

CHAPTER VII. THE DARK SQUARE GARDEN

Josephine had invited Aaron Sisson to dinner at a restaurant in Soho, one Sunday evening. They had a corner to themselves, and with a bottle of Burgundy she was getting his history from him.

His father had been a shaft-sinker, earning good money, but had been killed by a fall down the shaft when Aaron was only four years old. The widow had opened a shop: Aaron was her only child. She had done well in her shop. She had wanted Aaron to be a schoolteacher. He had served three years apprenticeship, then suddenly thrown it up and gone to the pit.

"But why?" said Josephine.

"I couldn't tell you. I felt more like it."

He had a curious quality of an intelligent, almost sophisticated mind, which had repudiated education. On purpose he kept the midland accent in his speech. He understood perfectly what a personification was--and an allegory. But he preferred to be illiterate.

Josephine found out what a miner's checkweighman was. She tried to find out what sort of wife Aaron had--but, except that she was the daughter of a publican and was delicate in health, she could learn nothing.

"And do you send her money?" she asked.

"Ay," said Aaron. "The house is mine. And I allow her so much a week out of the money in the bank. My mother left me a bit over a thousand when she died."

"You don't mind what I say, do you?" said Josephine.

"No I don't mind," he laughed.

He had this pleasant-seeming courteous manner. But he really kept her at a distance. In some things he reminded her of Robert: blond, erect, nicely built, fresh and English-seeming. But there was a curious cold distance to him, which she could not get across. An inward indifference to her--perhaps to everything. Yet his laugh was so handsome.

"Will you tell me why you left your wife and children?--Didn't you love them?"

Aaron looked at the odd, round, dark muzzle of the girl. She had had her hair bobbed, and it hung in odd dark folds, very black, over her ears.

"Why I left her?" he said. "For no particular reason. They're all right without me."

Josephine watched his face. She saw a pallor of suffering under its freshness, and a strange tension in his eyes.

"But you couldn't leave your little girls for no reason at all--"

"Yes, I did. For no reason--except I wanted to have some free room round me--to loose myself--"

"You mean you wanted love?" flashed Josephine, thinking he said lose.

"No, I wanted fresh air. I don't know what I wanted. Why should I know?"

"But we must know: especially when other people will be hurt," said she.

"Ah, well! A breath of fresh air, by myself. I felt forced to feel--I feel if I go back home now, I shall be FORCED--forced to love--or care--or something."

"Perhaps you wanted more than your wife could give you," she said.

"Perhaps less. She's made up her mind she loves me, and she's not going to let me off."

"Did you never love her?" said Josephine.

"Oh, yes. I shall never love anybody else. But I'm damned if I want to

be a lover any more. To her or to anybody. That's the top and bottom of it. I don't want to CARE, when care isn't in me. And I'm not going to be forced to it."

The fat, aproned French waiter was hovering near. Josephine let him remove the plates and the empty bottle.

"Have more wine," she said to Aaron.

But he refused. She liked him because of his dead-level indifference to his surroundings. French waiters and foreign food--he noticed them in his quick, amiable-looking fashion--but he was indifferent. Josephine was piqued. She wanted to pierce this amiable aloofness of his.

She ordered coffee and brandies.

"But you don't want to get away from EVERYTHING, do you? I myself feel so LOST sometimes--so dreadfully alone: not in a silly sentimental fashion, because men keep telling me they love me, don't you know. But my LIFE seems alone, for some reason--"

"Haven't you got relations?" he said.

"No one, now mother is dead. Nothing nearer than aunts and cousins in America. I suppose I shall see them all again one day. But they hardly count over here."

"Why don't you get married?" he said. "How old are you?"

"I'm twenty-five. How old are you?"

"Thirty-three."

"You might almost be any age.--I don't know why I don't get married. In a way, I hate earning my own living--yet I go on--and I like my work--"

"What are you doing now?"

"I'm painting scenery for a new play--rather fun--I enjoy it. But I often wonder what will become of me."

"In what way?"

She was almost affronted.

"What becomes of me? Oh, I don't know. And it doesn't matter, not to anybody but myself."

"What becomes of anybody, anyhow? We live till we die. What do you want?"

"Why, I keep saying I want to get married and feel sure of something.

But I don't know--I feel dreadful sometimes--as if every minute would be the last. I keep going on and on--I don't know what for--and IT keeps going on and on--goodness knows what it's all for."

"You shouldn't bother yourself," he said. "You should just let it go on and on--"

"But I MUST bother," she said. "I must think and feel--"

"You've no occasion," he said.

"How--?" she said, with a sudden grunting, unhappy laugh. Then she lit a cigarette.

"No," she said. "What I should really like more than anything would be an end of the world. I wish the world would come to an end."

He laughed, and poured his drops of brandy down his throat.

"It won't, for wishing," he said.

"No, that's the awful part of it. It'll just go on and on-- Doesn't it make you feel you'd go mad?"

He looked at her and shook his head.

"You see it doesn't concern me," he said. "So long as I can float by myself."

"But ARE you SATISFIED!" she cried.

"I like being by myself--I hate feeling and caring, and being forced into it. I want to be left alone--"

"You aren't very polite to your hostess of the evening," she said, laughing a bit miserably.

"Oh, we're all right," he said. "You know what I mean--"

"You like your own company? Do you?--Sometimes I think I'm nothing when I'm alone. Sometimes I think I surely must be nothing--nothingness."

He shook his head.

"No," he said. "No. I only want to be left alone."

"Not to have anything to do with anybody?" she queried ironically.

"Not to any extent."

She watched him--and then she bubbled with a laugh.

"I think you're funny," she said. "You don't mind?"

"No--why--It's just as you see it.--Jim Bricknell's a rare comic, to my eye."

"Oh, him!--no, not actually. He's self-conscious and selfish and hysterical. It isn't a bit funny after a while."

"I only know what I've seen," said Aaron. "You'd both of you like a bloody revolution, though."

"Yes. Only when it came he wouldn't be there."

"Would you?"

"Yes, indeed I would. I would give everything to be in it. I'd give heaven and earth for a great big upheaval--and then darkness."

"Perhaps you'll get it, when you die," said Aaron.

"Oh, but I don't want to die and leave all this standing. I hate it so."

"Why do you?"

"But don't you?"

"No, it doesn't really bother me."

"It makes me feel I can't live."

"I can't see that."

"But you always disagree with one!" said Josephine. "How do you like Lilly? What do you think of him?"

"He seems sharp," said Aaron.

"But he's more than sharp."

"Oh, yes! He's got his finger in most pies."

"And doesn't like the plums in any of them," said Josephine tartly.

"What does he do?"

"Writes--stories and plays."

"And makes it pay?"

"Hardly at all.--They want us to go. Shall we?" She rose from the table. The waiter handed her her cloak, and they went out into the blowy dark night. She folded her wrap round her, and hurried forward with short,

sharp steps. There was a certain Parisian chic and mincingness about her, even in her walk: but underneath, a striding, savage suggestion as if she could leg it in great strides, like some savage squaw.

Aaron pressed his bowler hat down on his brow.

"Would you rather take a bus?" she said in a high voice, because of the wind.

"I'd rather walk."

"So would I."

They hurried across the Charing Cross Road, where great buses rolled and rocked, crammed with people. Her heels clicked sharply on the pavement, as they walked east. They crossed Holborn, and passed the Museum. And neither of them said anything.

When they came to the corner, she held out her hand.

"Look!" she said. "Don't come any further: don't trouble."

"I'll walk round with you: unless you'd rather not."

"No--But do you want to bother?"

"It's no bother."

So they pursued their way through the high wind, and turned at last into the old, beautiful square. It seemed dark and deserted, dark like a savage wilderness in the heart of London. The wind was roaring in the great bare trees of the centre, as if it were some wild dark grove deep in a forgotten land.

Josephine opened the gate of the square garden with her key, and let it slam to behind him.

"How wonderful the wind is!" she shrilled. "Shall we listen to it for a minute?"

She led him across the grass past the shrubs to the big tree in the centre. There she climbed up to a seat. He sat beside her. They sat in silence, looking at the darkness. Rain was blowing in the wind. They huddled against the big tree-trunk, for shelter, and watched the scene.

Beyond the tall shrubs and the high, heavy railings the wet street gleamed silently. The houses of the Square rose like a cliff on this inner dark sea, dimly lighted at occasional windows. Boughs swayed and sang. A taxi-cab swirled round a corner like a cat, and purred to a standstill. There was a light of an open hall door. But all far away, it seemed, unthinkably far away. Aaron sat still and watched. He was frightened, it all seemed so sinister, this dark, bristling heart of

London. Wind boomed and tore like waves ripping a shingle beach. The two white lights of the taxi stared round and departed, leaving the coast at the foot of the cliffs deserted, faintly spilled with light from the high lamp. Beyond there, on the outer rim, a policeman passed solidly.

Josephine was weeping steadily all the time, but inaudibly. Occasionally she blew her nose and wiped her face. But he had not realized. She hardly realized herself. She sat near the strange man. He seemed so still and remote--so fascinating.

"Give me your hand," she said to him, subduedly.

He took her cold hand in his warm, living grasp. She wept more bitterly. He noticed at last.

"Why are you crying?" he said.

"I don't know," she replied, rather matter-of-fact, through her tears.

So he let her cry, and said no more, but sat with her cold hand in his warm, easy clasp.

"You'll think me a fool," she said. "I don't know why I cry."

"You can cry for nothing, can't you?" he said.

"Why, yes, but it's not very sensible."

He laughed shortly.

"Sensible!" he said.

"You are a strange man," she said.

But he took no notice.

"Did you ever intend to marry Jim Bricknell?" he asked.

"Yes, of course."

"I can't imagine it," he said.

"Why not?"

Both were watching blankly the roaring night of mid-London, the phantasmagoric old Bloomsbury Square. They were still hand in hand.

"Such as you shouldn't marry," he said.

"But why not? I want to."

"You think you do."

"Yes indeed I do."

He did not say any more.

"Why shouldn't I?" she persisted. "I don't know--"

And again he was silent.

"You've known some life, haven't you?" he asked.

"Me? Why?"

"You seem to."

"Do I? I'm sorry. Do I seem vicious?--No, I'm not vicious.--I've seen some life, perhaps--in Paris mostly. But not much. Why do you ask?"

"I wasn't thinking."

"But what do you mean? What are you thinking?"

"Nothing. Nothing."

"Don't be so irritating," said she.

But he did not answer, and she became silent also. They sat hand in hand.

"Won't you kiss me?" came her voice out of the darkness.

He waited some moments, then his voice sounded gently, half mocking, half reproachful.

"Nay!" he said.

"Why not?"

"I don't want to."

"Why not?" she asked.

He laughed, but did not reply.

She sat perfectly still for some time. She had ceased to cry. In the darkness her face was set and sullen. Sometimes a spray of rain blew across it. She drew her hand from his, and rose to her feet.

"Ill go in now," she said.

"You're not offended, are you?" he asked.

"No. Why?"

They stepped down in the darkness from their perch.

"I wondered."

She strode off for some little way. Then she turned and said:

"Yes, I think it is rather insulting."

"Nay," he said. "Not it! Not it!"

And he followed her to the gate.

She opened with her key, and they crossed the road to her door.

"Good-night," she said, turning and giving him her hand.

"You'll come and have dinner with me--or lunch--will you? When shall we make it?" he asked.

"Well, I can't say for certain--I'm very busy just now. I'll let you know."

A policeman shed his light on the pair of them as they stood on the

step.

"All right," said Aaron, dropping back, and she hastily opened the big door, and entered.