

§ 9

Of course it was all different. Our first encounter in this new phase had a quality of extreme disillusionment. The warm living creature, who would whisper, who would kiss with wonderful lips, who would say strange daring things, who had soft hair one might touch with a thrilling and worshipful hand, who changed one at a word or a look into a God of pride, became as if she had been no more than a dream. A self-possessed young aristocrat in white and brown glanced at me from amidst a group of brilliant people on the terrace, nodded as it seemed quite carelessly in acknowledgment of my salutation, and resumed her confident conversation with a tall stooping man, no less a person than Evesham, the Prime Minister. He was lunching at Burnmore on his way across country to the Rileys. I heard that dear laugh of hers, as ready and easy as when she laughed with me. I had not heard it for nearly three years--nor any sound that had its sweetness. "But Mr. Evesham," she was saying, "nowadays we don't believe that sort of thing----"

"There are a lot of things still for you to believe," says Mr. Evesham beaming. "A lot of things! One's capacity increases. It grows with exercise. Justin will bear me out."

Beyond her stood an undersized, brown-clad middle-aged man with a big head, a dark face and expressive brown eyes fixed now in unrestrained admiration on Mary's laughing face. This then was Justin, the incredibly rich and powerful, whose comprehensive operations could make and break a

thousand fortunes in a day. He answered Evesham carelessly, with his gaze still on Mary, and in a voice too low for my straining ears. There was some woman in the group also, but she has left nothing upon my mind whatever except an effect of black and a very decorative green sunshade. She greeted Justin's remark, I remember, with the little yelp of laughter that characterized that set. I think too there was someone else in the group; but I cannot clearly recall who....

Presently as I and Philip made unreal conversation together I saw Mary disengage herself and come towards us. It was as if a princess came towards a beggar. Absurd are the changes of phase between women and men. A year or so ago and all of us had been but "the children" together; now here were I and Philip mere youths still, nobodies, echoes and aspirations, crude promises at the best, and here was Mary in full flower, as glorious and central as the Hampton Court azaleas in spring.

"And this is Stephen," she said, aglow with happy confidence.

I made no memorable reply, and there was a little pause thick with mute questionings.

"After lunch," she said with her eye on mine, "I am going to measure against you on the steps. I'd hoped--when you weren't looking--I might creep up----"

"I've taken no advantage," I said.

"You've kept your lead."

Justin had followed her towards us, and now held out a hand to Philip.

"Well, Philip my boy," he said, and defined our places. Philip made some introductory gesture with a word or so towards me. Justin glanced at me as one might glance at someone's new dog, gave an expressionless nod to my stiff movement of recognition, and addressed himself at once to Mary.

"Lady Mary," he said, "I've wanted to tell you----"

I caught her quick eye for a moment and knew she had more to say to me, but neither she nor I had the skill and alacrity to get that said.

"I wanted to tell you," said Justin, "I've found a little Japanese who's done exactly what you wanted with that group of dwarf maples."

She clearly didn't understand.

"But what did I want, Mr. Justin?" she asked.

"Don't say that you forget?" cried Justin. "Oh don't tell me you forget! You wanted a little exact copy of a Japanese house---- I've had it done. Beneath the trees...."

"And so you're back in Burnmore, Mr. Stratton," said Lady Ladislav

intervening between me and their duologue. And I never knew how pleased Mary was with this faithful realization of her passing and forgotten fancy. My hostess greeted me warmly and pressed my hand, smiled mechanically and looked over my shoulder all the while to Mr. Evesham and her company generally, and then came the deep uproar of a gong from the house and we were all moving in groups and couples luncheonward.

Justin walked with Lady Mary, and she was I saw an inch taller than his squat solidity. A tall lady in rose-pink had taken possession of Guy, Evesham and Lady Ladislaw made the two centres of a straggling group who were bandying recondite political allusions. Then came one or two couples and trios with nothing very much to say and active ears. Philip and I brought up the rear silently and in all humility. Even young Guy had gone over our heads. I was too full of a stupendous realization for any words. Of course, during those years, she had been doing--no end of things! And while I had been just drudging with lectures and books and theorizing about the Empire and what I could do with it, and taking exercise, she had learnt, it seemed--the World.