

CHAPTER XIII

THE WEDDED WIFE

The upshot of it all was that Alvina ran away to Scarborough without telling anybody. It was in the first week in October. She asked for a week-end, to make some arrangements for her marriage. The marriage was presumably with Dr. Mitchell--though she had given him no definite word. However, her month's notice was up, so she was legally free. And therefore she packed a rather large bag with all her ordinary things, and set off in her everyday dress, leaving the nursing paraphernalia behind.

She knew Scarborough quite well: and quite quickly found rooms which she had occupied before, in a boarding-house where she had stayed with Miss Frost long ago. Having recovered from her journey, she went out on to the cliffs on the north side. It was evening, and the sea was before her. What was she to do?

She had run away from both men--from Ciccio as well as from Mitchell. She had spent the last fortnight more or less avoiding the pair of them. Now she had a moment to herself. She was even free from Mrs. Tuke, who in her own way was more exacting than the men. Mrs. Tuke had a baby daughter, and was getting well. Ciccio was living with the Tukes. Tommy had taken a fancy to him, and had half

engaged him as a sort of personal attendant: the sort of thing Tommy would do, not having paid his butcher's bills.

So Alvina sat on the cliffs in a mood of exasperation. She was sick of being badgered about. She didn't really want to marry anybody. Why should she? She was thankful beyond measure to be by herself. How sick she was of other people and their importunities! What was she to do? She decided to offer herself again, in a little while, for war service--in a new town this time. Meanwhile she wanted to be by herself.

She made excursions, she walked on the moors, in the brief but lovely days of early October. For three days it was all so sweet and lovely--perfect liberty, pure, almost paradisal.

The fourth day it rained: simply rained all day long, and was cold, dismal, disheartening beyond words. There she sat, stranded in the dismalness, and knew no way out. She went to bed at nine o'clock, having decided in a jerk to go to London and find work in the war-hospitals at once: not to leave off until she had found it.

But in the night she dreamed that Alexander, her first fiancé, was with her on the quay of some harbour, and was reproaching her bitterly, even reviling her, for having come too late, so that they had missed their ship. They were there to catch the boat--and she, for dilatoriness, was an hour late, and she could see the broad

stern of the steamer not far off. Just an hour late. She showed Alexander her watch--exactly ten o'clock, instead of nine. And he was more angry than ever, because her watch was slow. He pointed to the harbour clock--it was ten minutes past ten.

When she woke up she was thinking of Alexander. It was such a long time since she had thought of him. She wondered if he had a right to be angry with her.

The day was still grey, with sweepy rain-clouds on the sea--gruesome, objectionable. It was a prolongation of yesterday. Well, despair was no good, and being miserable was no good either. She got no satisfaction out of either mood. The only thing to do was to act: seize hold of life and wring its neck.

She took the time-table that hung in the hall: the time-table, that magic carpet of today. When in doubt, move. This was the maxim. Move. Where to?

Another click of a resolution. She would wire to Ciccio and meet him--where? York--Leeds--Halifax--? She looked up the places in the time-table, and decided on Leeds. She wrote out a telegram, that she would be at Leeds that evening. Would he get it in time? Chance it.

She hurried off and sent the telegram. Then she took a little luggage, told the people of her house she would be back next day,

and set off. She did not like whirling in the direction of Lancaster. But no matter.

She waited a long time for the train from the north to come in. The first person she saw was Tommy. He waved to her and jumped from the moving train.

"I say!" he said. "So glad to see you! Ciccio is with me. Effie insisted on my coming to see you."

There was Ciccio climbing down with the bag. A sort of servant! This was too much for her.

"So you came with your valet?" she said, as Ciccio stood with the bag.

"Not a bit," said Tommy, laying his hand on the other man's shoulder. "We're the best of friends. I don't carry bags because my heart is rather groggy. I say, nurse, excuse me, but I like you better in uniform. Black doesn't suit you. You don't mind--"

"Yes, I do. But I've only got black clothes, except uniforms."

"Well look here now--! You're not going on anywhere tonight, are you?"

"It is too late."

"Well now, let's turn into the hotel and have a talk. I'm acting under Effie's orders, as you may gather--"

At the hotel Tommy gave her a letter from his wife: to the tune of--don't marry this Italian, you'll put yourself in a wretched hole, and one wants to avoid getting into holes. I know--concluded Effie, on a sinister note.

Tommy sang another tune. Ciccio was a lovely chap, a rare chap, a treat. He, Tommy, could quite understand any woman's wanting to marry him--didn't agree a bit with Effie. But marriage, you know, was so final. And then with this war on: you never knew how things might turn out: a foreigner and all that. And then--you won't mind what I say--? We won't talk about class and that rot. If the man's good enough, he's good enough by himself. But is he your intellectual equal, nurse? After all, it's a big point. You don't want to marry a man you can't talk to. Ciccio's a treat to be with, because he's so natural. But it isn't a mental treat--

Alvina thought of Mrs. Tuke, who complained that Tommy talked music and pseudo-philosophy by the hour when he was wound up. She saw Effie's long, outstretched arm of repudiation and weariness.

"Of course!"--another of Mrs. Tuke's exclamations. "Why not be

atavistic if you can be, and follow at a man's heel just because he's a man. Be like barbarous women, a slave."

During all this, Ciccio stayed out of the room, as bidden. It was not till Alvina sat before her mirror that he opened her door softly, and entered.

"I come in," he said, and he closed the door.

Alvina remained with her hair-brush suspended, watching him. He came to her, smiling softly, to take her in his arms. But she put the chair between them.

"Why did you bring Mr. Tuke?" she said.

He lifted his shoulders.

"I haven't brought him," he said, watching her.

"Why did you show him the telegram?"

"It was Mrs. Tuke took it."

"Why did you give it her?"

"It was she who gave it me, in her room. She kept it in her room

till I came and took it."

"All right," said Alvina. "Go back to the Tukes." And she began again to brush her hair.

Ciccio watched her with narrowing eyes.

"What you mean?" he said. "I shan't go, Allaye. You come with me."

"Ha!" she sniffed scornfully. "I shall go where I like."

But slowly he shook his head.

"You'll come, Allaye," he said. "You come with me, with Ciccio."

She shuddered at the soft, plaintive entreaty.

"How can I go with you? How can I depend on you at all?"

Again he shook his head. His eyes had a curious yellow fire, beseeching, plaintive, with a demon quality of yearning compulsion.

"Yes, you come with me, Allaye. You come with me, to Italy. You don't go to that other man. He is too old, not healthy. You come with me to Italy. Why do you send a telegram?"

Alvina sat down and covered her face, trembling.

"I can't! I can't! I can't!" she moaned. "I can't do it."

"Yes, you come with me. I have money. You come with me, to my place in the mountains, to my uncle's house. Fine house, you like it. Come with me, Allaye."

She could not look at him.

"Why do you want me?" she said.

"Why I want you?" He gave a curious laugh, almost of ridicule. "I don't know that. You ask me another, eh?"

She was silent, sitting looking downwards.

"I can't, I think," she said abstractedly, looking up at him.

He smiled, a fine, subtle smile, like a demon's, but inexpressibly gentle. He made her shiver as if she was mesmerized. And he was reaching forward to her as a snake reaches, nor could she recoil.

"You come, Allaye," he said softly, with his foreign intonation.

"You come. You come to Italy with me. Yes?" He put his hand on her, and she started as if she had been struck. But his hands, with the

soft, powerful clasp, only closed her faster.

"Yes?" he said. "Yes? All right, eh? All right!"--he had a strange mesmeric power over her, as if he possessed the sensual secrets, and she was to be subjected.

"I can't," she moaned, trying to struggle. But she was powerless.

Dark and insidious he was: he had no regard for her. How could a man's movements be so soft and gentle, and yet so inhumanly regardless! He had no regard for her. Why didn't she revolt? Why couldn't she? She was as if bewitched. She couldn't fight against her bewitchment. Why? Because he seemed to her beautiful, so beautiful. And this left her numb, submissive. Why must she see him beautiful? Why was she will-less? She felt herself like one of the old sacred prostitutes: a sacred prostitute.

In the morning, very early, they left for Scarborough, leaving a letter for the sleeping Tommy. In Scarborough they went to the registrar's office: they could be married in a fortnight's time. And so the fortnight passed, and she was under his spell. Only she knew it. She felt extinguished. Ciccio talked to her: but only ordinary things. There was no wonderful intimacy of speech, such as she had always imagined, and always craved for. No. He loved her--but it was in a dark, mesmeric way, which did not let her be herself. His love did not stimulate her or excite her. It extinguished her. She had to

be the quiescent, obscure woman: she felt as if she were veiled. Her thoughts were dim, in the dim back regions of consciousness--yet, somewhere, she almost exulted. Atavism! Mrs. Tuke's word would play in her mind. Was it atavism, this sinking into extinction under the spell of Ciccio? Was it atavism, this strange, sleep-like submission to his being? Perhaps it was. Perhaps it was. But it was also heavy and sweet and rich. Somewhere, she was content. Somewhere even she was vastly proud of the dark veiled eternal loneliness she felt, under his shadow.

And so it had to be. She shuddered when she touched him, because he was so beautiful, and she was so submitted. She quivered when he moved as if she were his shadow. Yet her mind remained distantly clear. She would criticize him, find fault with him, the things he did. But ultimately she could find no fault with him. She had lost the power. She didn't care. She had lost the power to care about his faults. Strange, sweet, poisonous indifference! She was drugged. And she knew it. Would she ever wake out of her dark, warm coma? She shuddered, and hoped not. Mrs. Tuke would say atavism. Atavism! The word recurred curiously.

But under all her questionings she felt well; a nonchalance deep as sleep, a passivity and indifference so dark and sweet she felt it must be evil. Evil! She was evil. And yet she had no power to be otherwise. They were legally married. And she was glad. She was relieved by knowing she could not escape. She was Mrs. Marasca. What

was the good of trying to be Miss Houghton any longer? Marasca, the bitter cherry. Some dark poison fruit she had eaten. How glad she was she had eaten it! How beautiful he was! And no one saw it but herself. For her it was so potent it made her tremble when she noticed him. His beauty, his dark shadow. Ciccio really was much handsomer since his marriage. He seemed to emerge. Before, he had seemed to make himself invisible in the streets, in England, altogether. But now something unfolded in him, he was a potent, glamorous presence, people turned to watch him. There was a certain dark, leopard-like pride in the air about him, something that the English people watched.

He wanted to go to Italy. And now it was his will which counted. Alvina, as his wife, must submit. He took her to London the day after the marriage. He wanted to get away to Italy. He did not like being in England, a foreigner, amid the beginnings of the spy craze.

In London they stayed at his cousin's house. His cousin kept a restaurant in Battersea, and was a flourishing London Italian, a real London product with all the good English virtues of cleanliness and honesty added to an Italian shrewdness. His name was Giuseppe Califano, and he was pale, and he had four children of whom he was very proud. He received Alvina with an affable respect, as if she were an asset in the family, but as if he were a little uneasy and disapproving. She had come down, in marrying Ciccio. She had lost caste. He rather seemed to exult over her degradation. For he was a

northernized Italian, he had accepted English standards. His children were English brats. He almost patronized Alvina.

But then a long, slow look from her remote blue eyes brought him up sharp, and he envied Ciccio suddenly, he was almost in love with her himself. She disturbed him. She disturbed him in his new English aplomb of a London restaurateur, and she disturbed in him the old Italian dark soul, to which he was renegade. He tried treating her as an English lady. But the slow, remote look in her eyes made this fall flat. He had to be Italian.

And he was jealous of Ciccio. In Ciccio's face was a lurking smile, and round his fine nose there seemed a subtle, semi-defiant triumph. After all, he had triumphed over his well-to-do, Anglicized cousin. With a stealthy, leopard-like pride Ciccio went through the streets of London in those wild early days of war. He was the one victor, arching stealthily over the vanquished north.

Alvina saw nothing of all these complexities. For the time being, she was all dark and potent. Things were curious to her. It was curious to be in Battersea, in this English-Italian household, where the children spoke English more readily than Italian. It was strange to be high over the restaurant, to see the trees of the park, to hear the clang of trams. It was strange to walk out and come to the river. It was strange to feel the seethe of war and dread in the air. But she did not question. She seemed steeped in the passionate

influence of the man, as in some narcotic. She even forgot Mrs. Tuke's atavism. Vague and unquestioning she went through the days, she accompanied Ciccio into town, she went with him to make purchases, or she sat by his side in the music hall, or she stayed in her room and sewed, or she sat at meals with the Califanos, a vague brightness on her face. And Mrs. Califano was very nice to her, very gentle, though with a suspicion of malicious triumph, mockery, beneath her gentleness. Still, she was nice and womanly, hovering as she was between her English emancipation and her Italian subordination. She half pitied Alvina, and was more than half jealous of her.

Alvina was aware of nothing--only of the presence of Ciccio. It was his physical presence which cast a spell over her. She lived within his aura. And she submitted to him as if he had extended his dark nature over her. She knew nothing about him. She lived mindlessly within his presence, quivering within his influence, as if his blood beat in her. She knew she was subjected. One tiny corner of her knew, and watched.

He was very happy, and his face had a real beauty. His eyes glowed with lustrous secrecy, like the eyes of some victorious, happy wild creature seen remote under a bush. And he was very good to her. His tenderness made her quiver into a swoon of complete self-forgetfulness, as if the flood-gates of her depths opened. The depth of his warm, mindless, enveloping love was immeasurable. She felt she could sink forever into

his warm, pulsating embrace.

Afterwards, later on, when she was inclined to criticize him, she would remember the moment when she saw his face at the Italian Consulate in London. There were many people at the Consulate, clamouring for passports--a wild and ill-regulated crowd. They had waited their turn and got inside--Ciccio was not good at pushing his way. And inside a courteous tall old man with a white beard had lifted the flap for Alvina to go inside the office and sit down to fill in the form. She thanked the old man, who bowed as if he had a reputation to keep up.

Ciccio followed, and it was he who had to sit down and fill up the form, because she did not understand the Italian questions. She stood at his side, watching the excited, laughing, noisy, east-end Italians at the desk. The whole place had a certain free-and-easy confusion, a human, unofficial, muddling liveliness which was not quite like England, even though it was in the middle of London.

"What was your mother's name?" Ciccio was asking her. She turned to him. He sat with the pen perched flourishingly at the end of his fingers, suspended in the serious and artistic business of filling in a form. And his face had a dark luminousness, like a dark transporence which was shut and has now expanded. She quivered, as if it was more than she could bear. For his face was open like a flower right to the depths of his soul, a dark, lovely translucency, vulnerable to

the deep quick of his soul. The lovely, rich darkness of his southern nature, so different from her own, exposing itself now in its passionate vulnerability, made her go white with a kind of fear. For an instant, her face seemed drawn and old as she looked down at him, answering his questions. Then her eyes became sightless with tears, she stooped as if to look at his writing, and quickly kissed his fingers that held the pen, there in the midst of the crowded, vulgar Consulate.

He stayed suspended, again looking up at her with the bright, unfolded eyes of a wild creature which plays and is not seen. A faint smile, very beautiful to her, was on his face. What did he see when he looked at her? She did not know, she did not know. And she would never know. For an instant, she swore inside herself that God Himself should not take her away from this man. She would commit herself to him through every eternity. And then the vagueness came over her again, she turned aside, photographically seeing the crowd in the Consulate, but really unconscious. His movement as he rose seemed to move her in her sleep, she turned to him at once.

It was early in November before they could leave for Italy, and her dim, lustrous state lasted all the time. She found herself at Charing Cross in the early morning, in all the bustle of catching the Continental train. Giuseppe was there, and Gemma his wife, and two of the children, besides three other Italian friends of Ciccio. They all crowded up the platform. Giuseppe had insisted that Ciccio should take second-class tickets. They were very early. Alvina and

Ciccio were installed in a second-class compartment, with all their packages, Ciccio was pale, yellowish under his tawny skin, and nervous. He stood excitedly on the platform talking in Italian--or rather, in his own dialect--whilst Alvina sat quite still in her corner. Sometimes one of the women or one of the children came to say a few words to her, or Giuseppe hurried to her with illustrated papers. They treated her as if she were some sort of invalid or angel, now she was leaving. But most of their attention they gave to Ciccio, talking at him rapidly all at once, whilst he answered, and glanced in this way and that, under his fine lashes, and smiled his old, nervous, meaningless smile. He was curiously upset.

Time came to shut the doors. The women and children kissed Alvina, saying:

"You'll be all right, eh? Going to Italy--!" And then profound and meaningful nods, which she could not interpret, but which were fraught surely with good-fellowship.

Then they all kissed Ciccio. The men took him in their arms and kissed him on either cheek, the children lifted their faces in eager anticipation of the double kiss. Strange, how eager they were for this embrace--how they all kept taking Ciccio's hand, one after the other, whilst he smiled constrainedly and nervously.