

## CHAPTER XVII

He was alone with the Duchess. The doors were closed, and the world shut out by her own order. She leaned against the high back of her chair, watching him intently as she listened. He walked slowly up and down the room with long paces. He had been doing it for some time and he had told her from beginning to end the singular story of what had happened when he found Robin lying face downward on the moss in Mersham Wood.

This is what he was saying in a low, steady voice.

"She had not once thought of what most women would have thought of before anything else. If I were speaking to another person than yourself I should say that she was too ignorant of the world. To you I will say that she is not merely a girl--she is the unearthly luckless embodiment of the pure spirit of Love. She knew only worship and the rapt giving of gifts. Her unearthliness made him forget earth himself. Folly and madness of course! Incredible madness--it would seem to most people--a decently intelligent lad losing his head wholly and not regaining his senses until it was too late to act sanely. But perhaps not quite incredible to you and me. There must have been days which seemed to him--and lads like him--like the last hours of a condemned man. In the midst of love and terror and the agony of farewells--what time was there for sanity?"

"You believe her?" the Duchess said.

"Yes," impersonally. "In spite of the world, the flesh and the devil. I also know that no one else will. To most people her story will seem a thing trumped up out of a fourth rate novel. The law will not listen to it. You will--when you see her unawakened face."

"I have seen it," was the Duchess' interpolation. "I saw it when she went upon her knees and prayed that I would let her go to Mersham Wood. There was something inexplicable in her remoteness from fear and shame. She was only woe's self. I did not comprehend. I was merely a baffled old woman of the world. Now I begin to see. I believe her as you do. The world and the law will laugh at us because we have none of the accepted reasons for our belief. But I believe her as you do--absurd as it will seem to others."

"Yes, it will seem absurd," Coombe said slowly pacing. "But here she is--and here we are!"

"What do you see before us?" she asked of his deep thought.

"I see a helpless girl in a dark plight. As far as knowledge of how to defend herself goes, she is as powerless as a child fresh from a nursery. She lives among people with observing eyes already noting the change in her piteous face. Her place in your house makes her a centre of attention. The observation of her beauty and happiness has been

good-natured so far. The observation will continue, but in time its character will change. I see that before anything else."

"It is the first thing to be considered," she answered.

"The next--" she paused and thought seriously, "is her mother. Perhaps Mrs. Gareth-Lawless has sharp eyes. She said to you something rather vulgarly hideous about being glad her daughter was in my house and not in hers."

"Her last words to Robin were to warn her not to come to her for refuge 'if she got herself into a mess.' She is in what Mrs. Gareth-Lawless would call 'a mess.'"

"It is what a good many people would call it," the Duchess said. "And she does not even know that her tragedy would express itself in a mere vulgar colloquialism with a modern snigger in it. Presently, poor child, when she awakens a little more she will begin to go about looking like a little saint. Do you see that--as I do?"

She thought he did and that he was moved by it though he did not say so.

"I am thinking first of her mother. Mrs. Gareth-Lawless must see and hear nothing. She is not a criminal or malignant creature, but her light malice is capable of playing flimsily with any atrocity. She has not brain enough to know that she can be atrocious. Robin can be protected

only if she is shut out of the whole affair. She was simply speaking the truth when she warned the girl not to come to her in case of need."

"For a little longer I can keep her here," the Duchess said. "As she looks ill it will not be unnatural that the doctor should advise me to send her away from London. It is not possible to remember anything long in the life we live now. She will be forgotten in a week. That part of it will be simple."

"Yes," he answered. "Yes."

He paced the length of the room twice--three times and said nothing. She watched him as he walked and she knew he was going to say more. She also wondered what curious thing it might be. She had said to herself that what he said and did would be entirely detached from ordinary or archaic views. Also she had guessed that it might be extraordinary--perhaps as extraordinary as his long intimacy with Mrs. Gareth-Lawless. Was there a possibility that he was going to express himself now?

"But that is not all," he said at last and he ended his pondering walk by coming nearer to her. He sat down and touched the newspapers lying on the table.

"You have been poring over these," he said, "and I have been doing the same thing. I have also been talking to the people who know things and to those who ought to know them but don't. Just now the news is worse

each day. In the midst of the roar and thunder of cataclysms to talk about a mere girl 'in trouble' appears disproportionate. But because our world seems crumbling to pieces about us she assumes proportions of her own. I was born of the old obstinate passions of belief in certain established things and in their way they have had their will of me. Lately it has forced itself upon me that I am not as modern as I have professed to be. The new life has gripped me, but the old has not let me go. There are things I cannot bear to see lost forever without a struggle."

"Such as--" she said it very low.

"I conceal things from myself," he answered, "but they rise and confront me. There were days when we at least believed--quite obstinately--in a number of things."

"Sometimes quite heroically," she admitted. "'God Save the Queen' in its long day had actual glow and passion. I have thrilled and glowed myself at the shouting song of it."

"Yes," he drew a little nearer to her and his cold face gained a slight colour. "In those days when a son--or a grandson--was born to the head of a house it was a serious and impressive affair."

"Yes." And he knew she at once recalled her own son--and George in Flanders.

"It meant new generations, and generations counted for decent dignity as well as power. A farmer would say with huge pride, 'Me and mine have worked the place for four generations,' as he would say of the owner of the land, 'Him and his have held it for six centuries.' Centuries and generations are in danger of no longer inspiring special reverence. It is the future and the things to be which count."

"The things to be--yes," the Duchess said and knew that he was drawing near the thing he had to say.

"I suppose I was born a dogged sort of devil," he went on almost in a monotone. "The fact did not manifest itself to me until I came to the time when--all the rest of me dropped into a bottomless gulf. That perhaps describes it. I found myself suddenly standing on the edge of it. And youth, and future, and belief in the use of hoping and real enjoyment of things dropped into the blackness and were gone while I looked on. If I had not been born a dogged devil I should have blown my brains out. If I had been born gentler or kinder or more patient I should perhaps have lived it down and found there was something left. A man's way of facing things depends upon the kind of thing he was born. I went on living without--the rest of myself. I closed my mouth and not only my mouth but my life--as far as other men and women were concerned. When I found an interest stirring in me I shut another door--that was all. Whatsoever went on did it behind a shut door."

"But there were things which went on?" the Duchess gently suggested.

"In a hidden way--yes. That is what I am coming to. When I first saw Mrs. Gareth-Lawless sitting under her tree--" He suddenly stopped. "No," harshly, "I need not put it into words to you." Then a pause as if for breath. "She had a way of lifting her eyes as a very young angel might--she had a quivering spirit of a smile--and soft, deep curled corners to her mouth. You saw the same things in the old photograph you bought. The likeness was--Oh! it was hellish that such a resemblance could be! In less than half an hour after she spoke to me I had shut another door. But I was obliged to go and look at her again and again. The resemblance drew me. By the time her husband died I knew her well enough to be sure what would happen. Some man would pick her up and throw her aside--and then some one else. She could have held nothing long. She would have passed from one hand to another until she was tossed into the gutter and swept away--quivering spirit of a smile and all of it. I could not have shut any door on that. I prevented it--and kept her clean--by shutting doors right and left. I have watched over her. At times it has bored me frightfully. But after a year or so--behind another door I had shut the child."

"Robin? I had sometimes thought so," said the Duchess.

"I did not know why exactly. It was not affection or attraction. It was a sort of resentment of the beastly unfairness of things. The bottomless gulf seemed to yawn in her path when she was nothing but a baby.

Everything was being tossed into it before she had taken a step. I began to keep an eye on her and prevent things--or assist them. It was more fury than benevolence, but it has gone on for years--behind the shut door."

"Are you quite sure you have been entirely free from all affection for her?" The Duchess asked the question impersonally though with a degree of interest.

"I think so. I am less sure that I have the power to feel what is called 'affection' for any one. I think that I have felt something nearer it for Donal--and for you--than for any one else. But when the child talked to me in the wood I felt for the first time that I wished her to know that my relation to her mother was not the reason for her hating me which she had believed."

"She shall be made to understand," said the Duchess.

"She must," he said, "because of the rest."

The last four words were, as it were, italicised. Now, she felt, she was probably about to hear the chief thing he had been approaching. So she waited attentively.

"Behind a door has been shut another thing," he said and he endeavoured to say it with his usual detached rigidity of calm, but did not wholly



succeed. "It is the outcome of the generations and the centuries at present diminishing in value and dignity. The past having had its will of me and the present and future having gripped me--if I had had a son--"

As if in a flash she saw as he lingered on the words that he was speaking of a thing of which he had secretly thought often and much, though he had allowed no human being to suspect it. She had not suspected it herself. In a secretive, intense way he had passionately desired a son.

"If you had had a son--" she repeated.

"He would have stood for both--the past and the future--at the beginning of a New World," he ended.

He said it with such deliberate meaning that the magnitude of his possible significance caused her to draw a sudden breath.

"Is it going to be a New World?" she said.

"It cannot be the old one. I don't take it upon myself to describe the kind of world it will be. That will depend upon the men and women who build it. Those who were born during the last few years--those who are about to be born now."

Then she knew what he was thinking of.

"Donal's child will be one of them," she said.

"The Head of the House of Coombe--if there is a Head who starts fair--ought to have quite a lot to say--and do. Howsoever black things look," obstinately fierce, "England is not done for. At the worst no real Englishman believes she can be. She can't! You know the old saying, 'In all wars England loses battles, but she always wins one--the last one.' She always will. Afterwards she must do her bit for the New World."