

CHAPTER XXXVIII

It was one of the raids which left hellish things behind it--things hushed with desperate combined effort to restrain panic, but which blighted the air people strove to breathe and kept men and women shuddering for long after and made people waken with sharp cries from nightmares of horror. Certain paled faces belonged to those who had seen things and would never forget them. Others strove to look defiant and cheerful and did not find it easy. Some tried to get past policemen to certain parts of the city and some, getting past, returned livid and less adventurous in spirit because they had heard things it was gruesome to hear. Lord Coombe went the next morning to the slice of a house and found the servants rather hysterical. Feather had not returned, but they were not hysterical for that reason. She had probably remained at the house to which she had gone to see the Zepps. After the excitement was over, people like the Sinclairs were rather inclined to restore themselves by making a night of it, so to speak.

As "to-morrow" had now arrived, Lord Coombe wished to see her on her return. He had in fact lain awake thinking of plans of defence but had so far been able to decide on none. If there had been anything to touch, to appeal to, there might have been some hope, but she had left taste and fastidiousness scattered in shreds behind her. The War, as she put it, had made her less afraid of life. She had in fact joined the army of women who could always live so long as their beauty lasted. At the

beginning of her relations with Lord Coombe she had belonged in a sense to a world which now no longer existed in its old form. Possibly there would soon be neither courts nor duchesses and so why should anything particularly matter? There were those who were taking cataclysms lightly and she was among them. If her airy mind chanced to have veered and her temper died down, money or jewels might induce her to keep quiet if one could endure the unspeakable indignity of forcing oneself to offer them. She would feel such an offer no indignity and would probably regard it as a tremendous joke. But she could no more be trusted than a female monkey or jackdaw.

Lord Coombe sat among the gewgaws in the drawing room and waited because

he must see her when she came in and at least discover if the weather cock had veered.

After waiting an hour or more he heard a taxi arrive at the front door and stop there. He went to the window to see who got out of the vehicle. It gave him a slight shock to recognise a man he knew well. He wore plain clothes, but he was a member of the police force.

He evidently came into the house and stopped in the hall to talk to the immature footman who presently appeared at the drawing-room door, looking shaken because he had been questioned and did not know what it portended.

"What is the matter?" Lord Coombe assisted him with.

"Some one who is asking about Mrs. Gareth-Lawless. He doesn't seem satisfied with what I tell him. I took the liberty of saying your lordship was here and perhaps you'd see him."

"Bring him upstairs."

It was in fact a man who knew Lord Coombe well enough to be aware that he need make no delay.

"It was one of the worst, my lord," he said in answer to Coombe's first question. "We've had hard work--and the hardest of it was to hold things--people--back." He looked hag-ridden as he went on without any preparation. He was too tired for prefaces.

"There was a lady who went out of here last night. She was with a gentleman. They were running to a friend's house to see things from the roof. They didn't get there. The gentleman is in the hospital delirious to-day. He doesn't know what happened. It's supposed something frightened her and she lost her wits and ran away. The gentleman tried to follow her but the lights were out and he couldn't find her in the dark streets. The running about and all the noises and crashes sent him rather wild perhaps. Trying to find a frightened woman in the midst of all that--and not finding her--"

"What ghastly--damnable thing has happened?" Coombe asked with stiff lips.

"It's both," the man said, "--it's both."

He produced a package and opened it. There was a torn and stained piece of spangled violet gauze folded in it and on top was a little cardboard box which he opened also to show a ring with a big amethyst in it set with pearls.

"Good God!" Coombe ejaculated, getting up from his chair hastily, "Oh! Good God!"

"You know them?" the man asked.

"Yes. I saw them last night--before she went out."

"She ran the wrong way--she must have been crazy with fright. This--" the man hesitated a second here and pulled himself together, "--this is all that was found except--"

"Good God!" said Lord Coombe again and he walked to and fro rapidly, trying to hold his body rigid.

"The gentleman--his name is Delamore--went on looking--after the raid was over. Some one saw him running here and there as if he had gone

crazy. He was found afterwards where he'd fainted--near a woman's hand with this ring on and the piece of scarf in it. He's a strong young chap but he'd fainted dead. He was carried to the hospital and to-day he's delirious."

"There--was nothing more?" shuddered Coombe.

"Nothing, my lord."

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Out of unbounded space embodied nothingness had seemed to float across the world of living things, and into space the nothingness had disappeared--leaving behind a trinket and a rent scrap of purple gauze.