

## CHAPTER XXIX.

### THORNS AND ROSE PETALS.

He remained stooping and staring up at her, realising the implication of her words only very slowly.

Then it grew clear to him.

As she saw understanding dawning in his face, she uttered a cry of consternation. She came forward and sat down upon the little bedroom chair. She turned to him and began a sentence. "I," she said, and stopped, with an impatient gesture of her hands. "Oh!"

He straightened himself and stood regarding her. The basket of roses lay overturned between them.

"You thought these came from someone else?" he said, trying to grasp this inversion of the universe.

She turned her eyes, "I did not know," she panted. "A trap.... Was it likely--they came from you?"

"You thought they came from someone else," he said.

"Yes," she said, "I did."

"Who?"

"Mr. Baynes."

"That boy!"

"Yes--that boy."

"Well!"

Lewisham looked about him--a man in the presence of the inconceivable.

"You mean to say you have been carrying on with that youngster behind my back?" he asked.

She opened her lips to speak and had no words to say.

His pallor increased until every tinge of colour had left his face. He laughed and then set his teeth. Husband and wife looked at one another.

"I never dreamt," he said in even tones.

He sat down on the bed, thrusting his feet among the scattered roses

with a sort of grim satisfaction. "I never dreamt," he repeated, and the flimsy basket kicked by his swinging foot hopped indignantly through the folding doors into the living room and left a trail of blood-red petals.

They sat for perhaps two minutes, and when he spoke again his voice was hoarse. He reverted to a former formula. "Look here," he said, and cleared his throat. "I don't know whether you think I'm going to stand this, but I'm not."

He looked at her. She sat staring in front of her, making no attempt to cope with disaster.

"When I say I'm not going to stand it," explained Lewisham, "I don't mean having a row or anything of that sort. One can quarrel and be disappointed over--other things--and still go on. But this is a different thing altogether.

"Of all dreams and illusions!... Think what I have lost in this accursed marriage. And now ... You don't understand--you won't understand."

"Nor you," said Ethel, weeping but neither looking at him nor moving her hands from her lap where they lay helplessly. "You don't understand."

"I'm beginning to."

He sat in silence gathering force. "In one year," he said, "all my hopes, all my ambitions have gone. I know I have been cross and irritable--I know that. I've been pulled two ways. But ... I bought you these roses."

She looked at the roses, and then at his white face, made an imperceptible movement towards him, and became impassive again.

"I do think one thing. I have found out you are shallow, you don't think, you can't feel things that I think and feel. I have been getting over that. But I did think you were loyal--"

"I am loyal," she cried.

"And you think--Bah!--you poke my roses under the table!"

Another portentous silence. Ethel stirred and he turned his eyes to watch what she was about to do. She produced her handkerchief and began to wipe her dry eyes rapidly, first one and then the other. Then she began sobbing. "I'm ... as loyal as you ... anyhow," she said.

For a moment Lewisham was aghast. Then he perceived he must ignore that argument.

"I would have stood it--I would have stood anything if you had been loyal--if I could have been sure of you. I am a fool, I know, but I would have stood the interruption of my work, the loss of any hope of a Career, if I had been sure you were loyal. I ... I cared for you a great deal."

He stopped. He had suddenly perceived the pathetic. He took refuge in anger.

"And you have deceived me! How long, how much, I don't care. You have deceived me. And I tell you"--he began to gesticulate--"I'm not so much your slave and fool as to stand that! No woman shall make me that sort of fool, whatever else--So far as I am concerned, this ends things. This ends things. We are married--but I don't care if we were married five hundred times. I won't stop with a woman who takes flowers from another man--"

"I didn't," said Ethel.

Lewisham gave way to a transport of anger. He caught up a handful of roses and extended them, trembling. "What's this?" he asked. His finger bled from a thorn, as once it had bled from a blackthorn spray.

"I didn't take them," said Ethel. "I couldn't help it if they were sent."

"Ugh!" said Lewisham. "But what is the good of argument and denial? You took them in, you had them. You may have been cunning, but you have given yourself away. And our life and all this"--he waved an inclusive hand at Madam Gadow's furniture--"is at an end."

He looked at her and repeated with bitter satisfaction, "At an end."

She glanced at his face, and his expression was remorseless. "I will not go on living with you," he said, lest there should be any mistake. "Our life is at an end."

Her eyes went from his face to the scattered roses. She remained staring at these. She was no longer weeping, and her face, save about the eyes, was white.

He presented it in another form. "I shall go away."

"We never ought to have married," he reflected. "But ... I never expected this!"

"I didn't know," she cried out, lifting up her voice. "I didn't know. How could I help! Oh!"

She stopped and stared at him with hands clenched, her eyes haggard with despair.

Lewisham remained impenetrably malignant.

"I don't want to know," he said, answering her dumb appeal. "That settles everything. That!" He indicated the scattered flowers. "What does it matter to me what has happened or hasn't happened? Anyhow--oh! I don't mind. I'm glad. See? It settles things.

"The sooner we part the better. I shan't stop with you another night. I shall take my box and my portmanteau into that room and pack. I shall stop in there to-night, sleep in a chair or think. And to-morrow I shall settle up with Madam Gadow and go. You can go back ... to your cheating."

He stopped for some seconds. She was deadly still. "You wanted to, and now you may. You wanted to, before I got work. You remember? You know your place is still open at Lagune's. I don't care. I tell you I don't care that. Not that! You may go your own way--and I shall go mine. See? And all this rot--this sham of living together when neither cares for the other--I don't care for you now, you know, so you needn't think it--will be over and done with. As for marriage--I don't care that for marriage--it can't make a sham and a blunder anything but a sham.

"It's a sham, and shams have to end, and that's the end of the matter."

He stood up resolutely. He kicked the scattered roses out of his way and dived beneath the bed for his portmanteau. Ethel neither spoke nor moved, but remained watching his movements. For a time the portmanteau refused to emerge, and he marred his stern resolution by a half audible "Come here--damn you!" He swung it into the living room and returned for his box. He proposed to pack in that room.

When he had taken all his personal possessions out of the bedroom, he closed the folding-doors with an air of finality. He knew from the sounds that followed that she flung herself upon the bed, and that filled him with grim satisfaction.

He stood listening for a space, then set about packing methodically. The first rage of discovery had abated; he knew quite clearly that he was inflicting grievous punishment, and that gratified him. There was also indeed a curious pleasure in the determination of a long and painful period of vague misunderstanding by this unexpected crisis. He was acutely conscious of the silence on the other side of the folding-doors, he kept up a succession of deliberate little noises, beat books together and brushed clothes, to intimate the resolute prosecution of his preparations.

That was about nine o'clock. At eleven he was still busy....

Darkness came suddenly upon him. It was Madam Gadow's economical habit to turn off all her gas at that hour unless she chanced to be



entertaining friends.

He felt in his pocket for matches and he had none. He whispered curses. Against such emergencies he had bought a brass lamp and in the bedroom there were candles. Ethel had a candle alight, he could see the bright yellow line that appeared between the folding doors. He felt his way presently towards the mantel, receiving a blow in the ribs from a chair on the way, and went carefully amidst Madam Gadow's once amusing ornaments.

There were no matches on the mantel. Going to the chest of drawers he almost fell over his open portmanteau. He had a silent ecstasy of rage. Then he kicked against the basket in which the roses had come. He could find no matches on the chest of drawers.

Ethel must have the matches in the bedroom, but that was absolutely impossible. He might even have to ask her for them, for at times she pocketed matches.... There was nothing for it but to stop packing. Not a sound came from the other room.

He decided he would sit down in the armchair and go to sleep. He crept very carefully to the chair and sat down. Another interval of listening and he closed his eyes and composed himself for slumber.

He began to think over his plans for the morrow. He imagined the scene with Madam Gadow, and then his departure to find bachelor lodgings

once more. He debated in what direction he should go to get, suitable lodgings. Possible difficulties with his luggage, possible annoyances of the search loomed gigantic. He felt greatly irritated at these minor difficulties. He wondered if Ethel also was packing. What particularly would she do? He listened, but he could hear nothing. She was very still. She was really very still! What could she be doing? He forgot the bothers of the morrow in this new interest. Presently he rose very softly and listened. Then he sat down again impatiently. He tried to dismiss his curiosity about the silence by recapitulating the story of his wrongs.

He had some difficulty in fixing his mind upon this theme, but presently his memories were flowing freely. Only it was not wrongs now that he could recall. He was pestered by an absurd idea that he had again behaved unjustly to Ethel, that he had been headlong and malignant. He made strenuous efforts to recover his first heat of jealousy--in vain. Her remark that she had been as loyal as he, became an obstinate headline in his mind. Something arose within him that insisted upon Ethel's possible fate if he should leave her. What particularly would she do? He knew how much her character leant upon his, Good Heavens! What might she not do?

By an effort he succeeded in fixing his mind on Baynes. That helped him back to the harsher footing. However hard things might be for her she deserved them. She deserved them!

Yet presently he slipped again, slipped back to the remorse and regrets of the morning time. He clutched at Baynes as a drowning man clutches at a rope, and recovered himself. For a time he meditated on Baynes. He had never seen the poet, so his imagination had scope. It appeared to him as an exasperating obstacle to a tragic avenging of his honour that Baynes was a mere boy--possibly even younger than himself.

The question, "What will become of Ethel?" rose to the surface again. He struggled against its possibilities. No! That was not it! That was her affair.

He felt inexorably kept to the path he had chosen, for all the waning of his rage. He had put his hand to the plough. "If you condone this," he told himself, "you might condone anything. There are things one must not stand." He tried to keep to that point of view--assuming for the most part out of his imagination what it was he was not standing. A dim sense came to him of how much he was assuming. At any rate she must have flirted!... He resisted this reviving perception of justice as though it was some unspeakably disgraceful craving. He tried to imagine her with Baynes.

He determined he would go to sleep.

But his was a waking weariness. He tried counting. He tried to distract his thoughts from her by going over the atomic weights of the

elements....

He shivered, and realised that he was cold and sitting cramped on an uncomfortable horsehair chair. He had dozed. He glanced for the yellow line between the folding doors. It was still there, but it seemed to quiver. He judged the candle must be flaring. He wondered why everything was so still.

Now why should he suddenly feel afraid?

He sat for a long time trying to hear some movement, his head craning forward in the darkness.

A grotesque idea came into his head that all that had happened a very long time ago. He dismissed that. He contested an unreasonable persuasion that some irrevocable thing had passed. But why was everything so still?

He was invaded by a prevision of unendurable calamity.

Presently he rose and crept very slowly, and with infinite precautions against noise, towards the folding doors. He stood listening with his ear near the yellow chink.

He could hear nothing, not even the measured breathing of a sleeper.

He perceived that the doors were not shut, but slightly ajar. He pushed against the inner one very gently and opened it silently. Still there was no sound of Ethel. He opened the door still wider and peered into the room. The candle had burnt down and was flaring in its socket. Ethel was lying half undressed upon the bed, and in her hand and close to her face was a rose.

He stood watching her, fearing to move. He listened hard and his face was very white. Even now he could not hear her breathing.

After all, it was probably all right. She was just asleep. He would slip back before she woke. If she found him--

He looked at her again. There was something in her face--

He came nearer, no longer heeding the sounds he made. He bent over her. Even now she did not seem to breathe.

He saw that her eyelashes were still wet, the pillow by her cheek was wet. Her white, tear-stained face hurt him....

She was intolerably pitiful to him. He forgot everything but that and how he had wounded her that day. And then she stirred and murmured indistinctly a foolish name she had given him.

He forgot that they were going to part for ever. He felt nothing but a

great joy that she could stir and speak. His jealousy flashed out of being. He dropped upon his knees.

"Dear," he whispered, "Is it all right? I ... I could not hear you breathing. I could not hear you breathing."

She started and was awake.

"I was in the other room," said Lewisham in a voice full of emotion. "Everything was so quiet, I was afraid--I did not know what had happened. Dear--Ethel dear. Is it all right?"

She sat up quickly and scrutinised his face. "Oh! let me tell you," she wailed. "Do let me tell you. It's nothing. It's nothing. You wouldn't hear me. You wouldn't hear me. It wasn't fair--before you had heard me...."

His arms tightened about her. "Dear," he said, "I knew it was nothing. I knew. I knew."

She spoke in sobbing sentences. "It was so simple. Mr. Baynes ... something in his manner ... I knew he might be silly ... Only I did so want to help you." She paused. Just for one instant she saw one untenable indiscretion as it were in a lightning flash. A chance meeting it was, a "silly" thing or so said, a panic, retreat. She would have told it--had she known how. But she could not do it. She

hesitated. She abolished it--untold. She went on: "And then, I thought he had sent the roses and I was frightened ... I was frightened."

"Dear one," said Lewisham. "Dear one! I have been cruel to you. I have been unjust. I understand. I do understand. Forgive me.

Dearest--forgive me."

"I did so want to do something for you. It was all I could do--that little money. And then you were angry. I thought you didn't love me any more because I did not understand your work.... And that Miss Heydinger--Oh! it was hard."

"Dear one," said Lewisham, "I do not care your little finger for Miss Heydinger."

"I know how I hamper you. But if you will help me. Oh! I would work, I would study. I would do all I could to understand."

"Dear," whispered Lewisham. "Dear"

"And to have her--"

"Dear," he vowed, "I have been a brute. I will end all that. I will end all that."

He took her suddenly into his arms and kissed her.

"Oh, I know I'm stupid," she said.

"You're not. It's I have been stupid. I have been unkind, unreasonable. All to-day--... I've been thinking about it. Dear! I don't care for anything--It's you. If I have you nothing else matters ... Only I get hurried and cross. It's the work and being poor. Dear one, we must hold to each other. All to-day--It's been dreadful...."

He stopped. They sat clinging to one another.

"I do love you," she said presently with her arms about him. "Oh! I do--do--love you."

He drew her closer to him.

He kissed her neck. She pressed him to her.

Their lips met.

The expiring candle streamed up into a tall flame, flickered, and was suddenly extinguished. The air was heavy with the scent of roses.