

CHAPTER XVII

Gertrude, unaware of the extent to which she had already betrayed her disappointment, believed that anxiety for her father's health, which she alleged as the motive of her sudden departure, was an excuse plausible enough to blind her friends to her overpowering reluctance to speak to Agatha or endure her presence; to her fierce shrinking from the sort of pity usually accorded to a jilted woman; and, above all, to her dread of meeting Trefusis. She had for some time past thought of him as an upright and perfect man deeply interested in her. Yet, comparatively liberal as her education had been, she had no idea of any interest of man in woman existing apart from a desire to marry. He had, in his serious moments, striven to make her sensible of the baseness he saw in her worldliness, flattering her by his apparent conviction--which she shared--that she was capable of a higher life. Almost in the same breath, a strain of gallantry which was incorrigible in him, and to which his humor and his tenderness to women whom he liked gave variety and charm, would supervene upon his seriousness with a rapidity which her far less flexible temperament could not follow. Hence she, thinking him still in earnest when he had swerved into florid romance, had been dangerously misled. He had no conscientious scruples in his love-making, because he was unaccustomed to consider himself as likely to inspire love in women; and Gertrude did not know that her beauty gave to an hour spent alone with her a transient charm which few men of imagination and address could resist. She, who had lived in the marriage market since she had left school, looked upon love-making as the most serious business of life. To him it was only a pleasant sort of trifling, enhanced by a dash of sadness in the reflection that it meant so little.

Of the ceremonies attending her departure, the one that cost her most was the kiss she felt bound to offer Agatha. She had been jealous of her at college, where she had esteemed herself the better bred of the two; but that opinion had hardly consoled her for Agatha's superior quickness of wit, dexterity of hand, audacity, aptness of resource, capacity for forming or following intricate associations of ideas, and consequent power to dazzle others. Her jealousy of these qualities was now barbed by the knowledge that they were much nearer akin than her own to those of Trefusis. It mattered little to her how she appeared to herself in comparison with Agatha. But it mattered the whole world (she thought) that she must appear to Trefusis so slow, stiff, cold, and studied, and that she had no means to make him understand that she was not really so. For she would not admit the justice of impressions made by what she did not intend to do, however habitually she did it. She had a theory that she was not herself, but what she would have liked to be. As to the one quality in which she had always felt superior to Agatha, and which she called "good breeding," Trefusis had so far destroyed her conceit in that, that she was beginning to doubt whether it was not her cardinal defect.

She could not bring herself to utter a word as she embraced her schoolfellow; and Agatha was tongue-tied too. But there was much remorseful tenderness in the feelings that choked them. Their silence would have been awkward but for the loquacity of Jane, who talked enough for all three. Sir Charles was without, in the trap, waiting to drive Gertrude to the station. Erskine intercepted her in the hall as she passed out, told her that he should be desolate when she was gone, and begged her to remember him, a simple petition which moved her a little, and caused her to note that his dark eyes had a pleading eloquence which she had observed before in the kangaroos at the Zoological Society's gardens.

On the way to the train Sir Charles worried the horse in order to be excused from conversation on the sore subject of his guest's sudden departure. He had made a few remarks on the skittishness of young ponies, and on the weather, and that was all until they reached the station, a pretty building standing in the open country, with a view of the river from the platform. There were two flies waiting, two porters, a bookstall, and a refreshment room with a neglected beauty pining behind the bar. Sir Charles waited in the booking office to purchase a ticket for Gertrude, who went through to the platform. The first person she saw there was Trefusis, close beside her.

"I am going to town by this train, Gertrude," he said quickly. "Let me take charge of you. I have something to say, for I hear that some mischief has been made between us which must be stopped at once. You--"

Just then Sir Charles came out, and stood amazed to see them in conversation.

"It happens that I am going by this train," said Trefusis. "I will see after Miss Lindsay."

"Miss Lindsay has her maid with her," said Sir Charles, almost stammering, and looking at Gertrude, whose expression was inscrutable.

"We can get into the Pullman car," said Trefusis. "There we shall be as private as in a corner of a crowded drawing-room. I may travel with you, may I not?" he said, seeing Sir Charles's disturbed look, and turning to her for express permission.

She felt that to deny him would be to throw away her last chance of happiness. Nevertheless she resolved to do it, though she should die of grief on the way to London. As she raised her head to forbid him the more emphatically, she met his gaze, which was grave and expectant. For an instant she lost her presence of mind, and in that instant said, "Yes. I shall be very glad."

"Well, if that is the case," said Sir Charles, in the tone of one whose sympathy had been alienated by an unpardonable outrage, "there can be no use in my waiting. I leave you in the hands of Mr. Trefusis. Good-bye, Miss Lindsay."

Gertrude winced. Unkindness from a man usually kind proved hard to bear at parting. She was offering him her hand in silence when Trefusis said:

"Wait and see us off. If we chance to be killed on the journey--which is always probable on an English railway--you will reproach yourself afterwards if you do not see the last of us. Here is the train; it will not delay you a minute. Tell Erskine that you saw me here; that I have not forgotten my promise, and that he may rely on me. Get in at this end, Miss Lindsay."

"My maid," said Gertrude hesitating; for she had not intended to travel so expensively. "She--"

"She comes with us to take care of me; I have tickets for everybody," said Trefusis, handing the woman in.

"But--"

"Take your seats, please," said the guard. "Going by the train, sir?"

"Good-bye, Sir Charles. Give my love to Lady Brandon, and Agatha, and the dear children; and thanks so much for a very pleasant--" Here the train moved off, and Sir Charles, melting, smiled and waved his hat until he caught sight of Trefusis looking back at him with a grin which seemed, under the circumstances, so Satanic, that he stopped as if petrified in the midst of his gesticulations, and stood with his arm out like a semaphore.

The drive home restored him somewhat, but he was still full of his surprise when he rejoined Agatha, his wife, and Erskine in the drawing-room at the Beeches. The moment he entered, he said without preface, "She has gone off with Trefusis."

Erskine, who had been reading, started up, clutching his book as if about to hurl it at someone, and cried, "Was he at the train?"

"Yes, and has gone to town by it."

"Then," said Erskine, flinging the book violently on the floor, "he is a scoundrel and a liar."

"What is the matter?" said Agatha rising, whilst Jane stared open-mouthed at him.

"I beg your pardon, Miss Wylie, I forgot you. He pledged me his honor that he would not go by that train. I will." He hurried from the room. Sir Charles rushed after him, and overtook him at the foot of the stairs.

"Where are you going? What do you want to do?"

"I will follow the train and catch it at the next station. I can do it on my bicycle."

"Nonsense! you're mad. They have thirty-five minutes start; and the train travels forty-five miles an hour."

Erskine sat down on the stairs and gazed blankly at the opposite wall.

"You must have mistaken him," said Sir Charles. "He told me to tell you that he had not forgotten his promise, and that you may rely on him."

"What is the matter?" said Agatha, coming down, followed by Lady Brandon.

"Miss Wylie," said Erskine, springing up, "he gave me his word that he would not go by that train when I told him Miss Lindsay was going by it. He has broken his word and seized the opportunity I was mad and credulous enough to tell him of. If I had been in your place, Brandon, I would have strangled him or thrown him under the wheels sooner than let him go. He has shown himself in this as in everything else, a cheat, a conspirator, a man of crooked ways, shifts, tricks, lying sophistries, heartless selfishness, cruel cynicism--" He stopped to catch his breath, and Sir Charles interposed a remonstrance.

"You are exciting yourself about nothing, Chester. They are in a Pullman, with her maid and plenty of people; and she expressly gave him leave to go with her. He asked her the question flatly before my face, and I must say I thought it a strange thing for her to consent to. However, she did consent, and of course I was not in a position to prevent him from going to London if he pleased. Don't let us have a scene, old man. It can't be helped."

"I am very sorry," said Erskine, hanging his head. "I did not mean to make a scene. I beg your pardon."

He went away to his room without another word. Sir Charles followed and attempted to console him, but Erskine caught his hand, and asked to be left to himself. So Sir Charles returned to the drawing-room, where his wife, at a loss for once, hardly ventured to remark that she had never heard of such a thing in her life.

Agatha kept silence. She had long ago come unconsciously to the conclusion that Trefusis and she were the only members of the party at the Beeches who had much common-sense, and this made her slow to believe that he could be in the wrong and Erskine in the right in any misunderstanding between them. She had a slovenly way of summing up as "asses" people whose habits of thought differed from hers. Of all varieties of man, the minor poet realized her conception of the human ass most completely, and Erskine, though a very nice fellow indeed, thoroughly good and gentlemanly, in her opinion, was yet a minor poet, and therefore a pronounced ass. Trefusis, on the contrary, was the last man of her acquaintance whom she would have thought of as a very nice fellow or a virtuous gentleman; but he was not an a~s, although he was obstinate in his Socialistic fads. She had indeed suspected him of weakness almost asinine with respect to Gertrude, but then all men were asses in their dealings with women, and since he had transferred his weakness to her own account it no longer seemed to need justification. And now, as her concern for Erskine, whom she pitied, wore off, she began to resent Trefusis's journey with Gertrude as an attack on her recently acquired monopoly of him. There was an air of aristocratic pride about Gertrude which Agatha had formerly envied, and which she still feared Trefusis might mistake for an index of dignity and refinement. Agatha did not believe that her resentment was the common feeling called jealousy, for she still deemed herself unique, but it gave her a

sense of meanness that did not improve her spirits.

The dinner was dull. Lady Brandon spoke in an undertone, as if someone lay dead in the next room. Erskine was depressed by the consciousness of having lost his head and acted foolishly in the afternoon. Sir Charles did not pretend to ignore the suspense they were all in pending intelligence of the journey to London; he ate and drank and said nothing. Agatha, disgusted with herself and with Gertrude, and undecided whether to be disgusted with Trefusis or to trust him affectionately, followed the example of her host. After dinner she accompanied him in a series of songs by Schubert. This proved an aggravation instead of a relief. Sir Charles, excelling in the expression of melancholy, preferred songs of that character; and as his musical ideas, like those of most Englishmen, were founded on what he had heard in church in his childhood, his style was oppressively monotonous. Agatha took the first excuse that presented itself to leave the piano. Sir Charles felt that his performance had been a failure, and remarked, after a cough or two, that he had caught a touch of cold returning from the station. Erskine sat on a sofa with his head drooping, and his palms joined and hanging downward between his knees. Agatha stood at the window, looking at the late summer afterglow. Jane yawned, and presently broke the silence.

"You look exactly as you used at school, Agatha. I could almost fancy us back again in Number Six."

Agatha shook her head.

"Do I ever look like that--like myself, as I used to be?"

"Never," said Agatha emphatically, turning and surveying the figure of which Miss Carpenter had been the unripe antecedent.

"But why?" said Jane querulously. "I don't see why I shouldn't. I am not so changed."

"You have become an exceedingly fine woman, Jane," said Agatha gravely, and then, without knowing why, turned her attentive gaze upon Sir Charles, who bore it uneasily, and left the room. A minute later he returned with two buff envelopes in his hand.

"A telegram for you, Miss Wylie, and one for Chester." Erskine started up, white with vague fears. Agatha's color went, and came again with increased richness as she read:

"I have arrived safe and ridiculously happy. Read a thousand things between the lines. I will write tomorrow. Good night."

"You may read it," said Agatha, handing it to Jane.

"Very pretty," said Jane. "A shilling's worth of attention--exactly twenty words! He may well call himself an economist."

Suddenly a crowing laugh from Erskine caused them to turn and stare at him. "What nonsense!" he said, blushing. "What a fellow he is! I don't attach the slightest importance to this."

Agatha took a corner of his telegram and pulled it gently.

"No, no," he said, holding it tightly. "It is too absurd. I don't think I ought--"

Agatha gave a decisive pull, and read the message aloud. It was from Trefusis, thus:

"I forgive your thoughts since Brandon's return. Write her to-night, and follow your letter to receive an

affirmative answer in person. I promised that you might rely on me. She loves you."

"I never heard of such a thing in my life," said Jane. "Never!"

"He is certainly a most unaccountable man," said Sir Charles.

"I am glad, for my own sake, that he is not so black as he is painted," said Agatha. "You may believe every word of it, Mr. Erskine. Be sure to do as he tells you. He is quite certain to be right."

"Pooh!" said Erskine, crumpling the telegram and thrusting it into his pocket as if it were not worth a second thought. Presently he slipped away, and did not reappear. When they were about to retire, Sir Charles asked a servant where he was.

"In the library, Sir Charles; writing."

They looked significantly at one another and went to bed without disturbing him.