

here. For you there must be no war."

"How kind his face looked," was Robin's thought as he hesitated a second and then went on:

"I know very little of such--sacrosanct things as mothers and children, but lately I have had fancies of a place for them where there are only smiles and happiness and beauty--as a beginning."

It was she who now put her hand on his arm. "Little Darreuch is like that--and you gave it to me," she said.

## CHAPTER XXXVII

Lord Coombe was ushered into the little drawing-room by an extremely immature young footman who--doubtless as a consequence of his immaturity--appeared upon the scene too suddenly. The War left one only servants who were idiots or barely out of Board Schools, Feather said. And in fact it was something suggesting "a scene" upon which Coombe was announced. The athletic and personable young actor--entitled upon programmes Owen Delamore--was striding to and fro talking excitedly. There was theatrical emotion in the air and Feather, delicately flushed

and elate, was listening with an air half frightened, half pleased. The immaturity of the footman immediately took fright and the youth turning at once produced the fatal effect of fleeing precipitately.

Mr. Owen Delamore suddenly ceased speaking and would doubtless have flushed vividly if he had not already been so high of colour as to preclude the possibility of his flushing at all. The scene, which was plainly one of emotion, being intruded upon in its midst left him transfixed on his expression of anguish, pleading and reproachful protest--all thrilling and confusing things.

The very serenity of Lord Coombe's apparently unobserving entrance was perhaps a shock as well as a relief. It took even Feather two or three seconds to break into her bell of a laugh as she shook hands with her visitor.

"Mr. Delamore is going over his big scene in the new play," she explained with apt swiftness of resource. "It's very good, but it excites him dreadfully. I've been told that great actors don't let themselves get excited at all, so he ought not to do it, ought he, Lord Coombe?"

Coombe was transcendently well behaved.

"I am a yawning abyss of ignorance in such matters, but I cannot agree with the people who say that emotion can be expressed without feeling."

He himself expressed exteriorly merely intelligent consideration of the idea. "That however may be solely the opinion of one benighted."

It was so well done that the young athlete, in the relief of relaxed nerves, was almost hysterically inclined to believe in Feather's adroit statement and to feel that he really had been acting. He was at least able to pull himself together, to become less flushed and to sit down with some approach to an air of being lightly amused at himself.

"Well it is proved that I am not a great actor," he achieved. "I can't come anywhere near doing it. I don't believe Irving ever did--or Coquelin. But perhaps it is one of my recommendations that I don't aspire to be great. At any rate people only ask to be amused and helped out just now. It will be a long time before they want anything else, it's my opinion."

They conversed amiably together for nearly a quarter of an hour before Mr. Owen Delamore went on his way murmuring polite regrets concerning impending rehearsals, his secret gratitude expressing itself in special courtesy to Lord Coombe.

As he was leaving the room, Feather called to him airily:

"If you hear any more of the Zepps--just dash in and tell me!--Don't lose a minute! Just dash!"

When the front door was heard to close upon him, Coombe remarked casually:

"I will ask you to put an immediate stop to that sort of thing."

He observed that Feather fluttered--though she had lightly moved to a table as if to rearrange a flower in a group.

"Put a stop to letting Mr. Delamore go over his scene here?"

"Put a stop to Mr. Delamore, if you please."

It was at this moment more than ever true that her light being was overstrung and that her light head whirled too fast. This one particular also overstrung young man had shared all her amusements with her and had ended by pleasing her immensely--perhaps to the verge of inspiring a touch of fevered sentiment she had previously never known. She told herself that it was the War when she thought of it. She had however not been clever enough to realise that she was a little losing her head in a way which might not be to her advantage. For the moment she lost it completely. She almost whirled around as she came to Coombe.

"I won't," she exclaimed. "I won't!"

It was a sort of shock to him. She had never done anything like it

before. It struck him that he had never before seen her look as she looked at the moment. She was a shade too dazzlingly made up--she had crossed the line on one side of which lies the art which is perfect. Even her dress had a suggestion of wartime lack of restraint in its style and colours.

It was of a strange green and a very long scarf of an intensely vivid violet spangled with silver paillettes was swathed around her bare shoulders and floated from her arms. One of the signs of her excitement was that she kept twisting its ends without knowing that she was touching it. He noted that she wore a big purple amethyst ring--the amethyst too big. Her very voice was less fine in its inflections and as he swiftly took in these points Coombe recognised that they were the actual result of the slight tone of raffishness he had observed as denoting the character of her increasingly mixed circle.

She threw herself into a chair palpitating in one of her rages of a little cat--wreathing her scarf round and round her wrist and singularly striking him with the effect of almost spitting and hissing out her words.

"I won't give up everything I like and that likes me," she flung out.  
"The War has done something to us all. It's made us let ourselves go. It's done something to me too. It's made me less frightened. I won't be bullied into--into things."

"Do I seem to bully you? I am sorry."

The fact that she had let herself go with the rest of the world got the better of her.

"You have not been near me for weeks and now you turn up with your air of a grand Bashawe and order people out of my house. You have not been near me."

The next instant it was as though she tore off some last shred of mental veiling and threw it aside in her reckless mounting heat of temper.

"Near me!" she laughed scathingly, "For the matter of that when have you ever been near me? It's always been the same. I've known it for years. As the Yankees say, you 'wouldn't touch me with a ten-foot pole.' I'm sick of it. What did you do it for?"

"Do what?"

"Take possession of me as if I were your property. You never were in love with me--never for a second. If you had been you'd have married me."

"Yes. I should have married you."

"There was no reason why you should not. I was pretty. I was young. I'd

been decently brought up--and it would have settled everything. Why didn't you instead of letting people think I was your mistress when I didn't count for as much as a straw in your life?"

"You represented more than that," he answered. "Kindly listen to me."

That she had lost her head completely was sufficiently manifested by the fact that she had begun to cry--which made it necessary for her to use her handkerchief with inimitable skill to prevent the tears from encroaching on her brilliant white and rose.

"If you had been in love with me--" she chafed bitterly.

"On the morning some years ago when I came to you I made myself clear to the best of my ability," he said. "I did not mention love. I told you that I had no intention of marrying you. I called your attention to what the world would assume. I left the decision to you."

"What could I do--without a penny? Some other man would have had to do it if you had not," the letting go rushed her into saying.

"Or you would have been obliged to return to your parents in Jersey--which you refused to contemplate."

"Of course I refused. It would have been mad to do it. And there were other people who would have paid my bills."

"Solely because I knew that, I made my proposition. Being much older than you I realised that other people might not feel the responsibility binding--and permanent."

She sat up and stared at him. There was no touch of the rancour of recrimination in his presentation of detached facts. He was different from the rest. He was always better dressed and the perfection of his impersonal manner belonged to a world being swept away. He made Mr. Owen

Delamore seem by contrast a bounder and an outsider. But the fact which had in the secret places of her small mind been the fly in her ointment--the one fact that he had never for a moment cared a straw for her--caused her actually to hate him as he again made it, quite without prejudice, crystal clear. It was true that he had more than kept his word--that he had never broken a convention in his bearing towards her--that in his rigid way he had behaved like a prince--but she had been dirt under his feet--she had been dirt under his feet! She wanted to rave like a fishwife--though there were no fishwives in Mayfair.

It was at this very moment of climax that a sudden memory beset her.

"Rob always said that if a woman who was pretty could see a man often enough--again and again--he couldn't help himself--unless there was some one else!"



Her last words were fiercely accusing. She quite glared at him a few seconds, her chest heaving pantingly.

She suddenly sprang from her sofa and dashed towards a table where a pile of photographs lay in an untidy little heap. She threw them about with angrily shaking hands until at last she caught at one and brought it back to him.

"There was some one else," she laughed shrilly. "You were in love with that creature."

It was one of the photographs of Alixe such as the Bond Street shop had shown in its windows.

She made a movement as if to throw it into the grate and he took it from her hand, saying nothing whatever.

"I'd forgotten about it until Owen Delamore reminded me only yesterday," she said. "He's a romantic thing and he heard that you had been in attendance and had been sent to their castle in Germany. He worked the thing out in his own way. He said you had chosen me because I was like her. I can see now! I was like her!"

"If you had been like her," his voice was intensely bitter, "I should have asked you to be my wife. You are as unlike her as one human being can be to another."

"But I was enough like her to make you take me up!" she cried furiously.

"I have neither taken you up nor put you down," he answered. "Be good enough never to refer to the subject again."

"I'll refer to any subject I like. If you think I shall not you are mistaken. It will be worth talking about. An Early Victorian romance is worth something in these days."

The trend of her new circle had indeed carried her far. He was privately appalled by her. She was hysterically, passionately spiteful--almost to the point of malignance.

"Do you realise that this is a scene? It has not been our habit to indulge in scenes," he said.

"I shall speak about it as freely as I shall speak about Robin," she flaunted at him, wholly unrestrained. "Do you think I know nothing about Robin? I'm an affectionate mother and I've been making inquiries. She's not with the Dowager at Eaton Square. She got ill and was sent away to be hidden in the country. Girls are, sometimes. I thought she would be sent away somewhere, the day I met her in the street. She looked exactly like that sort of thing. Where is she? I demand to know."

There is nothing so dangerous to others as the mere spitefully malignant

temper of an empty headed creature giving itself up to its own weak fury. It knows no restraint, no limit in its folly. In her fantastic broodings over her daughter's undue exaltation of position Feather had many times invented for her own entertainment little scenes in which she could score satisfactorily. Such scenes had always included Coombe, the Dowager, Robin and Mrs. Muir.

"I am her mother. She is not of age. I can demand to see her. I can make her come home and stay with me while I see her through her 'trouble,' as pious people call it. She's got herself into trouble--just like a housemaid. I knew she would--I warned her," and her laugh was actually shrill.

It was inevitable--and ghastly--that he should suddenly see Robin with her white eyelids dropped over her basket of sewing by the window in the Tower room at Darreuch. It rose as clear as a picture on a screen and he felt sick with actual terror.

"I'll go to the Duchess and ask her questions until she can't face me without telling the truth. If she's nasty I'll talk to the War Work people who crowd her house. They all saw Robin and the wide-awake ones will understand when I'm maternal and tragic and insist on knowing. I'll go to Mrs. Muir and talk to her. It will be fun to see her face and the Duchess'."

He had never suspected her of malice such as this. And even in the midst

of his ghastly dismay he saw that it was merely the malice of an angrily spiteful selfish child of bad training and with no heart. There was nothing to appeal to--nothing to arrest and control. She might repent her insanity in a few days but for the period of her mood she would do her senseless worst.

"Your daughter has not done what you profess to believe," he said. "You do not believe it. Will you tell me why you propose to do these things?"

She had worked herself up to utter recklessness.

"Because of everything," she spat forth. "Because I'm in a rage--because I'm sick of her and her duchesses. And I'm most sick of you hovering about her as if she were a princess of the blood and you were her Grand Chamberlain. Why don't you marry her yourself--baby and all! Then you'll be sure there'll be another Head of the House of Coombe!"

She knew then that she had raved like a fishwife--that, even though there had before been no fishwives in Mayfair, he saw one standing shrilling before him. It was in his eyes and she knew it before she had finished speaking, for his look was maddening. It enraged her even further and she shook in the air the hand with the big purple amethyst ring, still clutching the end of the bedizened purple scarf. She was intoxicated with triumph--for she had reached him.

"I will! I will!" she cried. "I will--to-morrow!"

"You will not!" his voice rang out as she had never heard it before. He even took a step forward. Then came the hurried leap of feet up the narrow staircase and Owen Delamore flung the door wide, panting:

"You told me to dash in," he almost shouted. "They're coming! We can rush round to the Sinclairs'. They're on the roof already!"

She caught the purple scarf around her and ran towards him, for at this new excitement her frenzy reached its highest note.

"I will! I will!" she called back to Coombe as she fled out of the room and she held up and waved at him again the hand with the big amethyst. "I will, to-morrow!"

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Lord Coombe was left standing in the garish, crowded little drawing-room listening to ominous sounds in the street--to cries, running feet and men on fleeing bicycles shouting warnings as they sped at top speed and strove to clear the way.