

## CHAPTER XVII

"A nice, well-behaved Royal Family." There had been several of them in Europe for some time. An appreciable number of them had prided themselves, even a shade ostentatiously, upon their domesticity. The moral views of a few had been believed to border upon the high principles inscribed in copy books. Some, however, had not. A more important power or so had veered from the exact following of these commendable axioms--had high-handedly behaved according to their royal will and tastes. But what would you? With a nation making proper obeisance before one from infancy; with trumpets blaring forth joyous strains upon one's mere appearance on any scene; with the proudest necks bowed and the most superb curtsseys swept on one's mere passing by, with all the splendour of the Opera on gala night rising to its feet to salute one's mere entry into the royal or imperial box, while the national anthem bursts forth with adulatory and triumphant strains, only a keen and subtle sense of humour, surely, could curb errors of judgment arising from naturally mistaken views of one's own importance and value to the entire Universe. Still there remained the fact that a number of them WERE well-behaved and could not be complained of as bearing any likeness to the bloodthirsty tyrants and oppressors of past centuries.

The Head of the House of Coombe had attended the Court Functions and been received at the palaces and castles of most of them.

For in that aspect of his character of which Mademoiselle Valle had heard more than Dowson, he was intimate with well-known and much-observed personages and places. A man born among those whose daily life builds, as it passes, at least a part of that which makes history and so records itself, must needs find companions, acquaintances, enemies, friends of varied character, and if he be, by chance, a keen observer of passing panoramas, can lack no material for private reflection and the accumulation of important facts.

That part of his existence which connected itself with the slice of a house on the right side of the Mayfair street was but a small one. A feature of the untranslatableness of his character was that he was seen there but seldom. His early habit of crossing the Channel frequently had gradually reestablished itself as years passed. Among his acquaintances his "Saturday to Monday visits" to continental cities remote or unremote were discussed with humour. Possibly, upon these discussions, were finally founded the rumours of which Dowson had heard but which she had impartially declined to "credit". Lively conjecture inevitably figured largely in their arguments and, when persons of unrestrained wit devote their attention to airy persiflage, much may be included in their points of view.

Of these conjectural discussions no one was more clearly aware than Coombe himself, and the finished facility--even felicity--of

his evasion of any attempt at delicately valued cross examination was felt to be inhumanly exasperating.

In one of the older Squares which still remained stately, through the splendour of modern fashion had waned in its neighbourhood, there was among the gloomy, though imposing, houses one in particular upon whose broad doorsteps--years before the Gareth-Lawlesses had appeared in London--Lord Coombe stood oftener than upon any other. At times his brougham waited before it for hours, and, at others, he appeared on foot and lifted the heavy knocker with a special accustomed knock recognized at once by any footman in waiting in the hall, who, hearing it, knew that his mistress--the old Dowager Duchess of Darte--would receive this visitor, if no other.

The interior of the house was of the type which, having from the first been massive and richly sombre, had mellowed into a darker sombreness and richness as it had stood unmoved amid London years and fogs. The grandeur of decoration and furnishing had been too solid to depreciate through decay, and its owner had been of no fickle mind led to waver in taste by whims of fashion. The rooms were huge and lofty, the halls and stairways spacious, the fireplaces furnished with immense grates of glittering steel, which held in winter beds of scarlet glowing coal, kept scarlet glowing by a special footman whose being, so to speak, depended on his fidelity to his task.

There were many rooms whose doors were kept closed because they were apparently never used; there were others as little used but thrown open, warmed and brightened with flowers each day, because the Duchess chose to catch glimpses of their cheerfulness as she passed them on her way up or downstairs. The house was her own property, and, after her widowhood, when it was emptied of her children by their admirable marriages, and she herself became Dowager and, later, a confirmed rheumatic invalid, it became doubly her home and was governed by her slightest whim. She was not indeed an old woman of caprices, but her tastes, not being those of the later day in which she now lived, were regarded as a shade eccentric being firmly defined.

"I will not have my house glaring with electricity as if it were a shop. In my own rooms I will be lighted by wax candles. Large ones--as many as you please," she said. "I will not be 'rung up' by telephone. My servants may if they like. It is not my affair to deprive them of the modern inconveniences, if they find them convenient. My senility does not take the form of insisting that the world shall cease to revolve upon its axis. It formed that habit without my assistance, and it is to be feared that it would continue it in the face of my protests."

It was, in fact, solely that portion of the world affecting herself alone which she preferred to retain as it had been in the brilliant early years of her life. She had been a great beauty and also

a wit in the Court over which Queen Victoria had reigned. She had possessed the delicate high nose, the soft full eyes, the "polished forehead," the sloping white shoulders from which scarves floated or India shawls gracefully drooped in the Books of Beauty of the day. Her carriage had been noble, her bloom perfect, and, when she had driven through the streets "in attendance" on her Royal Mistress, the populace had always chosen her as "the pick of 'em all". Young as she had then been, elderly statesmen had found her worth talking to, not as a mere beauty in her teens, but as a creature of singular brilliance and clarity of outlook upon a world which might have dazzled her youth. The most renowned among them had said of her, before she was twenty, that she would live to be one of the cleverest women in Europe, and that she had already the logical outlook of a just man of fifty.

She married early and was widowed in middle life. In her later years rheumatic fever so far disabled her as to confine her to her chair almost entirely. Her sons and daughter had homes and families of their own to engage them. She would not allow them to sacrifice themselves to her because her life had altered its aspect.

"I have money, friends, good servants and a house I particularly like," she summed the matter up; "I may be condemned to sit by the fire, but I am not condemned to be a bore to my inoffensive family. I can still talk and read, and I shall train myself to become a professional listener. This will attract. I shall not

only read myself, but I will be read to. A strong young man with a nice voice shall bring magazines and books to me every day, and shall read the best things aloud. Delightful people will drop in to see me and will be amazed by my fund of information."

It was during the first years of her enforced seclusion that Coombe's intimacy with her began. He had known her during certain black days of his youth, and she had comprehended things he did not tell her. She had not spoken of them to him but she had silently given him of something which vaguely drew him to her side when darkness seemed to overwhelm him. The occupations of her life left her in those earlier days little leisure for close intimacies, but, when she began to sit by her fire letting the busy world pass by, he gradually became one of those who "dropped in".

In one of the huge rooms she had chosen for her own daily use, by the well-tended fire in its shining grate, she had created an agreeable corner where she sat in a chair marvellous for ease and comfort, enclosed from draughts by a fire screen of antique Chinese lacquer, a table by her side and all she required within her reach. Upon the table stood a silver bell and, at its sound, her companion, her reader, her maid or her personally trained footman, came and went quietly and promptly as if summoned by magic. Her life itself was simple, but a certain almost royal dignity surrounded her loneliness. Her companion, Miss Brent, an intelligent, mature woman who had known a hard and pinched life,

found at once comfort and savour in it.

"It is not I who am expensive,"--this in one of her talks with Coombe, "but to live in a house of this size, well kept by excellent servants who are satisfied with their lot, is not a frugal thing. A cup of tea for those of my friends who run in to warm themselves by my fire in the afternoon; a dinner or so when I am well enough to sit at the head of my table, represent almost all I now do for the world. Naturally, I must see that my tea is good and that my dinners cannot be objected to. Nevertheless, I sit here in my chair and save money--for what?"

Among those who "warmed themselves by her fire" this man had singularly become her friend and intimate. When they had time to explore each other's minds, they came upon curious discoveries of hidden sympathies and mutual comprehensions which were rich treasures. They talked of absorbing things with frankness. He came to sit with her when others were not admitted because she was in pain or fatigued. He added to neither her fatigue nor her pain, but rather helped her to forget them.

"For what?" he answered on this day. "Why not for your grandchildren?"

"They will have too much money. There are only four of them. They will make great marriages as their parents did," she said. She paused a second before she added, "Unless our World Revolution has

broken into flame by that time--And there are no longer any great marriages to make."

For among the many things they dwelt on in their talks along, was the Chessboard, which was the Map of Europe, over which he had watched for many years certain hands hover in tentative experimenting as to the possibilities of the removal of the pieces from one square to another. She, too, from her youth had watched the game with an interest which had not waned in her maturity, and which, in her days of sitting by the fire, had increased with every move the hovering hands made. She had been familiar with political parties and their leaders, she had met heroes and statesmen; she had seen an unimportant prince become an emperor, who, from his green and boastful youth, aspired to rule the world and whose theatrical obsession had been the sly jest of unwary nations, too carelessly sure of the advance of civilization and too indifferently self-indulgent to realize that a monomaniac, even if treated as a source of humour, is a perilous thing to leave unwatched. She had known France in all the glitter of its showy Empire, and had seen its imperial glories dispersed as mist. Russia she had watched with curiosity and dread. On the day when the ruler, who had bestowed freedom on millions of his people, met his reward in the shattering bomb which tore him to fragments, she had been in St. Petersburg. A king, who had been assassinated, she had known well and had well liked; an empress, whom a frenzied madman had stabbed to the heart, had been her friend.



Her years had been richly full of varied events, giving a strong and far-seeing mind reason for much unspoken thought of the kind which leaps in advance of its day's experience and exact knowledge. She had learned when to speak and when to be silent, and she oftener chose silence. But she had never ceased gazing on the world with keen eyes, and reflecting upon its virtues and vagaries, its depths and its shallows, with the help of a clear and temperate brain.

By her fire she sat, an attracting presence, though only fine, strong lines remained of beauty ravaged by illness and years. The "polished forehead" was furrowed by the chisel of suffering; the delicate high nose springing from her waxen, sunken face seemed somewhat eaglelike, but the face was still brilliant in its intensity of meaning and the carriage of her head was still noble. Not able to walk except with the assistance of a cane, her once exquisite hands stiffened almost to uselessness, she held her court from her throne of mere power and strong charm. On the afternoons when people "ran in to warm themselves" by her fire, the talk was never dull and was often wonderful. There were those who came quietly into the room fresh from important scenes where subjects of weight to nations were being argued closely--perhaps almost fiercely. Sometimes the argument was continued over cups of perfect tea near the chair of the Duchess, and, howsoever far it led, she was able brilliantly to follow. With the aid of books and pamphlets and magazines, and the strong young man with the nice voice, who was

her reader, she kept pace with each step of the march of the world.

It was, however, the modern note in her recollections of her world's march in days long past, in which Coombe found mental food and fine flavour. The phrase, "in these days" expressed in her utterance neither disparagement nor regret. She who sat in state in a drawing-room lighted by wax candles did so as an affair of personal preference, and denied no claim of higher brilliance to electric illumination. Driving slowly through Hyde Park on sunny days when she was able to go out, her high-swung barouche hinted at no lofty disdain of petrol and motor power. At the close of her youth's century, she looked forward with thrilled curiosity to the dawning wonders of the next.

"If the past had not held so much, one might not have learned to expect more," was her summing up on a certain afternoon, when he came to report himself after one of his absences from England. "The most important discovery of the last fifty years has been the revelation that no man may any longer assume to speak the last word on any subject. The next man--almost any next man--may evolve more. Before that period all elderly persons were final in their dictum. They said to each other--and particularly to the young--'It has not been done in my time--it was not done in my grandfather's time. It has never been done. It never can be done'."

"The note of today is 'Since it has never been done, it will surely

be done soon'," said Coombe.

"Ah! we who began life in the most assured and respectable of reigns and centuries," she answered him, "have seen much. But these others will see more. Crinolines, mushroom hats and large families seemed to promise a decorum peaceful to dullness; but there have been battles, murders and sudden deaths; there have been almost supernatural inventions and discoveries--there have been marvels of new doubts and faiths. When one sits and counts upon one's fingers the amazements the 19th century has provided, one gasps and gazes with wide eyes into the future. I, for one, feel rather as though I had seen a calm milch cow sauntering--at first slowly--along a path, gradually evolve into a tiger--a genie with a hundred heads containing all the marvels of the world--a flying dragon with a thousand eyes! Oh, we have gone fast and far!"

"And we shall go faster and farther," Coombe added.

"That is it," she answered. "Are we going too fast?"

"At least so fast that we forget things it would be well for us to remember." He had come in that day with a certain preoccupied grimness of expression which was not unknown to her. It was generally after one of his absences that he looked a shade grim.

"Such as--?" she inquired.

"Such as catastrophes in the history of the world, which forethought and wisdom might have prevented. The French Revolution is the obvious type of figure which lies close at hand so one picks it up. The French Revolution--its Reign of Terror--the orgies of carnage--the cataclysms of agony--need not have been, but they WERE. To put it in words of one syllable."

"What!" was her involuntary exclamation. "You are seeking such similes as the French Revolution!"

"Who knows how far a madness may reach and what Reign of Terror may take form?" He sat down and drew an atlas towards him. It always lay upon the table on which all the Duchess desired was within reach. It was fat, convenient of form, and agreeable to look at in its cover of dull, green leather. Coombe's gesture of drawing it towards him was a familiar one. It was frequently used as reference.

"The atlas again?" she said.

"Yes. Just now I can think of little else. I have realized too much."

The continental journey had lasted a month. He had visited more countries than one in his pursuit of a study he was making of the way in which the wind was blowing particular straws. For long

he had found much to give thought to in the trend of movement in one special portion of the Chessboard. It was that portion of it dominated by the ruler of whose obsession too careless nations made sly jest. This man he had known from his arrogant and unendearing youth. He had looked on with unbiassed curiosity at his development into arrogance so much greater than its proportions touched the grotesque. The rest of the world had looked on also, but apparently, merely in the casual way which good-naturedly smiles and leaves to every man--even an emperor--the privilege of his own eccentricities. Coombe had looked on with a difference, so also had his friend by her fireside. This man's square of the Chessboard had long been the subject of their private talks and a cause for the drawing towards them of the green atlas. The moves he made, the methods of his ruling, the significance of these methods were the evidence they collected in their frequent arguments. Coombe had early begun to see the whole thing as a process--a life-long labour which was a means to a monstrous end.

There was a certain thing he believed of which they often spoke as "It". He spoke of it now.

"Through three weeks I have been marking how It grows," he said; "a whole nation with the entire power of its commerce, its education, its science, its religion, guided towards one aim is a curious study. The very babes are born and bred and taught only that one thought may become an integral part of their being. The most

innocent and blue eyed of them knows, without a shadow of doubt, that the world has but one reason for existence--that it may be conquered and ravaged by the country that gave them birth."

"I have both heard and seen it," she said. "One has smiled in spite of oneself, in listening to their simple, everyday talk."

"In little schools--in large ones--in little churches, and in imposing ones, their Faith is taught and preached," Coombe answered. "Sometimes one cannot believe one's hearing. It is all so ingenuously and frankly unashamed--the mouthing, boasting, and threats of their piety. There exists for them no God who is not the modest henchman of their emperor, and whose attention is not rivetted on their prowess with admiration and awe. Apparently, they are His business, and He is well paid by being allowed to retain their confidence."

"A lack of any sense of humour is a disastrous thing," commented the Duchess. "The people of other nations may be fools--doubtless we all are--but there is no other which proclaims the fact abroad with such guileless outbursts of raucous exultation."

"And even we--you and I who have thought more than others" he said, restlessly, "even we forget and half smile. There been too much smiling."

She picked up an illustrated paper and opened it at a page filled by an ornate picture.

"See!" she said. "It is because he himself has made it so easy, with his amazing portraits of his big boots, and swords, and eruption of dangling orders. How can one help but smile when one finds him glaring at one from a newspaper in his superwarlike attitude, defying the Universe, with his comic moustachios and their ferocious waxed and bristling ends. No! One can scarcely believe that a man can be stupid enough not to realize that he looks as if he had deliberately made himself up to represent a sort of terrific military bogey intimating that, at he may pounce and say 'Boo?'"

"There lies the peril. His pretensions seem too grotesque to be treated seriously. And, while he should be watched as a madman is watched, he is given a lifetime to we attack on a world that has ceased to believe in the sole thing which is real to himself."

"You are fresh from observation." There was new alertness in her eyes, though she had listened before.

"I tell you it GROWS!" he gave back and lightly struck the table in emphasis. "Do you remember Carlyle--?"

"The French Revolution again?"

"Yes. Do you recall this? 'Do not fires, fevers, seeds, chemical mixtures, GO ON GROWING. Observe, too, that EACH GROWS with a rapidity proportioned to the madness and unhealthiness there is in it.' A ruler who, in an unaggressive age such as this, can concentrate his life and his people's on the one ambition of plunging the world in an ocean of blood, in which his own monomania can bathe in triumph--Good God! there is madness and unhealthiness to flourish in!"

"The world!" she said. "Yes--it will be the world."

"See," he said, with a curve of the finger which included most of the Map of Europe. "Here are countries engaged--like the Bandarlog--in their own affairs. Quarrelling, snatching things from each other, blustering or amusing themselves with transitory pomps and displays of power. Here is a huge empire whose immense, half-savage population has seethed for centuries in its hidden, boiling cauldron of rebellion. Oh! it has seethed! And only cruelties have repressed it. Now and then it has boiled over in assassination in high places, and one has wondered how long its autocratic splendour could hold its own. Here are small, fierce, helpless nations overrun and outraged into a chronic state of secret ever-ready hatred. Here are innocent, small countries, defenceless through their position and size. Here is France rich, careless, super-modern and cynic. Here is England comfortable to stolidity, prosperous and secure to



dullness in her own half belief in a world civilization, which no longer argues in terms of blood and steel. And here--in a well-entrenched position in the midst of it all--within but a few hundreds of miles of weakness, complicity, disastrous unreadiness and panic-stricken uncertainty of purpose, sits this Man of One Dream--who believes God Himself his vassal. Here he sits."

"Yes his One Dream. He has had no other." The Duchess was poring over the map also. They were as people pondering over a strange and terrible game.

"It is his monomania. It possessed him when he was a boy. What Napoleon hoped to accomplish he has BELIEVED he could attain by concentrating all the power of people upon preparation for it--and by not flinching from pouring forth their blood as if it were the refuse water of his gutters."

"Yes--the blood--the blood!" the Duchess shuddered. "He would pour it forth without a qualm."

Coombe touched the map first at one point and then at another.

"See!" he said again, and this time savagely. "This empire flattered and entangled by cunning, this country irritated, this deceived, this drawn into argument, this and this and this treated with professed friendship, these tricked and juggled with--And then, when

his plans are ripe and he is made drunk with belief in himself--just one sodden insult or monstrous breach of faith, which all humanity must leap to resent--And there is our World Revolution."

The Duchess sat upright in her chair.

"Why did you let your youth pass?" she said. "If you had begun early enough, you could have made the country listen to you. Why did you do it?"

"For the same reason that all selfish grief and pleasure and indifference let the world go by. And I am not sure they would have listened. I speak freely enough now in some quarters. They listen, but they do nothing. There is a warning in the fact that, as he has seen his youth leave him without giving him his opportunity, he has been a disappointed man inflamed and made desperate. At the outset, he felt that he must provide the world with some fiction of excuse. As his obsession and arrogance have swollen, he sees himself and his ambition as reason enough. No excuse is needed. Deutschland uber alles--is sufficient."

He pushed the map away and his fire died down. He spoke almost in his usual manner.

"The conquest of the world," he said. "He is a great fool. What would he DO with his continents if he got them?"

"What, indeed," pondered her grace. "Continents--even kingdoms are not like kittens in a basket, or puppies to be trained to come to heel."

"It is part of his monomania that he can persuade himself that they are little more." Coombe's eye-glasses had been slowly swaying from the ribbon in his fingers. He let them continue to sway a moment and then closed them with a snap.

"He is a great fool," he said. "But we,--oh, my friend--and by 'we' I mean the rest of the Map of Europe--we are much greater fools. A mad dog loose among us and we sit--and smile."

And this was in the days before the house with the cream-coloured front had put forth its first geraniums and lobelias in Feather's window boxes. Robin was not born.