

## CHAPTER XXXV

"It was the strangest experience of my existence. It seemed suddenly to change me to another type of man."

He said it to the Duchess as he sat with her in her private room at Eaton Square. He had told her the whole story of his week at Darreuch and she had listened with an interest at moments almost breathless.

"Do you feel that you shall remain the new type of man, or was it only a temporary phase?" she inquired.

"I told her that I felt I was living on a new planet. London is the old planet and I have returned to it. But not as I left it. Something has come back with me."

"It must have seemed another planet," the Duchess pondered. "The stillness of huge unbroken moors--no war--no khaki in sight--utter peace and remoteness. A girl brought back to life by pure love, drawing a spirit out of the unknown to her side on earth."

"She is like a spirit herself--but that she remains Robin--in an extraordinary new blooming."

"Yes, she remains Robin." The Duchess thought it out slowly. "Not once did she disturb you or herself by remembering that you were her husband."

"A girl who existed on the old planet would have remembered, and I should have detested her. To her, marriage means only Donal. The form we went through she sees only as a supreme sacrifice I made for the sake of Donal's child. If you could have heard her heart-wrung cry, 'There will be no one to defend you! Oh! What shall I do!'"

"The stainless little soul of her!" the Duchess exclaimed. "Her world holds only love and tenderness. Her goodbye to you meant that in her penitence she wanted to take you into it in the one way she feels most sacred. She will not die. She will live to give you the child. If it is a son there will be a Head of the House of Coombe."

"On the new planet one ceases to feel the vital importance of 'houses,'" Coombe half reflected aloud.

"Even on the old planet," the Duchess spoke as a woman very tired, "one is beginning to contemplate changes in values."

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The slice of a house in Mayfair had never within the memory of man been so brilliant. The things done in it were called War Work and

necessitated much active gaiety. Persons of both sexes, the majority of them in becoming uniform, flashed in and out in high spirits. If you were a personable and feminine creature, it was necessary to look as much like an attractive boy as possible when you were doing War Work. If one could achieve something like leggings in addition to a masculine cut of coat, one could swagger about most alluringly. There were numbers of things to be done which did not involve frumpish utilitarian costumes, all caps and aprons. Very short skirts were the most utilitarian of garments because they were easy to get about in. Smart military little hats were utilitarian also--and could be worn at any inspiring angle which would most attract the passing eye. Even before the War, shapely legs, feet and ankles had begun to play an increasingly interesting part in the scheme of the Universe--as a result of the brevity of skirts and the prevalence of cabaret dancing. During the War, as a consequence of the War Work done in such centres of activity as the slice of a house in Mayfair, these attractive members were allowed opportunities such as the world had not before contemplated.

"Skirts must be short when people are doing real work," Feather said.

"And then of course one's shoes and stockings require attention. I'm not always sure I like leggings however smart they are. Still I often wear them--as a sort of example."

"Of what?" inquired Coombe who was present

"Oh, well--of what women are willing to do for their country--in time of

war. Wearing unbecoming things--and doing without proper food. These food restrictions are enough to cause a revolution."

She was specially bitter against the food restrictions. If there was one thing men back from the Front--particularly officers--were entitled to, it was unlimited food. The Government ought to attend to it. When a man came back and you invited him to dinner, a nice patriotic thing it was to restrict the number of courses and actually deny him savouries and entrées because they are called luxuries. Who should have luxuries if not the men who were defending England?

"Of course the Tommies don't need them," she leniently added. "They never had them and never will. But men who are officers in smart regiments are starving for them. I consider that my best War Work is giving as many dinner parties as possible, and paying as little attention to food restrictions as I can manage by using my wits."

For some time--in certain quarters even from early days--there had been flowing through many places a current of talk about America. What was she going to do? Was she going to do anything at all? Would it be possible for her hugeness, her power, her wealth to remain inert in a world crisis? Would she be content tacitly to admit the truth of old accusations of commerciality by securing as her part in the superhuman conflict the simple and unadorned making of money through the dire necessities of the world? There was bitterness, there were sneers, there were vague hopes and scathing injustices born of torment and

racking dread. Some few were patiently just, because they knew something of the country and its political and social workings and were by chance of those whose points of view included the powers and significances of things not readily to be seen upon the surface of events.

"If there were dollars to be made out of it, of course America would rush in," was Feather's decision. "Americans never do anything unless they can make dollars. I never saw a dollar myself, but I believe they are made of green paper. It would be very exciting if they did rush in. They would bring so much money and they spend it as if it were water. Of course they haven't any proper army, so they'd have to build one up out of all sorts of people."

"Which was what we were obliged to do ourselves, by the way," Coombe threw in as a contribution.

"But they will probably have stockbrokers and Wall Street men for officers. Then some of them might give one 'tips' about how to make millions in 'corners.' I don't know what corners are but they make enormities out of them. Starling!" with a hilarious tinkle of a laugh, "you know that appallingly gorgeous house of Cherry Cheston's in Palace Garden--did she ever tell you that it was the result of a 'tip' a queer Chicago man managed for her? He liked her. He used to call her 'Cherry Ripe' when they were alone. He was big and red and half boyish--sentimental and half blustering. Cherry was ripe, you know, and he liked the ripe style. I should like to have a Chicago stockbroker

of my own. I wish the Americans would come in!"

The Dowager Duchess of Darte and Lord Coombe had been of those who had begun their talk of this in the early days.

"Personally I believe they will come in," Coombe had always said. And on different occasions he had added reasons which, combined, formulated themselves into the following arguments. "We don't really know much of the Americans though they have been buying and selling and marrying us for some time. Our insular trick of feeling superior has held us mentally aloof from half the globe. But presumably the United States was from the first, in itself, an ideal, pure and simple. It was. It is asinine to pooh-pooh it. A good deal is said about that sort of thing in their histories and speeches. They keep it before each other and it has had the effect of suggesting ideals on all sides. Which has resulted in laying a sort of foundation of men who believe in the ideals and would fight for them. They are good fighters and, when the sincere ones begin, they will plant their flag where the insincere and mere politicians will be forced to stand by it to save their faces. A few louder brays from Berlin, a few more threats of hoofs trampling on the Star Spangled Banner and the fuse will be fired. An American fuse might turn out an amazing thing--because the ideals do exist and ideals are inflammable."

This had been in the early days spoken of.