a desert island."

"I know that desert island," said Michael Moon; "it only exists in the `Swiss Family Robinson.' A man feels a strange desire for some sort of vegetable milk, and crash comes down some unexpected cocoa-nut from some undiscovered monkey. A literary man feels inclined to pen a sonnet, and at once an officious porcupine rushes out of a thicket and shoots out one of his quills."

"Don't you say a word against the `Swiss Family Robinson,'" cried Innocent with great warmth. "It mayn't be exact science, but it's dead accurate philosophy. When you're really shipwrecked, you do really find what you want. When you're really on a desert island, you never find it a desert. If we were really besieged in this garden, we'd find a hundred English birds and English berries that we never knew were here. If we were snowed up in this room, we'd be the better for reading scores of books in that bookcase that we don't even know are there; we'd have talks with each other, good, terrible talks, that we shall go to the grave without guessing; we'd find materials for everything-- christening, marriage, or funeral;

yes, even for a coronation-- if we didn't decide to be a republic."

"A coronation on `Swiss Family' lines, I suppose," said Michael, laughing. "Oh, I know you would find everything in that atmosphere. If we wanted such a simple thing, for instance, as a Coronation Canopy, we should walk down beyond the geraniums and find the Canopy Tree in full bloom. If we wanted such a trifle as a crown of gold, why, we should be digging up dandelions, and we should find a gold mine under the lawn. And when we wanted oil for the ceremony, why I suppose a great storm would wash everything on shore, and we should find there was a Whale on the premises."

"And so there IS a whale on the premises for all you know," asseverated Smith, striking the table with passion. "I bet you've never examined the premises! I bet you've never been round at the back as I was this morning-- for I found the very thing you say could only grow on a tree. There's an old sort of square tent up against the dustbin; it's got three holes in the canvas, and a pole's broken, so it's not much good as a tent, but as a Canopy--" And his voice quite failed him to express its shining adequacy; then he went on with controversial eagerness: "You see I take every challenge as you make it. I believe every blessed thing you say couldn't be here has been here all the time. You say you want a whale washed up for oil. Why, there's oil in that cruet-stand at your elbow; and I don't believe anybody has touched it or thought of it for years. And as for your gold crown, we're none of us wealthy here, but we could collect enough ten-shilling bits from our own pockets to string round a man's head for half an hour; or one of Miss Hunt's gold bangles is nearly big enough to--"

The good-humoured Rosamund was almost choking with laughter. "All is not gold that glitters," she said, "and besides--"

"What a mistake that is!" cried Innocent Smith, leaping up in great excitement. "All is gold that glitters-- especially now we are a Sovereign State. What's the good of a Sovereign State if you can't define a sovereign? We can make anything a precious metal, as men could in the morning of the world. They didn't choose gold because it was rare; your scientists can tell you twenty sorts of slime much rarer. They chose gold because it was bright--because it was a hard thing to find, but pretty when you've found it. You can't fight with golden swords or eat golden biscuits; you can only look at it--and you can look at it out here."

With one of his incalculable motions he sprang back and burst open the doors into the garden. At the same time also, with one of his gestures that never seemed at the instant so unconventional as they were, he stretched out his hand to Mary Gray, and led her out on to the lawn as if for a dance.

The French windows, thus flung open, let in an evening even lovelier than that of the day before. The west was swimming with sanguine colours, and a sort of sleepy flame lay along the lawn. The twisted shadows of the one or two garden trees showed upon this sheen, not gray or black, as in common daylight, but like arabesques written in vivid violet ink on some page of Eastern gold. The sunset was one of those festive and yet mysterious conflagrations in which common things by their colours remind us of costly or curious things. The slates upon the sloping roof burned like the plumes of a vast peacock, in every mysterious blend of blue and green. The red-brown bricks of the wall glowed with all the October tints of strong ruby and tawny wines. The sun seemed to set each object alight with a different coloured flame, like a man lighting fireworks; and even Innocent's hair, which was of a rather colourless fairness, seemed to have a flame of pagan gold on it as he strode across the lawn towards the one tall ridge of rockery.

"What would be the good of gold," he was saying, "if it did not glitter? Why should we care for a black sovereign any more than for a black sun at noon? A black button would do just as well. Don't you see that everything in this garden looks like a jewel? And will you kindly tell me what the deuce is the good of a jewel except that it looks like a jewel? Leave off buying and selling, and start looking! Open your eyes, and you'll wake up in the New Jerusalem.

"All is gold that glitters-- Tree and tower of brass; Rolls the
golden evening air Down the golden grass. Kick the cry to Jericho,
How yellow mud is sold; All is gold that glitters, For the glitter is the
gold."

"And who wrote that?" asked Rosamund, amused.

"No one will ever write it," answered Smith, and cleared the rockery with a flying leap.

"Really," said Rosamund to Michael Moon, "he ought to be sent to an asylum. Don't you think so?"

"I beg your pardon," inquired Michael, rather sombrely; his long, swarthy head was dark against the sunset, and, either by accident or mood, he had the look of something isolated and even hostile amid the social extravagance of the garden.

"I only said Mr. Smith ought to go to an asylum," repeated the lady.

The lean face seemed to grow longer and longer, for Moon was unmistakably sneering. "No," he said; "I don't think it's at all necessary."

"What do you mean?" asked Rosamund quickly. "Why not?"

"Because he is in one now," answered Michael Moon, in a quiet but ugly voice.

"Why, didn't you know?"

"What?" cried the girl, and there was a break in her voice; for the Irishman's face and voice were really almost creepy. With his dark figure and dark sayings in all that sunshine he looked like the devil in paradise.

"I'm sorry," he continued, with a sort of harsh humility. "Of course we don't talk about it much... but I thought we all really knew."

"Knew what?"

"Well," answered Moon, "that Beacon House is a certain rather singular sort of house--a house with the tiles loose, shall we say? Innocent Smith is only the doctor that visits us; hadn't you come when he called before? As most of our maladies are melancholic, of course he has to be extra cheery. Sanity, of course, seems a very bumptious eccentric thing to us. Jumping over a wall, climbing a tree--that's his bedside manner."

"You daren't say such a thing!" cried Rosamund in a rage. "You daren't suggest that I--"

"Not more than I am," said Michael soothingly; "not more than the rest of us. Haven't you ever noticed that Miss Duke never sits still--a notorious sign? Haven't you ever observed that Inglewood is always washing his hands-- a known mark of mental disease? I, of course, am a dipsomaniac."

"I don't believe you," broke out his companion, not without agitation. "I've heard you had some bad habits--"

"All habits are bad habits," said Michael, with deadly calm. "Madness does not come by breaking out, but by giving in; by settling down in some dirty, little, self-repeating circle of ideas; by being tamed. YOU went mad about money, because you're an heiress."

"It's a lie," cried Rosamund furiously. "I never was mean about money."

"You were worse," said Michael, in a low voice and yet violently. "You thought that other people were. You thought every man who came near you must be a fortune-hunter; you would not let yourself go and be sane; and now you're mad and I'm mad, and serve us right."

"You brute!" said Rosamund, quite white. "And is this true?"

With the intellectual cruelty of which the Celt is capable when his abysses are in revolt, Michael was silent for some seconds, and then stepped back with an ironical bow. "Not literally true, of course," he said; "only really true. An allegory, shall we say? a social satire."

"And I hate and despise your satires," cried Rosamund Hunt, letting loose her whole forcible female personality like a cyclone, and speaking every word to wound. "I despise it as I despise your rank tobacco, and your nasty, loungy ways, and your snarling, and your Radicalism, and your old clothes, and your potty little newspaper, and your rotten failure at everything. I don't care whether you call it snobbishness or not, I like life and success, and jolly things to look at, and action. You won't frighten me with Diogenes; I prefer Alexander."

"Victrix causa deae--" said Michael gloomily; and this angered her more, as, not knowing what it meant, she imagined it to be witty.

"Oh, I dare say you know Greek," she said, with cheerful inaccuracy; "you haven't done much with that either." And she crossed the garden, pursuing the vanished Innocent and Mary.

In doing so she passed Inglewood, who was returning to the house slowly, and with a thought-clouded brow. He was one of those men who are quite clever, but quite the reverse of quick. As he came back out of the sunset garden into the twilight parlour, Diana Duke slipped swiftly to her feet and began putting away the tea things. But it was not before Inglewood had seen an instantaneous picture so unique that he might well have snapshotted it with his everlasting camera. For Diana had been sitting in front of her unfinished work with her chin on her hand, looking straight out of the window in pure thoughtless thought.

"You are busy," said Arthur, oddly embarrassed with what he had seen, and wishing to ignore it.

"There's no time for dreaming in this world," answered the young lady with her back to him.

"I have been thinking lately," said Inglewood in a low voice, "that there's no time for waking up."

She did not reply, and he walked to the window and looked out on the garden.

"I don't smoke or drink, you know," he said irrelevantly, "because I think they're drugs. And yet I fancy all hobbies, like my camera and bicycle, are drugs too. Getting under a black hood, getting into a dark room--getting into a hole anyhow. Drugging myself with speed, and sunshine, and fatigue, and fresh air. Pedalling the machine so fast that I turn into a machine myself. That's the matter with all of us. We're too busy to wake up."

"Well," said the girl solidly, "what is there to wake up to?"

"There must be!" cried Inglewood, turning round in a singular excitement--"there must be something to wake up to! All we do is preparations--your cleanliness, and my healthiness, and Warner's scientific appliances. We're always preparing for something--something that never comes off. I ventilate the house, and you sweep the house; but what is going to HAPPEN in the house?"

She was looking at him quietly, but with very bright eyes, and seemed to be searching for some form of words which she could not find.

Before she could speak the door burst open, and the boisterous Rosamund Hunt, in her flamboyant white hat, boa, and parasol, stood framed in the doorway. She was in a breathing heat, and on her open face was an expression of the most infantile astonishment.

"Well, here's a fine game!" she said, panting. "What am I to do now, I wonder? I've wired for Dr. Warner; that's all I can think of doing."

"What is the matter?" asked Diana, rather sharply, but moving forward like one used to be called upon for assistance.

"It's Mary," said the heiress, "my companion Mary Gray: that cracked friend of yours called Smith has proposed to her in the garden, after ten hours' acquaintance, and he wants to go off with her now for a special licence."

Arthur Inglewood walked to the open French windows and looked out on the garden, still golden with evening light. Nothing moved there but a bird or two hopping and twittering; but beyond the hedge and railings, in the road outside the garden gate, a hansom cab was waiting, with the yellow Gladstone bag on top of it.