

CHAPTER XXV

Some days before this the Duchess of Darte had driven out in the morning to make some purchases and as she had sat in her large landau she had greatly missed Miss Brent who had always gone with her when she had made necessary visits to the shops. She was not fond of shopping and Miss Brent had privately found pleasure in it which had made her a cheerful companion. To the quiet elderly woman whose life previous to her service with this great lady had been spent in struggles with poverty, the mere incident of entering shops and finding eager salesmen springing forward to meet her with bows and amiable offers of ministration, was to the end of her days an almost thrilling thing. The Duchess bought splendidly though quietly. Knowing always what she wanted, she merely required that it be produced, and after silently examining it gave orders that it should be sent to her. There was a dignity in her decision which was impressive. She never gave trouble or hesitated. The staffs of employees in the large shops knew and reveled in her while they figuratively bent the knee. Miss Brent had been a happy satisfied woman while she had lived. She had died peacefully after a brief and, as it seemed at first, unalarming illness at one of her employer's country houses to which she had been amiably sent down for a holiday. Every kindness and attention had been bestowed upon her and only a few moments before she fell into her last sleep she had been talking pleasantly of her mistress.

"She is a very great lady, Miss Hallam," she had said to her nurse.

"She's the last of her kind I often think. Very great ladies seem to have gone out--if you know what I mean. They've gone out."

The Duchess had in fact said of Brent as she stood a few days later beside her coffin and looked down at her contentedly serene face, something not unlike what Brent had said of herself.

"You were a good friend, Brent, my dear," she murmured. "I shall always miss you. I am afraid there are no more like you left."

She was thinking of her all the morning as she drove slowly down to Bond Street and Piccadilly. As she got out of her carriage to go into a shop she was attracted by some photographs of beauties in a window and paused to glance at them. Many of them were beauties whom she knew, but among them were some of society's latest discoveries. The particular photographs which caught her eye were two which had evidently been purposely placed side by side for an interesting reason. The reason was that the two women, while obviously belonging to periods of some twenty years apart as the fashion of their dress proved, were in face and form so singularly alike that they bewilderingly suggested that they were the same person. Both were exquisitely nymphlike, fair and large eyed and both had the fine light hair which is capable of forming itself into a halo. The Duchess stood and looked at them for the moment spell-bound. She slightly caught her breath. She was borne back so

swiftly and so far. Her errand in the next door shop was forgotten. She went into the one which displayed the photographs.

"I wish to look at the two photographs which are so much alike," she said to the man behind the counter.

He knew her as most people did and brought forth the photographs at once.

"Many people are interested in them, your grace," he said. "It was the amazing likeness which made me put them beside each other."

"Yes," she answered. "It is almost incredible." She looked up from the beautiful young being dressed in the mode of twenty years past.

"This is--WAS--?" she corrected herself and paused. The man replied in a somewhat dropped voice. He evidently had his reasons for feeling it discreet to do so.

"Yes--WAS. She died twenty years ago. The young Princess Alixe of X--" he said. "There was a sad story, your grace no doubt remembers. It was a good deal talked about."

"Yes," she replied and said no more, but took up the modern picture. It displayed the same almost floating airiness of type,

but in this case the original wore diaphanous wisps of spangled tulle threatening to take wings and fly away leaving the girl slimness of arms and shoulders bereft of any covering whatsoever.

"This one is--?" she questioned.

"A Mrs. Gareth-Lawless. A widow with a daughter though she looks in her teens. She's older than the Princess was, but she's kept her beauty as ladies know how to in these days. It's wonderful to see them side by side. But it's only a few that saw her Highness as she was the season she came with the Prince to visit at Windsor in Queen Victoria's day. Did your grace--" he checked himself feeling that he was perhaps somewhat exceeding Bond Street limits.

"Yes. I saw her," said the Duchess. "If these are for sale I will take them both."

"I'm selling a good many of them. People buy them because the likeness makes them a sort of curiosity. Mrs. Gareth-Lawless is a very modern lady and she is quite amused."

The Duchess took the two photographs home with her and looked at them a great deal afterwards as she sat in her winged chair.

They were on her table when Coombe came to drink tea with her in the afternoon.

When he saw them he stood still and studied the two faces silently for several seconds.

"Did you ever see a likeness so wonderful?" he said at last.

"Never," she answered. "Or an unlikeness. That is the most wonderful of all--the unlikeness. It is the same body inhabited by two souls from different spheres."

His next words were spoken very slowly.

"I should have been sure you would see that," he commented.

"I lost my breath for a second when I saw them side by side in the shop window--and the next moment I lost it again because I saw--what I speak of--the utter world wide apartness. It is in their eyes. She--," she touched the silver frame enclosing the young Princess, "was a little saint--a little spirit. There never was a young human thing so transparently pure."

The rigid modeling of his face expressed a thing which, himself recognizing its presence, he chose to turn aside as he moved towards the mantel and leaned on it. The same thing caused his voice to sound hoarse and low as he spoke in answer, saying something she had not expected him to say. Its unexpectedness in fact produced

in her an effect of shock.

"And she was the possession of a brute incarnate, mad with unbridled lust and drink and abnormal furies. She was a child saint, and shook with terror before him. He killed her."

"I believe he did," she said unsteadily after a breath space of pause. "Many people believed so though great effort was made to silence the stories. But there were too many stories and they were so unspeakable that even those in high places were made furiously indignant. He was not received here at Court afterwards. His own emperor could not condone what he did. Public opinion was too strong."

"The stories were true," answered the hoarse low voice. "I myself, by royal command, was a guest at the Schloss in the Bavarian Alps when it was known that he struck her repeatedly with a dog whip. She was going to have a child. One night I was wandering in the park in misery and I heard shrieks which sent me in mad search. I do not know what I should have done if I had succeeded, but I tried to force an entrance into the wing from which the shrieks came. I was met and stopped almost by open violence. The sounds ceased. She died a week later. But the most experienced lying could not hide some things. Even royal menials may have human blood in their veins. It was known that there were hideous marks on her little dead body."

"We heard. We heard," whispered the Duchess.

"He killed her. But she would have died of horror if he had not struck her a blow. She began to die from the hour the marriage was forced upon her. I saw that when she was with him at Windsor."

"You were in attendance on him," the Duchess said after a little silence. "That was when I first knew you."

"Yes." She had added the last sentence gravely and his reply was as grave though his voice was still hoarse. "You were sublime goodness and wisdom. When a woman through the sheer quality of her silence saves a man from slipping over the verge of madness he does not forget. While I was sane I dared scarcely utter her name. If I had gone mad I should have raved as madmen do. For that reason I was afraid."

"I knew. Speech was the greatest danger," she answered him. "She was a princess of a royal house--poor little angel--and she had a husband whose vileness and violence all Europe knew. How DARED they give her to him?"

"For reasons of their own and because she was too humbly innocent and obedient to rebel."

The Duchess did not ask questions. The sublime goodness of which he had spoken had revealed its perfection through the fact that in the long past days she had neither questioned nor commented. She had given her strong soul's secret support to him and in his unbearable hours he had known that when he came to her for refuge, while she understood his need to the uttermost, she would speak no word even to himself.

But today though she asked no question her eyes waited upon him as it were. This was because she saw that for some unknown reason a heavy veil had rolled back from the past he had chosen to keep hidden even from himself, as it were, more than from others.

"Speech is always the most dangerous thing," he said. "Only the silence of years piled one upon the other will bury unendurable things. Even thought must be silenced. I have lived a lifetime since--" his words began to come very slowly--as she listened she felt as if he were opening a grave and drawing from its depths long buried things, "--since the night when I met her alone in a wood in the park of the Schloss and--lost hold of myself--lost it utterly."

The Duchess' withered hands caught each other in a clasp which was almost like a passionate exclamation.

"There was such a night. And I was young--young--not an iron bound

vieillard then. When one is young one's anguish is the Deluge which ends the world forever. I had lain down and risen up and spent every hour in growing torture for months. I had been forced to bind myself down with bands of iron. When I found myself, without warning, face to face with her, alone in the night stillness of the wood, the bands broke. She had dared to creep out in secret to hide herself and her heartbroken terror in the silence and darkness alone. I knew it without being told. I knew and I went quite mad for the time. I was only a boy. I threw myself face downward on the earth and sobbed, embracing her young feet."

Both of them were quite silent for a few moments before he went on.

"She was not afraid," he said, even with something which was like a curious smile of tender pity at the memory. "Afterwards--when I stood near her, trembling--she even took my hand and held it. Once she kissed it humbly like a little child while her tears rained down. Never before was there anything as innocently heartbreaking. She was so piteously grateful for love of any kind and so heart wrung by my misery."

He paused again and looked down at the carpet, thinking. Then he looked up at her directly.

"I need not explain to you. You will know. I was twenty-five. My

heart was pounding in my side, my blood thudded through my veins. Every atom of natural generous manhood in my being was wild with fury at the brutal wrong done her exquisiteness. And she--"

"She was a young novice fresh from a convent and very pious," the Duchess' quiet voice put in.

"You understand," he answered. "She knelt down and prayed for her own soul as well as mine. She thanked God that I was kind and would forgive her and go away--and only remember her in my prayers. She believed it was possible. It was not, but I kissed the hem of her white dress and left her standing alone--a little saint in a woodland shrine. That was what I thought deliriously as I staggered off. It was the next night that I heard her shrieks. Then she died."

The Duchess knew what else had died--the high adventure of youth and joy of life in him, the brilliant spirit which had been himself and whose utter withdrawal from his being had left him as she had seen him on his return to London in those days which now seemed a memory of a past life in a world which had passed also. He had appeared before her late one afternoon and she had for a moment been afraid to look at him because she was struck to the depths of her being by a sense of seeing before her a body which had broken the link holding it to life and walked the earth, the crowded streets, the ordinary rooms where people gathered, a dead thing.

Even while it moved it gazed out of dead eyes. And the years had passed and though they had been friends he had never spoken until now.

"Such a thing must be buried in a tomb covered with a heavy stone and with a seal set upon it. I am unsealing a tomb," he said. Then after a silence he added, "I have, of course, a reason." She bent her head because she had known this must be the case.

"There is a thing I wish you to understand. Every woman could not."

"I shall understand."

"Because I know you will I need not enter into exact detail. You will not find what I say abnormal."

There had been several pauses during his relation. Once or twice he had stopped in the middle of a sentence as if for calmer breath or to draw himself back from a past which had suddenly become again a present of torment too great to face with modern steadiness. He took breath so to speak in this manner again.

"The years pass, the agony of being young passes. One slowly becomes another man," he resumed. "I am another man. I could not be called a creature of sentiment. I have given myself interests

in existence--many of them. But the sealed tomb is under one's feet. Not to allow oneself to acknowledge its existence consciously is one's affair. But--the devil of chance sometimes chooses to play tricks. Such a trick was played on me."

He glanced down at the two pictures at which she herself was looking with grave eyes. It was the photograph of Feather he took up and set a strange questioning gaze upon.

"When I saw this," he said, "this--exquisitely smiling at me under a green tree in a sunny garden--the tomb opened under my feet, and I stood on the brink of it--twenty-five again."

"You cannot possibly put it into words," the Duchess said. "You need not. I know." For he had become for the moment almost livid. Even to her who so well knew him it was a singular thing to see him hastily set down the picture and touch his forehead with his handkerchief.

She knew he was about to tell her his reason for this unsealing of the tomb. When he sat down at her table he did so. He did not use many phrases, but in making clear his reasons he also made clear to her certain facts which most persons would have ironically disbelieved. But no shadow of a doubt passed through her mind because she had through a long life dwelt interestedly on the many variations in human type. She was extraordinarily interested when

he ended with the story of Robin.

"I do not know exactly why 'it matters to me'--I am quoting her mother," he explained, "but it happens that I am determined to stand between the child and what would otherwise be the inevitable. It is not that she has the slightest resemblance to--to anyone--which might awaken memory. It is not that. She and her mother are of totally different types. And her detestation of me is unconquerable. She believes me to be the worst of men. When I entered the room into which the woman had trapped her, she thought that I came as one of the creature's damnable clients. You will acknowledge that my position presents difficulties in the way of explanation to a girl--to most adults in fact. Her childish frenzy of desire to support herself arises from her loathing of the position of accepting support from me. I sympathize with her entirely."

"Mademoiselle Valle is an intelligent woman," the Duchess said as though thinking the matter out. "Send her to me and we will talk the matter over. Then she can bring the child."