CHAPTER XXVIII

That a previously scarcely suspected daughter of Mrs. Gareth-Lawless had become a member of the household of the Dowager Duchess of Darte stirred but a passing wave of interest in a circle which was not that of Mrs. Gareth-Lawless herself and which upon the whole but casually acknowledged its curious existence as a modern abnormality. Also the attitude of the Duchess herself was composedly free from any admission of necessity for comment.

"I have no pretty young relative who can be spared to come and live with me. I am fond of things pretty and young and I am greatly pleased with what a kind chance put in my way," she said. In her discussion of the situation with Coombe she measured it with her customary fine acumen.

"Forty years ago it could not have been done. The girl would have been made uncomfortable and outside things could not have been prevented from dragging themselves in. Filial piety in the mass would have demanded that the mother should be accounted for. Now a genial knowledge of a variety in mothers leaves Mrs. Gareth-Lawless to play about with her own probably quite amusing set. Once poor Robin would have been held responsible for her and so should I. My position would have seemed to defy serious moral issues. But we have reached a sane habit of detaching people from their relations. A nice condition we should be in if we had not."

"You, of course, know that Henry died suddenly in some sort of fit at Ostend." Coombe said it as if in a form of reply. She had naturally become aware of it when the rest of the world did, but had not seen him since the event.

"One did not suppose his constitution would have lasted so long," she answered. "You are more fortunate in young Donal Muir. Have you seen him and his mother?"

"I made a special journey to Braemarnie and had a curious interview with Mrs. Muir. When I say 'curious' I don't mean to imply that it was not entirely dignified. It was curious only because I realize that secretly she regards with horror and dread the fact that her boy is the prospective Head of the House of Coombe. She does not make a jest of it as I have had the temerity to do. It's a cheap defense, this trick of making an eternal jest of things, but it IS a defense and one has formed the habit."

"She has never done it--Helen Muir," his friend said. "On the whole I believe she at times knows that she has been too grave. She was a beautiful creature passionately in love with her husband. When such a husband is taken away from such a woman and his child is left it often happens that the flood of her love is turned into one current and that it is almost overwhelming. She is too sane to have coddled the boy and made him effeminate--what has she done

instead?"

"He is a splendid young Highlander. He would be too good-looking if he were not as strong and active as a young stag. All she has done is to so fill him with the power and sense of her charm that he has not seen enough of the world or learned to care for it. She is the one woman on earth for him and life with her at Braemarnie is all he asks for."

"Your difficulty will be that she will not be willing to trust him to your instructions."

"I have not as much personal vanity as I may seem to have," Coombe said. "I put all egotism modestly aside when I talked to her and tried to explain that I would endeavour to see that he came to no harm in my society. My heir presumptive and I must see something of each other and he must become intimate with the prospect of his responsibilities. More will be demanded of the next Marquis of Coombe than has been demanded of me. And it will be DEMANDED not merely hoped for or expected. And it will be the overwhelming forces of Fate which will demand it--not mere tenants or constituents or the general public."

"Have you any views as to WHAT will be demanded?" was her interested question.

"None. Neither has anyone else who shares my opinion. No one will have any until the readjustment comes. But before the readjustment there will be the pouring forth of blood--the blood of magnificent lads like Donal Muir--perhaps his own blood,--my God!"

"And there may be left no head of the house of Coombe," from the Duchess.

"There will be many a house left without its head--houses great and small. And if the peril of it were more generally foreseen at this date it would be less perilous than it is."

"Lads like that!" said the old Duchess bitterly. "Lads in their strength and joy and bloom! It is hideous."

"In all their young virility and promise for a next generation--the strong young fathers of forever unborn millions! It's damnable! And it will be so not only in England, but all over a blood drenched world."

It was in this way they talked to each other of the black tragedy for which they believed the world's stage already being set in secret, and though there were here and there others who felt the ominous inevitability of the raising of the curtain, the rest of the world looked on in careless indifference to the significance of the open training of its actors and even the resounding hammerings

of its stage carpenters and builders. In these days the two discussed the matter more frequently and even in the tone of those who waited for the approach of a thing drawing nearer every day.

Each time the Head of the House of Coombe made one of his so-called "week end" visits to the parts an Englishman can reach only by crossing the Channel, he returned with new knowledge of the special direction in which the wind veered in the blowing of those straws he had so long observed with absorbed interest.

"Above all the common sounds of daily human life one hears in that one land the rattle and clash of arms and the unending thudding tread of marching feet," he said after one such visit. "Two generations of men creatures bred and born and trained to live as parts of a huge death dealing machine have resulted in a monstrous construction. Each man is a part of it and each part's greatest ambition is to respond to the shouted word of command as a mechanical puppet responds to the touch of a spring. To each unit of the millions, love of his own country means only hatred of all others and the belief that no other should be allowed existence. The sacred creed of each is that the immensity of Germany is such that there can be no room on the earth for another than itself. Blood and iron will clear the world of the inferior peoples. To the masses that is their God's will. Their God is an understudy of their Kaiser."

"You are not saying that as part of the trick of making a jest of things?"

"I wish to God I were. The poor huge inhuman thing he has built does not know that when he was a boy he did not play at war and battles as other boys do, but as a creature obsessed. He has played at soldiers with his people as his toys throughout all his morbid life--and he has hungered and thirsted as he has done it."

A Bible lay upon the table and the Duchess drew it towards her.

"There is a verse here--" she said "--I will find it." She turned the pages and found it. "Listen! 'Know this and lay it to thy heart this day. Jehovah is God in heaven above and on the earth beneath. There is none else.' That is a power which does not confine itself to Germany or to England or France or to the Map of Europe. It is the Law of the Universe--and even Wilhelm the Second cannot bend it to his almighty will. 'There is none else.'"

"'There is none else'," repeated Coombe slowly. "If there existed a human being with the power to drive that home as a truth into his delirious brain, I believe he would die raving mad. To him there is no First Cause which was not 'made in Germany.' And it is one of his most valuable theatrical assets. It is part of his paraphernalia--like the jangling of his sword and the glitter of his orders. He shakes it before his people to arrest the attention

of the simple and honest ones as one jingles a rattle before a child. There are those among them who are not so readily attracted by terms of blood and iron."

"But they will be called upon to shed blood and to pour forth their own. There will be young things like Donal Muir--lads with ruddy cheeks and with white bodies to be torn to fragments." She shuddered as she said it. "I am afraid!" she said. "I am afraid!"

"So am I," Coombe answered. "Of what is coming. What a FOOL I have been!"

"How long will it be before other men awaken to say the same thing?"

"Each man's folly is his own shame." He drew himself stiffly upright as a man might who stood before a firing squad. "I had a life to live or to throw away. Because I was hideously wounded at the outset I threw it aside as done for. I said 'there is neither God nor devil, vice nor virtue, love nor hate. I will do and leave undone what I choose.' I had power and brain and money. A man who could see clearly and who had words to choose from might have stood firmly in the place to which he was born and have spoken in a voice which might have been listened to. He might have fought against folly and blindness and lassitude. I deliberately chose privately to sneer at the thought of lifting a hand to serve any

thing but the cold fool who was myself. Life passes quickly. It does not turn back." He ended with a short harsh laugh. "This is Fear," he said. "Fear clears a man's mind of rubbish and non-essentials. It is because I am AFRAID that I accuse myself. And it is not for myself or you but for the whole world which before the end comes will seem to fall into fragments."

"You have been seeing ominous signs?" the Duchess said leaning forward and speaking low.

"There have been affectionate visits to Vienna. There is a certain thing in the air--in the arrogance of the bearing of men clanking their sabres as they stride through the streets. There is an exultant eagerness in their eyes. Things are said which hold scarcely concealed braggart threats. They have always been given to that sort of thing--but now it strikes one as a thing unleashed--or barely leashed at all. The background of the sound of clashing arms and the thudding of marching feet is more unendingly present. One cannot get away from it. The great munition factories are working night and day. In the streets, in private houses, in the shops, one hears and recognizes signs. They are signs which might not be clear to one who has not spent years in looking on with interested eyes. But I have watched too long to see only the surface of things. The nation is waiting for something--waiting."

"What will be the pretext--what," the Duchess pondered.

"Any pretext will do--or none--except that Germany must have what she wants and that she is strong enough to take it--after forty years of building her machine."

"And we others have built none. We almost deserve whatever comes to us." The old woman's face was darkly grave.

"In three villages where I chance to be lord of the manor I have, by means of my own, set lads drilling and training. It is supposed to be a form of amusement and an eccentric whim of mine and it is a change from eternal cricket. I have given prizes and made an occasional speech on the ground that English brawn is so enviable a possession that it ought to develop itself to the utmost. When I once went to the length of adding that each Englishman should be muscle fit and ready in case of England's sudden need, I saw the lads grin cheerfully at the thought of England in any such un-English plight. Their innocent swaggering belief that the country is always ready for everything moved my heart of stone. And it is men like myself who are to blame--not merely men of my class, but men of my KIND. Those who have chosen to detach themselves from everything but the living of life as it best pleased their tastes or served their personal ambitions."

"Are we going to be taught that man cannot argue without including his fellow man? Are we going to be forced to learn it?" she said.

"Yes--forced. Nothing but force could reach us. The race is an undeveloped thing. A few centuries later it will have evolved another sense. This century may see the first huge step--because the power of a cataclysm sweeps it forward."

He turned his glance towards the opening door. Robin came in with some letters in her hand. He was vaguely aware that she wore an aspect he was unfamiliar with. The girl of Mrs. Gareth-Lawless had in the past, as it went without saying, expressed the final note of priceless simplicity and mode. The more finely simple she looked, the more priceless. The unfamiliarity in her outward seeming lay in the fact that her quiet dun tweed dress with its lines of white at neck and wrists was not priceless though it was well made. It, in fact, unobtrusively suggested that it was meant for service rather than for adornment. Her hair was dressed closely and her movements were very quiet. Coombe realized that her greeting of him was delicately respectful.

"I have finished the letters," she said to the Duchess. "I hope they are what you want. Sometimes I am afraid----"

"Don't be afraid," said the Duchess kindly. "You write very correct and graceful little letters. They are always what I want. Have you been out today?"

"Not yet." Robin hesitated a little. "Have I your permission to ask Mrs. James if it will be convenient to her to let Dowie go with me for an hour?"

"Yes," as kindly as before. "For two hours if you like. I shall not drive this afternoon."

"Thank you," said Robin and went out of the room as quietly as she had entered it.

When the door closed the Duchess was smiling at Lord Coombe.

"I understand her," she said. "She is sustained and comforted by her pretty air of servitude. She might use Dowie as her personal maid and do next to nothing, but she waits upon herself and punctiliously asks my permission to approach Mrs. James the housekeeper with any request for a favour. Her one desire is to be sure that she is earning her living as other young women do when they are paid for their work. I should really like to pet and indulge her, but it would only make her unhappy. I invent tasks for her which are quite unnecessary. For years the little shut-up soul has been yearning and praying for this opportunity to stand honestly on her own feet and she can scarcely persuade herself that it has been given to her. It must not be spoiled for her. I send her on errands my maid could perform. I have given her a little room with a serious business air. It is full of files and papers and she

sits in it and copies things for me and even looks over accounts. She is clever at looking up references. I have let her sit up quite late once or twice searching for detail and dates for my use. It made her bloom with joy."

"You are quite the most delightful woman in the world," said Coombe. "Quite."