

CHAPTER XXIII

There are old and forgotten churches in overgrown corners of London whose neglected remoteness suggests the possibility of any ecclesiastical ceremony being performed quite unobserved except by the parties concerned in it. If entries and departures were discreetly arranged, a baptismal or a marriage ceremony might take place almost as in a tomb. A dark wet day in which few pass by and such as pass are absorbed in their own discomforts beneath their umbrellas, offers a curiously entire aloofness of seclusion. In the neglected graveyards about them there is no longer any room to bury any one in the damp black earth where the ancient tombs are dark with mossy growth and mould, heavy broken slabs slant sidewise perilously, sad and thin cats prowl, and from a soot-blackened tree or so the rain drops with hollow, plashing sounds.

The rain was so plashing and streaming in rivulets among the mounds and stones of the burial ground of one of the most ancient and forgotten looking of such churches, when on a certain afternoon there came to the narrow soot-darkened Vicarage attached to it a tall, elderly man who wished to see and talk to the Vicar.

The Vicar in question was an old clergyman who had spent nearly fifty years in the silent, ecclesiastical-atmosphered small house. He was an unmarried man whose few relatives living in the far North of England

were too poor and unenterprising to travel to London. His days were spent in unsatisfactory work among crowded and poverty-stricken human creatures before whom he felt helpless because he was an unpractical old Oxford bookworm. He read such services as he held in his dim church, to empty pews and echoing hollowness. He was nevertheless a deeply thinking man who was a gentleman of a scarcely remembered school; he was a peculiarly silent man and of dignified understanding. Through the long years he had existed in detached seclusion in his corner of his world around which great London roared and swept almost unheard by him in his remoteness.

When the visitor's card was brought to him where he sat in his dingy, book-packed study, he stood--after he had told his servant to announce the caller--gazing dreamily at the name upon the white surface. It was a stately name and brought back vague memories. Long ago--very long ago, he seemed to recall that he had slightly known the then bearer of it. He himself had been young then--quite young. The man he had known was dead and this one, his successor, must by this time have left youth behind him. What had led him to come?

Then the visitor was shown into the study. The Vicar felt that he was a man of singular suggestions. His straight build, his height, his carriage arrested the attention and the clear cut of his cold face held it. One of his marked suggestions was that there was unusual lack of revelation in his rather fine almond eye. It might have revealed much

but its intention was to reveal nothing but courteous detachment from all but well-bred approach to the demand of the present moment.

"I think I remember seeing you when you were a boy, Lord Coombe," the Vicar said. "My father was rector of St. Andrews." St. Andrews was the Norman-towered church on the edge of the park enclosing Coombe Keep.

"I came to you because I also remembered that," was Coombe's reply.

Their meeting was a very quiet one. But every incident of life was quiet in the Vicarage. Only low sounds were ever heard, only almost soundless movements made. The two men seated themselves and talked calmly while the rain pattered on the window panes and streaming down them seemed to shut out the world.

What the Vicar realised was that, since his visitor had announced that he had come because he remembered their old though slight acquaintance, he had obviously come for some purpose to which the connection formed a sort of support or background. This man, whose modernity of bearing and externals seemed to separate them by a lifetime of experience, clearly belonged to the London which surrounded and enclosed his own silences with civilised roar and the tumult of swift passings. On the surface the small, dingy book-crammed study obviously held nothing this outer world could require. The Vicar said as much courteously and he glanced round the room as he spoke, gently smiling.

"But it is exactly this which brings me," Lord Coombe answered.

With great clearness and never raising the note of quiet to which the walls were accustomed, he made his explanation. He related no incidents and entered into no detail. When he had at length concluded the presentation of his desires, his hearer knew nothing whatever, save what was absolutely necessary, of those concerned in the matter. Utterly detached from all curiosities as he was, this crossed the Vicar's mind. There was a marriage ceremony to be performed. That only the contracting parties should be aware of its performance was absolutely necessary. That there should be no chance of opportunity given for question or comment was imperative. Apart from this the legality of the contract was all that concerned those entering into it; and that must be assured beyond shadow of possible doubt.

In the half-hidden and forgotten old church to which the Vicarage was attached such a ceremony could obviously be performed, and to an incumbent detached from the outer world, as it were, and one who was capable of comprehending the occasional gravity of reasons for silence, it could remain so long as was necessary a confidence securely guarded.

"It is possible," the Vicar said at the end of the explanation. "I have performed the ceremony before under somewhat similar circumstances."

A man of less breeding and with even normal curiosities might have made the mistake of asking innocent questions. He asked none except such as

related to the customary form of procedure in such matters. He did not, in fact, ask questions of himself. He was also fully aware that Lord Coombe would have given no answer to any form of inquiry. The marriage was purely his own singular affair. It was he himself who chose in this way to be married--in a forgotten church in whose shadowy emptiness the event would be as a thing brought to be buried unseen and unmarked by any stone, but would yet be a contract binding in the face and courts of the world if it should for any reason be exhumed.

When he rose to go and the Vicar rose with him, there was a moment of pause which was rather curious. The men's eyes met and for a few moments rested upon each other. The Vicar's were still and grave, but there was a growth of deep feeling in them. This suggested a sort of profound human reflection.

Lord Coombe's expression itself changed a shade. It might perhaps be said that his eyes had before this moment scarcely seemed to hold expression.

"She is very young," he said in an unusual voice. "In this--holocaust--she needs protection. I can protect her."

"It is a holocaust," the Vicar said, "--a holocaust." And singularly the words seemed an answer.

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On a morning of one of London's dark days when the rain was again splashing and streaming in rivulets among the mounds and leaning and tumbling stones of the forgotten churchyard, there came to the church three persons who if they had appeared in more frequented edifices would have attracted some attention without doubt, unnoticeably as they were dressed and inconspicuous as was their manner and bearing.

They did not all three present themselves at the same time. First there appeared the tall elderly man who had visited and conferred with the Vicar. He went at once to the vestry where he spent some time with the incumbent who awaited him.

Somewhat later there stepped through the little arched doorway a respectable looking elderly woman and a childlike white-faced girl in a close black frock. That the church looked to them so dark as to be almost black with shadows was manifest when they found themselves inside peering into the dimness. The outer darkness seemed to have crowded itself through the low doorway to fill the groined arches with gloom.

"Where must we go to, Dowie?" Robin whispered holding to the warm, stout arm.

"Don't be timid, my dearie," Dowie whispered back. "His lordship will be ready for us now we've come."

His lordship was ready. He came forward to meet them and when he did so, Robin knew--though he seemed to be part of the dimness and to come out of a dream--that she need feel no further uncertainties or fears. That which was to take place would move forward without let or hindrance to its end. That was what one always felt in his presence.

In a few minutes they were standing in a part of the church which would have seemed darker than any other shadow-filled corner but that a dim light burned on a small altar and a clergyman whose white vestments made him look wraithlike and very tall waited before it and after a few moments of solemn silence began to read from the prayer book he held in his hand.

There were strange passings and repassings through Robin's mind as she made her low responses--memories of the hours when she had asked herself if she were still alive--if she were not dead as Donal was, but walking about without having found it out. It was as though this must be true now and her own voice and Lord Coombe's and the clergyman's only ghosts' voices. They were so low and unlike real voices and when they floated away among the shadows, low ghastly echoes seemed to float with them.

"I will," she heard herself say, and also other things the clergyman told her to repeat after him and when Lord Coombe spoke she could scarcely understand because it was all like a dream and did not matter.

Once she turned so cold and white and trembled so that Dowie made an

involuntary movement towards her, but Lord Coombe's quiet firmness held her swaying body and though the clergyman paused a moment the trembling

passed away and the ceremony went on. She had begun to tremble because she remembered that the other marriage had seemed like a dream in another world than this--a world which was so alive that she had trembled and thrilled with exquisite living. And because Donal knew how frightened she was he had stood so close to her that she had felt the dear warmness of his body. And he had held her hand quite tight when he took it and his "I will" had been beautiful and clear. And when he had put on the borrowed ring he had drawn her eyes up to the blue tarn of his own. Donal was killed! Perhaps the young chaplain had been killed too. And she was being married to Lord Coombe who was an old man and did

not stand close to her, whose hand scarcely held hers at all--but who was putting on a ring.

Her eyes--her hunted young doe's eyes--lifted themselves. Lord Coombe met them and understood. Strangely she knew he understood--that he knew what she was thinking about. For that one moment there came into his eyes a look which might not have been his own, and vaguely she knew that it held strange understanding and he was sorry for her--and for Donal and for everything in the world.