

CHAPTER TWENTY

I wanted to see her, to finish it one way or another, and, at my aunt's house, I found her standing in an immense white room; waiting for me. There was a profusion of light. It left her absolutely shadowless, like a white statue in a gallery; inscrutable.

"I have come," I said. I had it in my mind to say: "Because there is nothing for me to do on earth." But I did not, I looked at her instead.

"You have come," she repeated. She had no expression in her voice, in her eyes. It was as if I were nothing to her; as if I were the picture of a man. Well, that was it; I was a picture, she a statue. "I did it," I said at last.

"And you want?" she asked.

"You know," I answered, "I want my...." I could not think of the word. It was either a reward or a just due. She looked at me, quite suddenly. It made an effect as if the Venus of Milo had turned its head toward me. She began to speak, as if the statue were speaking, as if a passing bell were speaking; recording a passing passionlessly.

"You have done nothing at all," she said. "Nothing."

"And yet," I said, "I was at the heart of it all."

"Nothing at all," she repeated. "You were at the heart, yes; but at the heart of a machine." Her words carried a sort of strong conviction. I seemed suddenly to see an immense machine--unconcerned, soulless, but all its parts made up of bodies of men: a great mill grinding out the dust of centuries; a great wine-press. She was continuing her speech.

"As for you--you are only a detail, like all the others; you were set in a place because you would act as you did. It was in your character. We inherit the earth and you, your day is over.... You remember that day, when I found you--the first day?"

I remembered that day. It was on the downland, under the immense sky, amid the sound of larks. She had explained the nature of things. She had talked expressionlessly in pregnant words; she was talking now. I knew no more of her to-day, after all these days, after I had given up to her my past and my future.

"You remember that day. I was looking for such a man, and I found you."

"And you ..." I said, "you have done this thing! Think of it!... I have nobody-- nothing--nowhere in the world. I cannot look a man in the face, not even Churchill. I can never go to him again." I paused, expecting a sign of softening. None came. "I have parted with my past and you tell me there is no future."

"None," she echoed. Then, coldly, as a swan takes the water, she began to speak:

"Well, yes! I've hurt you. You have suffered and in your pain you think me vile, but remember that for ages the virtue of to-morrow has been the vileness of to-day. That which outstrips one, one calls vile. My virtue lies in gaining my end. Pity for you would have been a crime for me. You have suffered. And then? What are you to me? As I came among you I am to-day; that is where I am triumphant and virtuous. I have succeeded. When I came here I came into a world of--of shadows of men. What were their passions, their joys, their fears, their despair, their outcry, to me? If I had ears, my virtue was to close them to the cries. There was no other way. There was one of us--your friend Fox, I mean. He came into the world, but had not the virtue to hold himself aloof. He has told you, 'One goes blind down here.' He began to feel a little like the people round him. He contracted likings and dislikings. He liked you ... and you betrayed him. So he went under. He grew blind down here. I have not grown blind. I see as I saw. I move as I did in a world of ... of the pictures of men. They despair. I hear groans ... well, they are the groans of the dead to me. This to you, down near it, is a mass of tortuous intrigue; vile in its pettiest detail. But come further off; stand beside me, and what does it look like? It is a mighty engine of disintegration. It has crushed out a whole fabric, a whole plane of society. It has done that. I guided it. I had to have my eyes on every little strand of it; to be forever on the watch."

"And now I stand alone. Yesterday that fabric was everything to you; it seemed solid enough. And where is it to-day? What is it to you more than to me? There stood Virtue ... and Probity ... and all the things that all those people stood for. Well, to-day they are gone; the very belief in them is gone. Who will believe in them, now that it is proved that their tools were people ... like de Mersch? And it was I that did it. That, too, is to be accounted to me for virtue."

"Well, I have inherited the earth. I am the worm at the very heart of the rose of it. You are thinking that all that I have gained is the hand of Gurnard. But it is more than that. It is a matter of a chess-board; and Gurnard is the only piece that remains. And I am the hand that moves him. As for a marriage; well, it is a marriage of minds, a union for a common purpose. But mine is the master mind."

As for you. Well, you have parted with your past ... and there is no future for you. That is true. You have nowhere to go to; have nothing left, nothing in the world. That is true too. But what is that to me? A set of facts--that you have parted with your past and have no future. You had to do the work; I had to make you do it. I chose you because you would do it. That is all.... I knew you; knew your secret places, your weaknesses. That is my power. I stand for the Inevitable, for the future that goes on its way; you for the past that lies by the roadside. If for your sake I had swerved one jot from my allotted course, I should have been untrue. There was a danger, once, for a minute.... But I stood out against it. What would you have had me do? Go under as Fox went under? Speak like him, look as he looks now.... Me? Well, I did not."

"I was in the hands of the future; I never swerved; I went on my way. I had to judge men as I judged you; to corrupt, as I corrupted you. I cajoled; I bribed; I held out hopes; and with every one, as with you, I succeeded. It is in that power that the secret of the greatness which is virtue, lies. I had to set about a work of art, of an art strange to you; as strange, as alien as the arts of dead peoples. You are the dead now, mine the art of an ensuing day. All that remains to you is to fold your hands and wonder, as you wondered before the gates of Nineveh. I had to sound the knell of the old order; of your virtues, of your honours, of your faiths, of ... of altruism, if you like. Well, it is sounded. I was forever on the watch; I foresaw; I forestalled; I have never rested. And you...."

"And I ..." I said, "I only loved you."

There was a silence. I seemed for a moment to see myself a tenuous, bodiless thing, like a ghost in a bottomless cleft between the past and the to come. And I was to be that forever.

"You only loved me," she repeated. "Yes, you loved me. But what claim upon me does that give you? You loved me.... Well, if I had loved you it would have given you a claim.... All your misery; your heartache comes from ... from love; your love for me, your love for the things of the past, for what was doomed.... You loved the others too ... in a way, and you betrayed them and you are wretched. If you had not loved them you would not be wretched now; if you had not loved me you would not have betrayed your--your very self. At the first you stood alone; as much alone as I. All these people were nothing to you. I was nothing to you. But you must needs love them and me. You should have let them remain nothing to the end. But you did not. What were they to you?--Shapes, shadows on a sheet. They looked real. But were they--any one of them? You will never see them again; you will never see me again; we shall be all parts of a past of shadows. If you had been as I am, you could have looked back upon them unmoved or could have forgotten.... But you ... 'you only loved' and you will have no more ease. And, even

now, it is only yourself that matters. It is because you broke; because you were false to your standards at a supreme moment; because you have discovered that your honour will not help you to stand a strain. It is not the thought of the harm you have done the others.... What are they--what is Churchill who has fallen or Fox who is dead--to you now? It is yourself that you bemoan. That is your tragedy, that you can never go again to Churchill with the old look in your eyes, that you can never go to anyone for fear of contempt.... Oh, I know you, I know you."

She knew me. It was true, what she said.

I had had my eyes on the ground all this while; now I looked at her, trying to realise that I should never see her again. It was impossible. There was that intense beauty, that shadowlessness that was like translucence. And there was her voice. It was impossible to understand that I was never to see her again, never to hear her voice, after this.

She was silent for a long time and I said nothing--nothing at all. It was the thought of her making Fox's end; of her sitting as Fox had sat, hopelessly, lifelessly, like a man waiting at the end of the world. At last she said: "There is no hope. We have to go our ways; you yours, I mine. And then if you will--if you cannot forget--you may remember that I cared; that, for a moment, in between two breaths, I thought of ... of failing. That is all I can do ... for your sake."

That silenced me. Even if I could have spoken to any purpose, I would have held my tongue now.

I had not looked at her; but stood with my eyes averted, very conscious of her standing before me; of her great beauty, of her great glory.

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After a long time I went away. I never saw her again. I never saw any one of them all again. Fox was dead and Churchill I have never had the heart to face. That was the end of all that part of my life. It passed away and left me only a consciousness of weakness and ... and regrets. She remains. One recognises her hand in the trend of events. Well, it is not a very gay world. Gurnard, they say, is the type of the age--of its spirit. And they say that I, the Granger of Etchingam, am not on terms with my brother-in-law. www.freeclassicebooks.com