

CHAPTER II

One sunny afternoon, a hansom drove at great speed along Belsize Avenue, St. John's Wood, and stopped before a large mansion. A young lady sprang out; ran up the steps, and rang the bell impatiently. She was of the olive complexion, with a sharp profile: dark eyes with long lashes; narrow mouth with delicately sensuous lips; small head, feet, and hands, with long taper fingers; lithe and very slender figure moving with serpent-like grace. Oriental taste was displayed in the colors of her costume, which consisted of a white dress, close-fitting, and printed with an elaborate china blue pattern; a yellow straw hat covered with artificial hawthorn and scarlet berries; and tan-colored gloves reaching beyond the elbow, and decorated with a profusion of gold bangles.

The door not being opened immediately, she rang again, violently, and was presently admitted by a maid, who seemed surprised to see her. Without making any inquiry, she darted upstairs into a drawing-room, where a matron of good presence, with features of the finest Jewish type, sat reading. With her was a handsome boy in black velvet, who said:

"Mamma, here's Henrietta!"

"Arthur," said the young lady excitedly, "leave the room this instant; and don't dare to come back until you get leave."

The boy's countenance fell, and he sulkily went out without a word.

"Is anything wrong?" said the matron, putting away her book with the unconcerned resignation of an experienced person who foresees a storm in a teacup. "Where is Sidney?"

"Gone! Gone! Deserted me! I--" The young lady's utterance failed, and she threw herself upon an ottoman, sobbing with passionate spite.

"Nonsense! I thought Sidney had more sense. There, Henrietta, don't be silly. I suppose you have quarrelled."

"No! No!! No!!!" cried Henrietta, stamping on the carpet. "We had not a word. I have not lost my temper since we were married, mamma; I solemnly swear I have not. I will kill myself; there is no other way. There's a curse on me. I am marked out to be miserable. He--"

"Tut, tut! What has happened, Henrietta? As you have been married now nearly six weeks, you can hardly be surprised at a little tiff arising. You are so excitable! You cannot expect the sky to be always cloudless. Most likely you are to blame; for Sidney is far more reasonable than you. Stop crying, and behave like a woman of sense, and I will go to Sidney and make everything right."

"But he's gone, and I can't find out where. Oh, what shall I do?"

"What has happened?"

Henrietta writhed with impatience. Then, forcing herself to tell her story, she answered:

"We arranged on Monday that I should spend two days with Aunt Judith instead of going with him to Birmingham to that horrid Trade Congress. We parted on the best of terms. He couldn't have been more affectionate. I will kill myself; I don't care about anything or anybody. And when I came back on Wednesday he was gone, and there was this letter." She produced a letter, and wept more bitterly than before.

"Let me see it."

Henrietta hesitated, but her mother took the letter from her, sat down near the window, and composed herself to read without the least regard to her daughter's vehement distress. The letter ran thus:

"Monday night.

"My Dearest: I am off--surfeited with endearment--to live my own life and do my own work. I could only have prepared you for this by coldness or neglect, which are wholly impossible to me when the spell of your presence is upon me. I find that I must fly if I am to save myself.

"I am afraid that I cannot give you satisfactory and intelligible reasons for this step. You are a beautiful and luxurious creature: life is to you full and complete only when it is a carnival of love. My case is just the reverse. Before three soft speeches have escaped me I rebuke myself for folly and insincerity. Before a caress has had time to cool, a strenuous revulsion seizes me: I long to return to my old lonely ascetic hermit life; to my dry books; my Socialist propagandism; my voyage of discovery through the wilderness of thought. I married in an insane fit of belief that I had a share of the natural affection which carries other men through lifetimes of matrimony. Already I am undeceived. You are to me the loveliest woman in the world. Well, for five weeks I have walked and tallied and dallied with the loveliest woman in the world, and the upshot is that I am flying from her, and am for a hermit's cave until I die. Love cannot keep possession of me: all my strongest powers rise up against it and will not endure it. Forgive me for writing nonsense that you won't understand, and do not think too hardly of me. I have been as good to you as my selfish nature allowed. Do not seek to disturb me in the obscurity which I desire and deserve. My solicitor will call on your father to arrange business matters, and you shall be as happy as wealth and liberty can make you. We shall meet again--some day.

"Adieu, my last love,

"Sidney Trefusis."

"Well?" cried Mrs. Trefusis, observing through her tears that her mother had read the letter and was contemplating it in a daze.

"Well, certainly!" said Mrs. Jansenius, with emphasis. "Do you think he is quite sane, Henrietta? Or have you been plaguing him for too much attention? Men are not willing to give up their whole existence to their wives, even during the honeymoon."

"He pretended that he was never happy out of my presence," sobbed Henrietta. "There never was anything so cruel. I often wanted to be by myself for a change, but I was afraid to hurt his feelings by saying so. And now he has no feelings. But he must come back to me. Mustn't he, mamma?"

"He ought to. I suppose he has not gone away with anyone?"

Henrietta sprang up, her cheeks vivid scarlet. "If I thought that I would pursue him to the end of the earth, and murder her. But no; he is not like anybody else. He hates me! Everybody hates me! You don't care whether I am deserted or not, nor papa, nor anyone in this house."

Mrs. Jansenius, still indifferent to her daughter's agitation, considered a moment, and then said placidly:

"You can do nothing until we hear from the solicitor. In the meantime you may stay with us, if you wish. I did not expect a visit from you so soon; but your room has not been used since you went away."

Mrs. Trefusis ceased crying, chilled by this first intimation that her father's house was no longer her home. A more real sense of desolation came upon her. Under its cold influence she began to collect herself, and to feel

her pride rising like a barrier between her and her mother.

"I won't stay long," she said. "If his solicitor will not tell me where he is, I will hunt through England for him. I am sorry to trouble you."

"Oh, you will be no greater trouble than you have always been," said Mrs. Jansenius calmly, not displeased to see that her daughter had taken the hint. "You had better go and wash your face. People may call, and I presume you don't wish to receive them in that plight. If you meet Arthur on the stairs, please tell him he may come in."

Henrietta screwed her lips into a curious pout and withdrew. Arthur then came in and stood at the window in sullen silence, brooding over his recent expulsion. Suddenly he exclaimed: "Here's papa, and it's not five o'clock yet!" whereupon his mother sent him away again.

Mr. Jansenius was a man of imposing presence, not yet in his fiftieth year, but not far from it. He moved with dignity, bearing himself as if the contents of his massive brow were precious. His handsome aquiline nose and keen dark eyes proclaimed his Jewish origin, of which he was ashamed. Those who did not know this naturally believed that he was proud of it, and were at a loss to account for his permitting his children to be educated as Christians. Well instructed in business, and subject to no emotion outside the love of family, respectability, comfort, and money, he had maintained the capital inherited from his father, and made it breed new capital in the usual way. He was a banker, and his object as such was to intercept and appropriate the immense saving which the banking system effects, and so, as far as possible, to leave the rest of the world working just as hard as before banking was introduced. But as the world would not on these terms have banked at all, he had to give them some of the saving as an inducement. So they profited by the saving as well as he, and he had the satisfaction of being at once a wealthy citizen and a public benefactor, rich in comforts and easy in conscience.

He entered the room quickly, and his wife saw that something had vexed him.

"Do you know what has happened, Ruth?" he said.

"Yes. She is upstairs."

Mr. Jansenius stared. "Do you mean to say that she has left already?" he said. "What business has she to come here?"

"It is natural enough. Where else should she have gone?"

Mr. Jansenius, who mistrusted his own judgment when it differed from that of his wife, replied slowly, "Why did she not go to her mother?"

Mrs. Jansenius, puzzled in her turn, looked at him with cool wonder, and remarked, "I am her mother, am I not?"

"I was not aware of it. I am surprised to hear it, Ruth. Have you had a letter too? I have seen the letter. But what do you mean by telling me that you do not know I am Henrietta's mother? Are you trying to be funny?"

"Henrietta! Is she here? Is this some fresh trouble?"

"I don't know. What are you talking about?"

"I am talking about Agatha Wylie."

"Oh! I was talking about Henrietta."

"Well, what about Henrietta?"

"What about Agatha Wylie?"

At this Mr. Jansenius became exasperated, and he deemed it best to relate what Henrietta had told her. When she gave him Trefusis's letter, he said, more calmly: "Misfortunes never come singly. Read that," and handed her another letter, so that they both began reading at the same time.

Mrs. Jansenius read as follows:

"Alton College, Lyvern.

"To Mrs. Wylie, Acacia Lodge, Chiswick.

"Dear Madam: I write with great regret to request that you will at once withdraw Miss Wylie from Alton College. In an establishment like this, where restraint upon the liberty of the students is reduced to a minimum, it is necessary that the small degree of subordination which is absolutely indispensable be acquiesced in by all without complaint or delay. Miss Wylie has failed to comply with this condition. She has declared her wish to leave, and has assumed an attitude towards myself and my colleagues which we cannot, consistently with our duty to ourselves and her fellow students, pass over. If Miss Wylie has any cause to complain of her treatment here, or of the step which she has compelled us to take, she will doubtless make it known to you.

"Perhaps you will be so good as to communicate with Miss Wylie's guardian, Mr. Jansenius, with whom I shall be happy to make an equitable arrangement respecting the fees which have been paid in advance for the current term.

"I am, dear madam,

"Yours faithfully,

"Maria Wilson."

"A nice young lady, that!" said Mrs. Jansenius.

"I do not understand this," said Mr. Jansenius, reddening as he took in the purport of his son-in-law's letter. "I will not submit to it. What does it mean, Ruth?"

"I don't know. Sidney is mad, I think; and his honeymoon has brought his madness out. But you must not let him throw Henrietta on my hands again."

"Mad! Does he think he can shirk his responsibility to his wife because she is my daughter? Does he think, because his mother's father was a baronet, that he can put Henrietta aside the moment her society palls on him?"

"Oh, it's nothing of that sort. He never thought of us. But I will make him think of us," said Mr. Jansenius, raising his voice in great agitation. "He shall answer for it."

Just then Henrietta returned, and saw her father moving excitedly to and fro, repeating, "He shall answer to me for this. He shall answer for it."

Mrs. Jansenius frowned at her daughter to remain silent, and said soothingly, "Don't lose your temper, John."

"But I will lose my temper. Insolent hound! Damned scoundrel!"

"He is not," whimpered Henrietta, sitting down and taking out her handkerchief.

"Oh, come, come!" said Mrs. Jansenius peremptorily, "we have had enough crying. Let us have no more of it."

Henrietta sprang up in a passion. "I will say and do as I please," she exclaimed. "I am a married woman, and I will receive no orders. And I will have my husband back again, no matter what he does to hide himself. Papa, won't you make him come back to me? I am dying. Promise that you will make him come back."

And, throwing herself upon her father's bosom, she postponed further discussion by going into hysterics, and startling the household by her screams.