

CHAPTER XVIII

This then was it--the New World and the human creatures who were to build it, the unborn as well as those now in their cradles or tottering in their first step on the pathway leading to the place of building. Yet he himself had no thought of there being any touch of heroic splendour in his way of looking at it. He was not capable of drama. Behind his shut doors of immovability and stiff coldness, behind his cynic habit of treating all things with detached lightness, the generations and the centuries had continued their work in spite of his modernity. His British obstinacy would not relinquish the long past he and his had seemed to own in representing it. He had loved one woman, and one only--with a love like a deep wound; he had longed for a son; he had stubbornly undertaken to protect a creature he felt life had treated unfairly. The shattering of the old world had stirred in him a powerful interest in the future of the new one whose foundations were yet to be laid. The combination of these things might lead to curious developments.

They sat and talked long and the developments were perhaps more unusual than she had imagined they might be.

"If I had been able to express the something which approached affection which I felt for Donal, he would have found out that my limitations were not deliberately evil proclivities," was one of the things he said. "One

day he would have ended by making a clean breast of it. He was afraid of me. I suspect he was afraid of his mother--fond as they were of each other. I should have taken the matter in hand and married the pair of them at once--quietly if they preferred it, but safely and sanely. God knows I should have comprehended their wish to keep a roaring world out of their paradise. It was paradise!"

"How you believe her!" she exclaimed.

"She is not a trivial thing, neither was he. If I did not believe her I should know that he meant to marry her, even if fate played them some ghastly trick and there was not time. Another girl's consciousness of herself might have saved her, but she had no consciousness but his. If--if a son is born he should be what his father would have been after my death."

"The Head of the House," the Duchess said.

"It is a curious thing," he deliberated, "that now there remains no possible head but what is left of myself--it ceases to seem the mere pompous phrase one laughed at--the Head of the House of Coombe. Here I, of all men, sit before you glaring into the empty future and demanding one. There ought to have been more males in the family. Only four were killed--and we are done for."

"If you had seen them married before he went away--" she began.

He rose to his feet as if involuntarily. He looked as she had never seen him look before.

"Allow me to make a fantastic confession to you," he said. "It will open doors. If all were as the law foolishly demands it should be--if she were safe in the ordinary way--absurdly incredible or not as the statement may seem--I should now be at her feet."

"At her feet!" she said slowly, because she felt herself facing actual revelation.

"Her child would be to me the child of the son who ought to have been born to me a life time ago. God, how I have wanted him! Robin would seem to be what another Madonna-like young creature might have been if she had been my wife. She would not know that she was a little saint on an altar. She would be the shrine of the past and the future. In my inexpressive way I should be worshipping before her. That her possible son would rescue the House of Coombe from extinction would have meant much, but it would be a mere detail. Now you understand."

Yes. She understood. Things she had never comprehended and had not expected to comprehend explained themselves with comparative clearness. He proceeded with a certain hard distinctness.

"The thing which grips me most strongly is that this one--who is one of

those who have work before them--shall not be handicapped. He shall not begin life manacled and shamed by illegitimacy. He shall begin it with the background of all his father meant to give him. The law of England will not believe in his claims unless they can be proven. She can prove nothing. I can prove nothing for her. If she had been a little female costermonger she would have demanded her 'marriage lines' and clung to them fiercely. She would have known that to be able to flaunt them in the face of argument was indispensable."

"She probably did not know that there existed such documents," the Duchess said. "Neither of the pair knew anything for the time but that they were wild with love and were to be torn apart."

"Therefore," he said with distinctness even clearer and harder, "she must possess indisputable documentary evidence of marriage before the child is born--as soon as possible."

"Marriage!" she hesitated aghast. "But who will--?"

"I," he answered with absolute rigidity. "It will be difficult. It must be secret. But if it can be done--when his time comes the child can look his new world in the face. He will be the Head of the House of Coombe when it most needs a strong fellow who has no cause to fear anything and who holds money and power in his hands."

"You propose to suggest that she shall marry you?" she put it to him.

"Yes. It will be the devil's own job," he answered. "She has not begun to think of the child yet--and she has abhorred me all her life. To her the world means nothing. She does not know what it can do to her and she would not care if she did. Donal was her world and he is gone. But you and I know what she does not."

"So this is what you have been thinking?" she said. It was indeed an unarchaic point of view. But even as she heard him she realised that it was the almost inevitable outcome--not only of what was at the moment happening to the threatened and threatening world, but of his singularly secretive past--of all the things he had hidden and also of all the things he had professed not to hide but had baffled people with.

"Since the morning Redcliff dropped his bomb I have not been able to think of much else," he said. "It was a bomb, I own. Neither you nor I had reason for a shadow of suspicion. My mind has a trick of dragging back to me a memory of a village girl who was left as--as she is. She said her lover had married her--but he went away and never came back. The village she lived in was a few miles from Coombe Keep and she gave birth to a boy. His childhood must have been a sort of hell. When other boys had rows with him they used to shout 'Bastard' after him in the street. He had a shifty, sickened look and when he died of measles at seven years old no doubt he was glad of it. He used to run crying to his wretched mother and hide his miserable head in her apron."

"It sounds unendurable," the Duchess said sharply.

"I can defy the world as she cannot," he said with dangerous calm. "I can provide money for her. She may be hidden away. But only one thing will save her child--Donal's child--from being a sort of outcast and losing all he should possess--a quick and quiet marriage which will put all doubt out of the question."

"And you know perfectly well what the general opinion will be with regard to yourself?"

"Damned well. A debauched old degenerate marrying the daughter of his mistress because her eighteen years attracts his vicious decrepitude. My absolute indifference to that, may I say, can not easily be formulated. She shall be spared as much as possible. The thing can be kept secret for years. She can live in entire seclusion. No one need be told until I am dead--or until it is necessary for the boy's sake. By that time perhaps changes in opinion will have taken place. But now--as is the cry of the hour--there is no time. She said that Donal said it too." He stood still for a few moments and looked at the floor. "But as I said," he terminated, "it will be the devil's own job. When I first speak to her about it--she will almost be driven mad."