

**WALTER
BESANT**

THE REVOLT
OF MAN

Walter Besant
The Revolt of Man

«Public Domain»

Besant W.

The Revolt of Man / W. Besant — «Public Domain»,

Содержание

| | |
|-----------------------------------|----|
| PREFACE | 5 |
| CHAPTER I | 6 |
| CHAPTER II | 14 |
| CHAPTER III | 20 |
| CHAPTER IV | 25 |
| Конец ознакомительного фрагмента. | 28 |

Walter Besant

The Revolt of Man

PREFACE

IT is now fourteen years since this book appeared anonymously. At first the story stood cold and shivering, disregarded by the world. Six weeks, however, after its production a highly appreciative review in one of the most important journals caused people to inquire after it. Since then it has gone through many editions.

Every one who has written stories knows the unaccountable difference there is between the ease and delight of writing some and the difficulties and troubles which attend the writing of others. The *Revolt of Man* was written during a certain summer holiday; day by day chapter by chapter, was read out, as it was finished, to two ladies. It is needless to say that their comments on the progress of events were often most valuable. Above all I may now acknowledge their advice as to the conclusion of the story. At first it ended in a real battle. 'Let the *Revolt of Man* be bloodless,' said my advisers. It *is* bloodless. The advice was excellent, and I followed it; and now, after fourteen years, I take this opportunity of thanking them.

W. B.

United University Club;

December 1896.

CHAPTER I IN PARK LANE

BREAKFAST was laid for two in the smallest room – a jewel of a room – of perhaps the largest house in Park Lane. It was already half-past ten, but as yet there was only one occupant of the room, an elderly lady of striking appearance. Her face, a long oval face, was wrinkled and crow-footed in a thousand lines; her capacious forehead was contracted as if with thought; her white eyebrows were thick and firmly drawn; her deep-set eyes were curiously keen and bright; her features were strongly marked, – it was a handsome face which could never, even in early girlhood, have been a pretty face; her abundant hair was of a rich creamy white, the kind of white which in age compensates its owner for the years of her youth when it was inclined to redness; her mouth was full, the lower lip slightly projecting, as is often found with those who speak much and in large rooms; her fingers were restless; her figure was withered by time. When she laid aside the paper she had been reading, and walked across the room to the open window, you might have noticed how frail and thin she seemed, yet how firmly she walked and stood.

This wrinkled face, this frail form, belonged to the foremost intellect of England; the lady was none other than Dorothy Ingleby, Professor of Ancient and Modern History in the University of Cambridge.

It would be difficult, without going into great detail, and telling many anecdotes, to account for her great reputation and the weight of her authority. She had written little; her lectures were certainly not popular with undergraduates, partly because undergraduates will never attend Professors' lectures, and partly because the University would not allow her to lecture at all on the history of the past, and the story of the present was certainly neither interesting nor enlivening.

As girls at school, everybody had learned about the Great Transition, and the way in which the transfer of Power, which marked the last and greatest step of civilisation, had been brought about: the gradual substitution of women for men in the great offices; the spread of the new religion; the abolition of the monarchy; the introduction of pure theocracy, in which the ideal Perfect Woman took the place of a personal sovereign; the wise measures by which man's rough and rude strength was disciplined into obedience, – all these things were mere commonplaces of education. Even men, who learned little enough, were taught that in the old days strength was regarded more than mind, while the father actually ruled in the place which should have been occupied by the mother; these things belonged to constitutional history – nobody cared much about them; while, on the other hand, they would have liked to know – the more curious among them – what was the kind of world which existed before the development of culture gave the reins to the higher sex; and it was well known that the only person at all capable of presenting a faithful restoration of the old world was Professor Ingleby.

Again, there was a mystery about her: although in holy orders, she had always refused to preach; it was whispered that she was not orthodox. She had been twice called upon to sign the hundred and forty-four Articles, a request with which, on both occasions, she cheerfully complied, to the discomfiture of her enemies. Yet her silence in matters of religion provoked curiosity and surmise – a grave, woman, a woman with all the learning of the University Library in her head, a woman who, alone among women, held her tongue, and who, when she did speak, spoke slowly, and weighed her words, and seemed to have written out her conversation beforehand, so pointed and polished it was. In religion and politics, however, the Professor generally maintained silence absolute. Now, if a woman is always silent on those subjects upon which other women talk oftenest and feel most deeply, it is not wonderful if she becomes suspected of heterodoxy. It was known positively, and she had publicly declared, that she wished the introduction – she once said, mysteriously, the return – of a more exact and scientific training than could be gained from the political, social, and moral economy which

formed the sole studies of Cambridge. Now, the Heads of Houses, the other professors, the college lecturers, and the fellows, all held the orthodox doctrine that there is no other learning requisite or desirable than that contained in the aforesaid subjects. For these, they maintained, embrace all the branches of study which are concerned with the conduct of life.

The Professor threw aside the *Gazette*, which contained as full a statement as was permitted of last night's debate, with an angry gesture, and walked to the open window.

'Another defeat!' she murmured. 'Poor Constance! This time, I suppose, they must resign. These continual changes of ministry bring contempt as well as disaster upon the country. Six months ago, all the Talents! Three months ago, all the Beauties! Now, all the First-classes! And what a mess – what a mess – they make between them! Why do they not come to me and make me lecture on ancient history, and learn how affairs were conducted a hundred years ago, when man was in his own place, and' – here she laughed and looked around her with a certain suspicion – 'and woman was in hers?'

Then she turned her eyes out to the park below her. It was a most charming morning in June; the trees were at their freshest and their most beautiful: the flowers were at their brightest, with great masses of rhododendron, purple lilac, and the golden rain of the laburnum. The Row was well filled: young men were there, riding bravely and gallantly with their sisters, their mothers, or their wives; girls and ladies were taking their morning canter before the official day began; and along the gravel-walks girls were hastening quickly to their offices or their lecture-rooms; older ladies sat in the shade, talking politics; idlers of both sexes were strolling and sitting, watching the horses or talking to each other.

'Youth and hope!' murmured the Professor. 'Every lad hopes for a young wife; every girl trusts that success will come to her while she is still young enough to be loved. Age looks on with her young husband at her side, and prides herself in having no illusions left. Poor creatures! You destroyed love – love the consoler, love the leveller – when you, who were born to receive, undertook to give. Blind! blind!'

She turned from the window and began to examine the pictures hanging on the walls. These consisted entirely of small portraits copied from larger pictures. They were arranged in chronological order, and were in fact family portraits. The older pictures were mostly the heads of men, taken in the fall of life, gray-bearded, with strong, steadfast eyes, and the look of authority. Among them were portraits of ladies, chiefly taken in the first fresh bloom of youth.

'They knew,' said the Professor, 'how to paint a face in those days.'

Among the modern pictures a very remarkable change was apparent. The men were painted in early manhood, the women at a more mature age; the style was altered for the worse, a gaudy conventional mannerism prevailed; there was weakness in the drawing and a blind following in the colour: as for the details, they were in some cases neglected altogether, and in others elaborated so as to swamp and destroy the subject of the picture. The faces of the men were remarkable for a self-conscious beauty of the lower type: there was little intellectual expression; the hair was always curly, and while some showed a bull-like repose of strength, others wore an expression of meek and gentle submissiveness. As for the women, they were represented with all the emblems of authority – tables, thrones, papers, deeds, and pens.

'As if,' said the Professor, 'the peeresses' right divine to rule was in their hearts! But, in these days, the painter's art is a rule of thumb.'

There was a small stand full of books, chiefly of a lighter kind, prettily bound and profusely gilt. Some were novels, with such titles as *The Hero of the Cricket Field*, *The Long Jump*, *The Silver Racket*, and so on. Some were apparently poems, among them being Lady Longspin's *Vision of the Perfect Knight*, with a frontispiece, showing the Last Lap of the Seven-Mile Race; Julia Durdle's poems of the *Young Man's Crown of Glory*, and Aunt Agatha's *Songs for Girls at School or College*. There were others of a miscellaneous character, such as *Guide to the Young Politician*, being a series of letters to a peeress at Oxford; *Meditations in the University Church*; *Hymns for Men*; the *Sacrifice of the*

Faithful Heart; The Womanhood of Heaven; or, the Light and Hope of Men, with many others whose title proclaimed the nature of their contents. The appearance of the books, however, did not seem to show that they were much read.

‘I should have thought,’ said the Professor, ‘that Constance would have turned all this rubbish out of her breakfast-room. After all, though, what could she put in its place here?’

As the clock struck eleven, the door opened, and the young lady whom the Professor spoke of as Constance appeared.

She was a girl of twenty, singularly beautiful, her face was one of those very rare faces which seem as if nature, after working steadily in one mould for a good many generations, has at last succeeded in perfecting her idea. Most of our faces, somehow, look as if the mould had not quite reached the conception of the sculptor. Unfortunately, while such faces as that of Constance, Countess of Carlyon, are rare, they are seldom reproduced in children. Nature, in fact, smashes her mould when it is quite perfect, and begins again upon another. The hair was of that best and rarest brown, in which there is a touch of gold when the sun shines upon it. Her eyes were of a dark, deep blue; her face was a beautiful and delicate oval; her chin was pointed; her cheek perhaps a little too pale, and rather thin; and there was a broad edging of black under her eyes, which spoke of fatigue, anxiety, or disappointment. But she smiled when she saw her guest.

‘Good morning, Professor,’ she said, kissing the wrinkled cheek. ‘It was good indeed of you to come. I only heard you were in town last night.’

‘You are well this morning, Constance?’ asked the Professor.

‘Oh, yes!’ replied the girl wearily. ‘I am well enough. Let us have breakfast. I have been at work since eight with my secretary. You know that we resign to-day.’

‘I gathered so much,’ said the Professor, ‘from the rag they call the *Official Gazette*. They do not report fully, of course, but it is clear that you had an exciting debate, and that you were defeated.’

The Countess sighed. Then she reddened and clenched her hands.

‘I cannot bear to think of it,’ she cried. ‘We had a *disgraceful* night. I shall never forget it – or forgive it. It was not a debate at all; it was the exchange of unrestrained insults, rude personalities, humiliating recrimination.’

‘Take some breakfast first, my dear,’ said the Professor, ‘and then you shall tell me as much as you please.’

Most of the breakfast was eaten by the Professor herself. Long before she had finished, Constance sprang from the table and began to pace the room in uncontrollable agitation.

‘It is hard – oh! it is very hard – to preserve even common dignity, when such attacks are made. One noble peeress taunted me with my youth. It is two years since I came of age – I am twenty, – but never mind that. Another threw in my teeth my – my – my cousin Chester,’ – she blushed violently; ‘to think that the British House of Peeresses should have fallen so low! Another charged me with trying to be thought the loveliest woman in London; can we even listen to such things without shame? And the Duchesse de la Vieille Roche’ – here she laughed bitterly – ‘actually had the audacity to attack my Political Economy – mine; and I was Senior in the Tripos! When they were tired of abusing me, they began upon each other. No reporters were present. The Chancellor, poor lady! tried in vain to maintain order; the scene – with the whole House, as it seemed, screeching, crying, demanding to be heard, throwing accusations, innuendoes, insinuations, at each other – made one inclined to ask if this was really the House of Peeresses, the Parliament of Great Britain, the place where one would expect to find the noblest representatives in the whole world of culture and gentleness.’

Constance paused, exhausted but not satisfied. She had a good deal more to say, but for the moment she stood by the window, with flashing eyes and trembling lips.

‘The last mixed Parliament,’ said the Professor, thoughtfully – ‘that in which the few men who were members seceded in a body – presented similar characteristics. The abuse of the liberty of speech led to the abolition of the Lower House. *Absit omen!*’

‘Thank Heaven,’ replied the Countess, ‘that it was abolished! Since then we have had – at least we have generally had – decorum and dignity of debate.’

‘Until last night, dear Constance, and a few similar last nights. Take care.’

‘They cannot abolish us,’ said Constance, ‘because they would have nothing to fall back upon.’

The Professor coughed dryly, and took another piece of toast.

The Countess threw herself into a chair.

‘At least,’ she said, ‘we have changed mob-government for divine right.’

‘Ye – yes.’ The Professor leaned back in her chair. ‘James II., in the old time, said much the same thing; yet they abolished him. To be sure, in his days, divine right went through the male line.’

‘Men said so,’ said the Countess, ‘to serve their selfish ends. How can any line be continued except through the mother? Absurd!’

Then there was silence for a little, the Professor calmly eating an egg, and the Home Secretary playing with her tea-spoon.

‘We hardly expected success,’ she continued, after a while; ‘it was only in the desperate condition of the Party that the Cabinet gave way to my proposal. Yet I did hope that the nature of the Bill would have awakened the sympathy of a House which has brothers, fathers, nephews, and male relations of all kinds, and does not consist entirely of orphaned only daughters.’

‘That is bitter, Constance,’ sighed the Professor. ‘I hope you did not begin by saying so.’

‘No, I did not. I explained that we were about to ask for a Commission into the general condition of the men of this country. I set forth, in mild and conciliating language, a few of my facts. You know them all; I learned them from you. I showed that the whole of the educational endowments of this country have been seized upon for the advantage of women. I suggested that a small proportion might be diverted for the assistance of men. Married men with property, I showed, have no protection from the prodigality of their wives. I pointed out that the law of evidence, as regards violence towards wives, presses heavily on the man. I showed that single men’s wages are barely sufficient to purchase necessary clothing. I complained of the long hours during which men have to toil in solitude or in silence, of the many cases in which they have to do housework and attend to the babies, as well as do their long day’s work. And I ventured to hint at the onerous nature of the Married Mother’s Tax – that five per cent. on all men’s earnings.’

‘My dear Constance,’ interrupted the Professor, ‘was it judicious to show your whole hand at once? Surely step by step would have been safer.’

‘Perhaps. I ventured next to call the serious attention of the House to the grave discontent among the younger women of the middle classes who, by reason of the crowded state of the professions, are unable to think of marriage, as a rule, before forty, and often have to wait later. This was received with cold disapprobation: the House is always touchy on the subject of marriage. But when I went on to hint that there was danger to the State in the reluctance with which the young men entered the married state under these conditions, there was such a clamour that I sat down.’

The Professor nodded.

‘Just what one would have expected. Talk the conventional commonplace, and the House will listen; tell the truth, and the House will rise with one consent and shriek you down. Poor child! what did you expect?’

‘A dozen rose together. Lady Cloistertown caught the Chancellor’s eye. I suppose you know her extraordinary command of commonplaces. She asked whether the House was prepared to place man on an equality with woman; she supposed we should like to see him sitting with ourselves, voting with the rudeness of his intellect, even speaking with the bluntness of the masculine manner. And then she burst into a scream. “Irreligion,” she cried, “was rampant; was this a moment for bringing forward such a motion? Not only women, but even men, had begun to doubt the Perfect Woman; the rule of the higher intellect was threatened; the new civilisation was tottering; we might even expect an attempt to bring about a return of the reign of brute force-“ Heavens! and that was only a beginning.

Then followed the weary platitudes that we know so well. Can no one place truth before us in words of freshness?

‘If you insist upon every kind of truth being naked,’ said the Professor, ‘you ought not to grumble if her limbs sometimes look unlovely.’

‘Then let us for a while agree to accept truth in silence.’

‘I would we could!’ echoed the elder lady. ‘I know the weariness of the commonplace. When we are every year invaded by gentlemen at Commemoration, I have to go through the same dreary performance. The phrases about the higher intellect, the sex which is created to carry on the thought, while the other executes the work of this world; the likeness and yet unlikeness between us due to that beautiful arrangement of nature; the extraordinary success we are making of our power; the loveliness of the new religion, revealed bit by bit, to one woman after another, until we were able to reach unto the conception, the vision, the realisation of the Perfect Woman – ’

‘Professor,’ interrupted Constance, laying her hand on her friend’s shoulder, ‘do not talk so. Strengthen my faith; do not destroy what is left of religion by a sneer. Alas! everything seems falling away; nothing satisfies; there is no support anywhere, nor any hope. I suppose I am not strong enough for my work; at least I have failed. The whole country is crying out with discontent. The Lancashire women cannot sell their husband’s work. I hear that they are taking to drink. Wife-beating has broken out again in the Potteries. It is reported that secret associations are again beginning to be formed among the men; and then there are these county magistrates with their unjust sentences. A man at Leicester has been sentenced to penal servitude for twenty years because his wife says he swore at her and threatened her. I wrote for information; the magistrate says she thought an example was needed. And, innocent or guilty, the husband is not allowed to cross-examine his wife. Then look at the recent case at Cambridge.’

‘Yes,’ said the Professor; ‘that is bad indeed.’

‘The husband – a man of hitherto blameless character, – young, well-born, handsome, good at his trade, and with some pretensions to the higher culture – sentenced to penal servitude for life for striking his wife, one of the senior fellows of Trinity!’

The Professor’s eyes flashed.

‘As you are going out of office to-day, my Lady Home Secretary, and can do no more justice for a while, I will tell you the truth of that case. The wife was tired of her husband. It was a most unhappy match. She wanted to marry another man, so she trumped up the charge; that is the disgraceful truth. No fishwife of Billingsgate could have lied more impudently. He, in accordance with our, no doubt most just and well-intentioned, laws, becomes a convict for the rest of his days; she marries again. Everybody knows the truth, but nobody ventures to state it. She banged her own arm black and blue herself with the poker, and showed it in open court as the effects of his violence. As for her husband, I visited him in prison. He was calm and collected. He says that he is glad there are no children to lament his disgrace, that prison life is preferable to living any longer with such a woman, and that, on the whole, death is better than life when an innocent man can be so treated in a civilised country.’

‘Poor man!’ groaned Constance. ‘Stay; I have a few hours yet of power. His name? she sprang to her desk.’

‘John Phillips – no; Phillips is the wife’s name. I forgot that the sentence itself carries divorce with it. His bachelor name was Coryton.’

Constance wrote rapidly.

‘John Coryton. He shall be released. A free pardon from the Home Secretary cannot be appealed against. He is free.’

She sprang from the table and rang the bell. Her private secretary appeared.

‘This despatch to be forwarded at once,’ she said. ‘Not a moment’s delay.’

‘Constance!’ The Professor seized her hand. ‘You will have the thanks of every woman who knows the truth. All those who do not will curse the weakness of the Home Secretary.’

‘I care not,’ she said. ‘I have done one just action in my short term of office. I – who looked to do so many good and just actions!’

‘It is difficult, more difficult than one ever suspects, for a Minister to do good. Alas! my dear, John Coryton’s case is only one of many.’

‘I know,’ replied Constance sighing. ‘Yet what can I do! Our greatest enemies are – ourselves. Oh, Professor! when I think of the men working at their looms from morning until night, cooking the dinners and looking after the children, while the women sit about the village pump or in their clubs, to talk unmeaning politics – Tell me, logician, why our theories are all so logical, and our practice is so bad?’

‘Everything,’ said the Professor, ‘in our system is rigorously logical and just. If it could not be proved scientifically – if it were not absolutely certain – the system could never be accepted by the exact intellect of cultivated women. Have not Oxford and Cambridge proclaimed this from a hundred pulpits and in a thousand text-books? My dear Lady Carlyon, you yourself proved it when you took your degree in the most brilliant essay ever written.’

The Countess winced.

‘Must we, then,’ she asked, ‘cease to believe in logic?’

‘Nay,’ replied Professor Ingleby; ‘I said not that. But every conclusion depends upon the minor premiss. That, dear Countess, in the case of our system, appears to me a little uncertain.’

‘But where is the uncertainty? Surely you will allow me, my dear Professor,’ – Constance smiled, – ‘although I am only a graduate of two years’ standing, to know enough logic to examine a syllogism?’

‘Surely, Constance. My dear, I do not presume to doubt your reasoning powers. It was only an expression of perplexity. We are so right, and things go so wrong.’

Both ladies were silent for a few moments, and Constance sighed.

‘For instance,’ the Professor went on, ‘we were logically right when we suppressed the Sovereignty. In a perfect State, the head must also be perfect. Whom, then, could we acknowledge as head but the Perfect Woman? So we became a pure theocracy. Then, again, we were right when we abolished the Lower House; for in a perfect State, the best rulers must be those who are well-born, well-educated, and well-bred. All this requires no demonstration. Yet – ’

But the Countess shook her head impatiently, and sprang to her feet.

‘Enough, Professor! I am tired of debates and the battles of phrase. The House may get on without me. And I will inquire no more, even of you, Professor, into the foundations of faith, constitution, and the rest of it. I am brave, when I rise in my place, about the unalterable principles of religious and political economy: brave words do not mean brave heart. Like so many who are outspoken, which I cannot be – at least yet – my faith is sapped, I doubt.’

‘She who doubts,’ said the Professor, ‘is perhaps near the truth.’

‘Nay; for I shall cease to investigate; I shall go down to the country and talk with my tenants.’

‘Do you learn much,’ asked the Professor, ‘of your country tenants?’

The Countess laughed.

‘I teach a great deal, at least,’ she replied. ‘Three times a-week I lecture the women on constitutional law, and twice on the best management of husbands, sons, and farm-labourers, and so forth.’

‘And you are so much occupied in teaching that you never learn? That is a great pity, Constance. Do you observe?’

‘I suppose I do. Why, Professor?’

‘Old habits linger longest in country places. What do you find to remark upon, most of all?’

‘The strange and unnatural deference,’ replied the girl, with a blush of shame, ‘paid by country women to the men. Yes, Professor, after all our teaching, and in spite of all our laws, in the country districts the old illogical supremacy of brute force still obtains, thinly disguised.’

‘My dear, who manages the farm?’

‘Why,’ said the Countess, ‘the wives are supposed to manage, but their husbands really have the whole management in their own hands.’

‘Who drives the cattle, sows the seed, reaps, ploughs?’

‘The husband, of course. It is his duty.’

‘It is,’ said the Professor. ‘Child, a few generations ago he did all this as the acknowledged head of the house. *He does not forget.*’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I mean, my dear Countess, that things are never so near their end as when they appear the firmest. Now, if you please, tell me something more of this great speech of yours, which so roused the wrath of assembled and hereditary wisdom. What did you intend to say?’

Constance began, in a quick, agitated way, nervously pacing the room, to run through the main points of the speech which she had prepared but had not been allowed to deliver. It was a plea for the intellectual elevation of the other sex. She pointed out that, although there was legislation in plenty for their subjection, – although the greatest care was taken to prevent men from working together, conspiring, and meeting, so that most work was done in solitude or at home – and when that was not the case, a woman was always present to enforce silence – although laws had been passed to stamp out violence, and to direct the use of brute strength into useful channels, – little or nothing had been done, even by private enterprise, for the education of men. She showed that the prisons were crammed with cases of young men who had ‘broken out’; that very soon they would have no more room to hold their prisoners; that the impatience of men under the severe restrictions of the law was growing greater every day, and more dangerous to order; and that, unless some remedy were found, she trembled for the consequences.

Here the Professor raised her eyes, and laughed gently.

The Countess went on with her speech. ‘I am not advocating, before this august assembly, the adoption of unconstitutional and revolutionary measures, – I claim only for men such an education of their reasoning faculties as will make them reasoning creatures. I would teach them something of what we ourselves learn, so that they may reason as we reason, and obey the law because they cannot but own that the law is just. I know that we must first encourage the young men to follow a healthy instinct which bids them be strong; yet there is more in life for a man to do than to work, to dig, to carry out orders, to be a good athlete, an obedient husband, and a conscientious father.’

Here the Professor laughed again.

‘Why do you laugh, Professor?’

‘Because, my dear, you are already in the way that leads to understanding.’

‘You speak in parables.’

‘You are yet in twilight, dear Constance.’ The Professor rose and laid her hand on the young Countess’s arm. ‘Child, your generous heart has divined what your logic would have made it impossible for you to perceive – a great truth, perhaps the greatest of truths. Go on.’

‘Have I? The House would not allow me to say it, then; my own friends deserted me; a vote of want of confidence was hurriedly passed by a majority of 235 to 22; and’ – the young Minister laughed bitterly – ‘there is an end of my great schemes.’

‘For a time – yes,’ said the Professor. ‘But, Constance, there is a greater work before you than you suspect or dream. Greatest of the women of all time, my child, shall you be – if what I hope may be brought to pass. Let not this little disappointment of an hour vex you any longer. Go – gain strength in the country – meditate – and read.’

‘Oh, read!’ cried the girl, impatiently; ‘I am sick of reading.’

‘Read,’ continued the Professor; ‘read – with closed doors – the *forbidden books*. They stand in your own castle, locked up in cases; they have not been destroyed because they are not known to exist. Read Shakespeare.’

Events which followed prevented the Countess from undertaking this course of study; for she remained in town. From time to time the Professor was wont to startle her by reading or quoting some passage which appealed to her imagination as nothing in modern poetry seemed able to do. She knew that the passage came from one of the old books which had been put away, locked up, or destroyed. It was generally a passage of audacity, clothing a revolutionary sentiment in words which burned themselves into her brain, and seemed alive. She never forgot these words, but she dared not repeat them. And she knew herself that the very possession of the sentiments, the knowledge that they existed, made her 'dangerous,' as her enemies called her; for most of them were on the attributes of man.

The conversation was interrupted by a servant, who brought the Countess a note.

'How very imprudent!' cried Constance, reddening with vexation. 'Why will the boy do these wild things? Help me, Professor. My cousin, Lord Chester, wants to see me, and is coming, *by himself*, to my house – here – immediately.'

'Surely I am sufficient guardian of the proprieties, Constance. We will say, if you like, that the boy came to see his old tutor. Let him come, and, unless he has anything for your ear alone, I can be present.'

'Heaven knows what he has to say,' his cousin sighed. 'Always some fresh escapade, some kicking over the limits of convention.' She was standing at the window, and looked out. 'And here he comes, riding along Park Lane as if it were an open common.'

CHAPTER II

THE EARL OF CHESTER

‘EDWARD!’ cried Constance, giving her cousin her hand, ‘is this prudent? You ride down Park Lane as if you were riding after hounds, your unhappy attendant – poor girl! – trying in vain to keep up with you; and then you descend openly, and in the eyes of all, alone, at my door – the door of your unmarried cousin. Consider me, my dear Edward, if you are careless about your own reputation. Do you think I have no enemies? Do you think young Lord Chester can go anywhere without being seen and reported? Do you think all women have kind hearts and pleasant tongues?’

The young man laughed, but a little bitterly.

‘My reputation, Constance, may just as well be lost as kept. What do I care for my reputation?’

At these terrible words Constance looked at him in alarm.

He was worth looking at, if only as a model, being six feet high, two-and-twenty years of age, strongly built, with crisp, curly brown hair, the shoulders of a Hercules, and the face of an Apollo. But to-day his face was clouded, and as he spoke he clenched his fist.

‘What has happened now, Edward?’ asked his cousin. ‘Anything important? The new groom?’

‘The new groom has a seat like a sack, is afraid to gallop, and can’t jump. As for her nerve, she’s got none. My stable-boy Jack would be worth ten of her. But if a man cannot be allowed – for the sake of his precious reputation – to ride without a girl trailing at his heels, why, I suppose there is no more to be said. No, Constance; it is worse than the new groom.’

‘Edward, you are too masterful,’ said his cousin, gravely. ‘One cannot, even if he be Earl of Chester, fly in the face of all the *convenances*. Rules are made to protect the weak for their own sake; the strong obey them for the sake of the weak. You are strong; be therefore considerate. Suppose all young men were allowed to run about alone?’

The Professor shook her head gravely.

‘It would be a return,’ she said, ‘to the practice of the ancients.’

‘The barbarous practice of the ancients,’ added Constance.

‘The grooms might at least be taught how to ride,’ grumbled the young man.

‘But about this disaster, Edward; is it the postponement of a cricket match, the failure of a tennis game –’

‘Constance,’ he interrupted, ‘I should have thought you capable of believing that I should not worry you at such a moment with trifles. I have got the most serious news for you – things for which I want your help and your sympathy.’

Constance turned pale. What could he have to tell her except one thing – the one thing which she had been dreading for two or three years?

Edward, Earl of Chester in his own right, held his title by a tenure unique in the peerage. For four generations the Countesses of Chester had borne their husbands one child only, and that a son; for four generations the Earls of Chester had married ladies of good family, certainly, but of lower rank, so that the title remained. He represented, by lineal descent through the male line, the ancient Royal House; and though there were not wanting ladies descended through the female line from old Kings of England, by this extraordinary accident he possessed the old royal descent, which was more coveted than any other in the long lists of the Red Book. It was objected that its honours were half shorn by being transmitted through so many males; but there were plenty to whisper that, according to ancient custom, the young Earl would be none other than the King of England. So long a line of only children could not but result in careful nursing of the estate, which was held in trust and ward by one Countess after another, until now it was one of the greatest in the country; and though there were a few peeresses whose acres exceeded those of the Earl of Chester, there was no young man in

the matrimonial market to be compared with him. His hand was at the disposal – subject, of course, to his own agreement, which was taken for granted – of the Chancellor, who, up to the present time, had made no sign.

Young, handsome, the holder of a splendid title, the owner of a splendid rent-roll, said to be of amiable disposition, known to be proud of his descent – could there be a husband more desirable? Was it to be wondered at if every unmarried woman in a certain rank of life, whether maid or widow, dreamed of marrying the Earl of Chester, and made pictures in her own mind of herself as the Countess, sitting in the House, taking precedence as Première, after the Duchesses, holding office, ruling departments, making eloquent speeches, followed and reported by the society papers, giving great entertainments, actually being and doing what other women can only envy and sigh for?

It was whispered that Lady Carlyon would ask her cousin's hand; it was also whispered that the Chancellor (now a permanent officer of the State) would never grant her request on account of her politics; it was also whispered that a certain widow, advanced in years, of the highest rank, had been observed to pay particular attention to the young Earl in society and in the field. This report, however, was received with caution, and was not generally believed.

'Serious news!' Constance for a moment looked very pale. The Professor glanced at her with concern and even pity. 'Serious news!' She was going to add, 'Who is it?' but stopped in time. 'What is it?' she said instead.

'You have not yet heard, then,' the Earl replied, 'of the great honour done to me and to my house?'

Constance shook her head. She knew now that her worst fears were going to be realised.

'Tell me quickly, Edward.'

'No less a person than her Grace the Duchess of Dunstanburgh has offered me, through the Chancellor, the support and honour of her hand.'

Constance started. This was the worst, indeed. The Duchess of Dunstanburgh! Sixty-five years of age; already thrice a widow; the Duchess of Dunstanburgh! She could not speak.

'Have you nothing to say, Constance?' asked the young man. 'Do you not envy me my happy lot? My bride is not young to be sure, but she is a Duchess; the old Earldom will be lost in the new Duchy. She has buried three husbands already; one may look forward with joy to lying beside them in her gorgeous mausoleum. Her country house is finer than mine, but it is not so old. She is of rank so exalted that one need not inquire into her temper, which is said to be evil; nor into the little faults, such as jealousy, suspicion, meanness, greed, and avarice, with which the wicked world credits her.'

'Edward! Edward!' cried his cousin.

'Then, again, one's religion will be so beautifully brought into play. We are required to obey – that is the first thing taught in the Church catechism; all women are set in authority over us. I must therefore obey the Chancellor.'

His hearers were silent.

'Again, what says the text? – "It is man's chiefest honour to be chosen: his highest duty to give, wherever bidden, his love, his devotion, and his loyalty."'

The Professor nodded her head gravely.

'What martyrs of religion would ask for a more noble opportunity,' he asked, 'than to marry this old woman?'

'Edward!' Constance could only warn. She sees no way to advise. 'Do not scoff.'

'Let us face the position,' said the Professor. 'The Chancellor has gone through the form of asking your consent to this marriage. When?'

'Last night.'

'And when do you see her?'

'I am to see her ladyship this very morning.'

'To inform her of your acquiescence. Yes; it is the usual form. The time is very short.'

‘My acquiescence?’ asked the Earl. ‘We shall see about that presently.’

‘Patience, my lord!’ The Professor was thinking what to advise for the best. ‘Patience! Let us have no sudden and violent resolves. We may get time. Ay – time will be our best friend. Remember that the Chancellor *must* be obeyed. She may, for the sake of courtesy, go through the form of proposing a suitable alliance for your consideration, but her proposition is her order, which you must obey. Otherwise it is contempt of court, and the penalty –’

‘I know it,’ said the Earl, ‘already. It is imprisonment.’

‘Such contempt would be punished by imprisonment for life. Imprisonment, hopeless.’

‘Nay,’ he replied. ‘Not hopeless, because one could always hope in the power of friends. Have I not Constance? And then, you see, Professor, I am two-and-twenty, while the Chancellor and the Duchess are both sixty-five. Perhaps they may join the majority.’

The Professor shook her head. Even to speak of the age of so great a lady, even to hint at her death as an event likely to happen soon, was an outrage against propriety – which is religion.

‘My determination is this,’ he went on, ‘whatever the consequence, I will never marry the Duchess. Law or no law, I will never marry a woman unless I love her.’ His eye rested for a moment on his cousin, and he reddened. ‘I may be imprisoned, but I shall carry with me the sympathy of every woman – that is, of every young woman – in the country.’

‘That will not help you, poor boy,’ said the Professor. ‘Hundreds of men are lying in our prisons who would have the sympathies of young women, were their histories known. But they lie there still, and will lie there till they die.’

‘Then I,’ said the Earl proudly, ‘will lie with them.’

There were moments when this young man seemed to forget the lessons of his early training, and the examples of his fellows. The meekness, modesty, submission, and docility which should mark the perfect man sometimes disappeared, and gave place to an assumption of the authority which should only belong to woman. At such times, in his own castle, his servants trembled before him; the stoutest woman’s heart failed for fear: even his guardian, the Dowager Lady Boltons, selected carefully by the Chancellor on account of her inflexible character, and because she had already reduced to complete submission a young heir of the most obstinate disposition, and the rudest and most uncompromising material, quailed before him. He rode over her, so to speak. His will conquered hers. She was ashamed to own it; she did not acquaint the Chancellor with her ward’s masterful character, but she knew, in her own mind, that her guardianship had been a failure. Nay, so strange was the personal influence of the young man, so infectious among the men were such assertions of will, that any husband who happened to witness one of them, would go home and carry on in fashion so masterful, so independent, and so self-willed, even those who had previously been the most submissive, that they were only brought to reason and proper submission by threats, remonstrances, and visits of admonition from the vicar – who, poor woman, was always occupied in the pulpit, owing to the Earl’s bad example, with the disobedience of man and its awful consequences here and hereafter. Sometimes these failed. Then they became acquainted with the inside of a prison and with bread and water.

‘Let us get time,’ said the Professor. ‘My lord, I hope,’ – here she sunk her voice to a whisper – ‘that you will neither lie in a prison nor marry any but the woman you love.’

Again the young man’s eyes boldly fell upon Constance, who blushed without knowing why.

Then the Professor, without any excuse, left them alone.

‘You have,’ said Lord Chester, ‘something to say to me, Constance.’

She hesitated. What use to say now what should have been said at another time and at a more fitting opportunity?

‘I am no milky, modest, obedient youth, Constance. You know me well. Have you nothing to say to me?’

In the novels, the young man who hears the first word of love generally sinks on his knees, and with downcast eyes and blushing face reverentially kisses the hand so graciously offered to him. In

ordinary life they had to wait until they were asked. Yet this young man was actually asking – boldly asking – for the word of love – what else could he mean? – and instead of blushing, was fixedly regarding Constance with fearless eyes.

‘It seems idle now to say it,’ she replied, stammering and hesitating – though in novels the woman always spoke up in a clear, calm, and resolute accents; ‘but, Edward, had the Chancellor not been notoriously the personal friend and creature of the Duchess, I should have gone to her long ago. They were schoolfellows; she owes her promotion to the Duchess; she would most certainly have rewarded her Grace by refusing my request.’

‘Yet you are a Carlyon and I am a Chester. On what plea?’

‘Cousinship, incompatibility of temper, some legal quibble – who knows? However, that is past; forget, my poor Edward, that I have told what should have been a secret. You will marry the Duchess – you –’

He interrupted her by laughing – a cheerfully sarcastic laugh, as of one who holds the winning cards and means to play them.

‘Fair cousin,’ he said, ‘I have something to say to you of far more importance than that. You have retired before an imaginary difficulty. I am going to face a real difficulty, a real danger. Constance,’ he went on, ‘you and I are such old friends and playfellows, that you know me as well as a woman can ever know a man who is not her husband. We played together when you were three and I was five. When you were ten and I was twelve, we read out of the same book until the stupidity and absurdity of modern custom tried to stop me from reading any more. Since then we have read separately, and you have done your best to addle your pretty head with political economy, in the name and by the aid of which you and your House of Lawmakers have ruined this once great country.’

‘Edward! this is the wildest treason. Where, oh, where, did you learn to talk – to think – to dare such dreadful things?’

‘Never mind where, Constance. In those days – in those years of daily companionship – a hope grew up in my heart, – a flame of fire which kept me alive, I think, amidst the depression and gloom of my fellow men. Can you doubt what was that hope?’

Constance trembled – the Countess of Carlyon, the Home Secretary, trembled. Had she ever before, in all her life, trembled? She was afraid. In the novels, it was true, many a young man, greatly daring, by a bold word swept away a cloud of misunderstanding and reserve. But this was in novels written by women of the middle class, who can never hope to marry young, for the solace of people of their own rank. It was not to be expected that in such works there should be any basis of reality – they were in no sense pictures of life; for, in reality, as was deplored almost openly, when these elderly ladies were rich enough to take a husband and face the possibilities of marriage, though they always chose the young men, it was rare indeed that they met with more than a respectful acquiescence. Nothing, ladies complained, among each other, was more difficult to win and retain a young man’s love. But here was this headstrong youth, with love in his eyes – bold, passionate, masterful love – overpowering love – love in his attitude as he bent over the girl, and love upon his lips. Oh, dignity of a Home Secretary! Oh, rules and conventions of life! Oh, restraints of religion! Where were they all at this most fatal moment?

‘Constance,’ he said taking her hand, ‘all the rubbish about manly modesty is outside the door: and that is closed. I am descended from a race who in the good old days wooed their brides for themselves, and fought for them too, if necessary. Not toothless, hoary old women, but young, sunny, blooming girls, like yourself. And they wooed them thus, my sweet.’ He seized her in his strong arms and kissed her on the lips, on the cheeks, on the forehead. Constance, frightened and moved, made no resistance, and answered nothing. Once she looked up and met his eyes, but they were so strong, so burning, so determined, that she was fain to look no longer. ‘I love you, my dear,’ the shameless young man went on, – ‘I love you. I have always loved you, and shall never love any other woman; and if I may not marry you, I will never marry at all. Kiss me yourself, my sweet; tell me that you love me.’

Had he a spell? was he a wizard, this lover of hers? Could Constance, she thought afterwards, trying to recall the scene, have dreamed the thing, or did she throw her arms about his neck and murmur in his ears that she too loved him, and that if she could not marry him, there was no other man in all the world for her?

To recall those five precious minutes, indeed, was afterwards to experience a sense of humiliation which, while it crimsoned her cheek, made her heart and pulse to beat, and sent the blood coursing through her veins. She felt so feeble and so small, but then her lover was so strong. Could she have believed it possible that the will of a man should thus be able to overpower her? Why, she made no resistance at all while her cousin in this unheard-of manner betrayed a passion which ... which ... yes, by all the principles of holy religion, by all the rules of society, by all the teaching which inculcated submission, patience, and waiting to be chosen, caused this young man to deserve punishment – condign, sharp, exemplary. And yet – what did this mean? Constance felt her heart go forth to him. She loved him the more for his masterfulness; she was prouder of herself because of his great passion.

That was what she thought afterwards. What she did, when she began to recover, was to free herself and hide her burning face in her hands.

‘Edward,’ she whispered, ‘we are mad. And I, who should have known better, am the more culpable. Let us forget this moment. Let us respect each other. Let us be silent.’

‘Respect?’ he echoed. ‘Why, who could respect you, Constance, more than I do? Silence? Yes, for a while. Forget? Never!’

‘It is wrong, it is irreligious,’ she faltered.

‘Wrong! Oh, Constance, let us not, between ourselves, talk the foolish unrealities of school and pulpit.’

‘Oh, Edward!’ – she looked about her in terror – ‘for Heaven’s sake do not blaspheme. If any were to hear you. For words less rebellious men have been sent to the prisons for life.’

He laughed. This young infidel laughed at law as he laughed at religion.

‘Have patience,’ Constance went on, trying to get into her usual frame of mind; but she was shaken to the very foundation, and at the moment actually felt as if her religion was turned upside down and her allegiance transferred to the Perfect Man. ‘Have patience, Edward; you will yet win through to the higher faith. Many a young man overpowered by his strength, as you have been, has had his doubts, and yet has landed at last upon the solid rock of truth.’

Edward made no reply to this, not even by a smile. It was not a moment in which the ordinary consolations of religion, so freely offered by women to men, could touch his soul. He took out his watch and remarked that the time was getting on, and that the Chancellor’s appointment must be kept.

‘With her ladyship, I suppose,’ he said, ‘we shall find the painted, ruddled, bewigged old hag who has the audacity to ask me —*me*— in marriage.’

Constance caught his hand.

‘Edward! cousin! are you mad? Are you proposing to seek a prison at once? Hag? old? painted? ruddled? And this of the Duchess of Dunstanburgh? Are you aware that the least of these charges is actionable at common law? For my sake, Edward, if not your own, be careful.’

‘I will, sweet Constance. And for your sake, just to our two selves, I repeat that the painted – ’

‘Oh!’

‘The ruddled – ’

‘Oh, hush!’

‘The bewigged – ’

‘Edward!’

‘Old hag – do you hear? – OLD HAG shall never marry me.’

Once more this audacious and unmanly lover, who respected nothing, seized her by the waist and kissed her lips. Once more Lady Carlyon felt that unaccountable weakness steal upon her, so that

she was bewildered, faint, and humiliated. For a moment she lay still and acquiescent in his arms. Worse than all, the door opened and Professor Ingleby surprised her in this compromising situation.

‘Upon my word!’ she said, with a smile upon her lips; ‘upon my word, my lord – Constance – if her Grace of Dunstanburgh knew this! Children, children!’ – she laid her withered hand upon Constance’s head – ‘I pray that this thing may be. But we want time. Let us keep Lord Chester’s appointment. And, as far as you can, leave to me, my lord, your old tutor, the task of speech. I know the Duchess, and I know the Chancellor. It may be that the oil of persuasion will be more efficacious than the lash of contradiction. Let me try.’

They stood confused – even the unblushing front of the lover reddened.

‘I have thought of a way of getting time. Come with us, Constance, as Lord Chester’s nearest female relation; I as his tutor, in absence of Lady Boltons, who is ill. When the Chancellor proposes the Duchess, do you propose – yourself. She will decide against you on the spot. *Appeal to the House*; that will give us three months’ delay.’

CHAPTER III

THE CHANCELLOR

THE CHANCELLOR, a lady now advanced in years, was of humble origin – a fact to which she often alluded to at public meetings with a curious mixture of humility and pride: the former, because it did really humiliate her in a country where so much deference was paid to hereditary rank, to reflect that she could not be proud of her ancestors; the latter, because her position was really so splendid, and her enemies could not but acknowledge it. She had plenty of enemies – as was, of course, the case with every successful woman in every line of life – and these were unanimous in declaring that she proclaimed her humble origin only because, if she attempted to conceal it, other people would proclaim it for her. And, indeed, without attributing extraordinary malice to these ladies, the Chancellor's unsuccessful rivals and enemies, this statement was probably true – nothing being more common, during an animated debate, than for the ladies to hurl at each other's heads all such facts procurable as might be calculated to damage the reputation of a family: and this so much so, that after a lively night the family trees were as much scotched, broken, and lopped as a public pleasure-garden in the nineteenth century after the first Monday in August.

At this time the Chancellor had arrived at a respectable age – being, that is to say, in her sixty-sixth year. She was a woman of uneven temper, having been soured by a long life of struggle against rivals who lost no opportunity of assailing her public and private reputation. She had remained unmarried, because, said her foes, no man would consent to link his lot with so spiteful a person; she was no lawyer, they said, because her whole desire and aim had been to show herself a lawyer of the highest rank; she was partial – this they said for the same reason, because she wanted to be remembered as an upright judge. They alluded in the House to her ignorance of the higher culture – although the poor lady had taught herself half-a-dozen languages, and was skilled in many arts; and they taunted her with her friendship for, meaning her dependence upon, her patron, the Duchess of Dunstanburgh. The last accusation was the burr that stuck, because the poor Chancellor could not deny its truth. She was, in fact, the daughter of a very respectable woman – a tenant-farmer of the Duchess. Her Grace found the girl clever, and educated her. She acquired over her, by the force of her personal character, an extraordinary influence – having made her entirely her own creature. She found the money for her entrance at the Bar, pushed her at the beginning, watched her upward course, never let her forget that everything was owing to her own patronage at the outset, and, when the greatest prize of the profession was in her grasp, and the farmer's girl became Chancellor, the Duchess of Dunstanburgh – by one of those acts of hers which upset the debates and resolutions of years – passed a Bill which made the appointment tenable for life, and so transferred into her own hands all the power, all the legal skill of the Chancellor. It was the most brilliant political *coup* ever made. Those who knew whispered that the Chancellor had no voice, no authority, no independent action at all; her patron regulated everything. While this terrible Duchess lived, the Court of Chancery belonged to her with all its manifold and complicated powers. She herself was, save at rare intervals, Prime Minister, Autocrat, and almost Dictator. Certainly it was notorious that whatever the Duchess of Dunstanburgh wanted she had; and it was also a fact not to be disputed, that there were many lawyers of higher repute, more dignified, more learned, more eloquent, and of better birth, who had been passed over to make room for this protégée of the Duchess – this 'daughter of the plough.'

Lord Chester, accompanied by the Countess of Carlyon and Professor Ingleby, arrived at the Law Courts at twelve, the hour of the Chancellor's appointment, and were shown into an ante-room. Here, with a want of courtesy most remarkable, considering the rank of the ward in Chancery whose future was to be decided at this interview, they were kept waiting for half an hour. When at length they were admitted to the presence, they were astonished to find that, contrary to all precedent, the

Duchess of Dunstanburgh herself was with the Chancellor. In fact she had been directing her creature in the line she was to take: she intended to receive the hand of the Earl from her, and to push on the marriage without an hour's delay. It was sharp practice; but her Grace was not a woman who considered herself bound by the ordinary rules. Any lesser person would have made her petition for the hand of a ward, and waited until she had received in due course official notification of acceptance, when an interview would have been arranged and the papers signed. All this, owing to the delays of Chancery, generally took from a twelvemonth upwards; and in the case of poor people who had no interest, perhaps their petitions were never decided at all, so that the unfortunate petitioner waited in vain, until she died of old age, still unmarried; and the unlucky ward lived on, hoping against hope, till his time for marriage went by. The Duchess possessed even more than the dignity which became her rank. She was rather a tall woman, with aquiline features; her age was sixty-five, and in her make-up she studiously affected, not the bloom and elasticity of youth, but the vigour and strength of middle life – say of fifty. All the resources of art were lavished upon her with this object: her hair showed a touch of gray upon the temples, but was still abundant, rich, and glossy, and was so beautifully arranged that it challenged the admiration even of those who knew that it was a wig; her eyebrows were dark and well defined – her enemies said she kept a special artist continually employed in making new eyebrows; her teeth were of pearly whiteness; her cheeks, just touched with paint, showed none of the wrinkles of time – though no one knew how that was managed; her forehead strong and broad, was crossed by three deep lines which could not be effaced by any artist. Some said they were caused by the successive deaths of three husbands, and therefore marked the Duchess's profound grief and the goodness of her heart, because it was known that one of them at least – the third, youngest, and handsomest of all, upon whom the fond wife lavished all her affections – had given her the greatest trouble; indeed, it was even said that – and that – and that – with many other circumstances showing the blackest ingratitude, so that women held up their hands and wondered what men wanted. But her Grace's enemies said that her famous wrinkles were caused by her three great vices of pride, ambition, and avarice; and they declared that if she developed another such furrow, it would represent her other great vice of vanity. As for that third husband – could one expect the poor young man to fall in love with a woman already fifty-eight when she married him?

The Duchess was richly but plainly dressed in black velvet and lace; her figure was still full. As she rose to greet the Chancellor's ward, she leaned upon a gold-headed stick – being somewhat troubled with gout. Her smile was encouraging and kind towards the Earl; to Constance, as to a political enemy who was to be treated with all external courtesy, she bowed low; and she coldly inclined her head in return to the profound act of deference paid to her by the Professor. The Chancellor, a fussy little woman with withered cheeks, wrinkled brow, and thin gray locks, sat at her table. She hardly rose to greet her ward, whom she motioned to a chair. Then she looked at Constance, and waited for her to explain her presence.

'I come with Lord Chester on this occasion,' said Constance, 'as his nearest female relation. As your ladyship is probably aware, I am his second cousin.'

The Chancellor bowed. Then the Professor spoke.

'I ask your ladyship's permission to appear in support of my pupil on this important occasion. His guardian, Lady Boltons, is unfortunately too ill to be present.'

'There is no reason, I suppose,' said the Chancellor, ungraciously, and with a glance of some anxiety at the Duchess, 'why you should not be present, Professor Ingleby; – unless, that is, the Earl of Chester would rather see me alone. But the proceedings are most formal.'

Lord Chester, who was very grave, merely shook his head. Then the Chancellor shuffled about her papers for a few moments, and addressed her ward.

'Your lordship will kindly give me your best attention,' she began, with some approach to blandness. 'I am glad, in the first place, to congratulate you on your health, your appearance, and your strength. I have received the best reports on your moral and religious behaviour, and your docility,

and – and – so on, from your guardian, Lady Boltons, and I am only sorry that she is not able to be here herself, in order to receive from me my thanks for the faithful and conscientious discharge of her duties, and from the Duchess of Dunstanburgh a recognition of her services in those terms which come from no one with more weight and more dignity than from her Grace.’ The Duchess held up a hand in deprecation; the Professor nodded, and lifted up her hands and smiled, as if a word of thanks from the Duchess was all she, for her part, wanted, in order to be perfectly happy. The Earl, one is sorry to say, sat looking straight at the Chancellor without an expression of any kind, unless it were one of patient endurance. The Chancellor went on.

‘You will shortly, you now know, pass from my guardianship to the hands and care of another far more able and worthy to hold the reins of authority than myself.’

Here Constance rose.

‘Before your ladyship goes any further, I beg to state to you that Lord Chester has only this morning informed me of a proposal made to you by her Grace of Dunstanburgh, which is now under your consideration.’

‘It certainly is,’ said the Chancellor, ‘and I am about –’

‘Before you proceed,’ – Constance changed colour, but her voice was firm, – ‘you will permit me also to make official and formal application in the presence of the Duchess herself, who will, I am sure, be a witness, and Professor Ingleby, for the hand of Lord Chester. There is, I think, no occasion for me to say anything in addition to my simple proposal. What I could add would probably not influence your ladyship’s decision. You know me, and all that is to be known about me –’

‘This is most astonishing!’ cried the Duchess.

‘May I ask your Grace what is astonishing about this proposal? May I remind you that I have known Lord Chester all my life; that we are equals in point of rank, position, and wealth; that I am, if I may say so, not altogether undistinguished, even in the House of which your Grace is so exalted an ornament? But I have to do with the judgment of your ladyship, not the opinion of the Duchess.’

The Chancellor turned anxiously to her patroness, as if for direction. She replied with dignity.

‘Your ladyship is aware that, as the earlier applicant, my proposal would naturally take precedence in your ladyship’s consideration of any later ones. I might even demand that it be considered on its own merits, without reference at all to Lady Carlyon’s proposal, with regard to which I keep my own opinion.’

Constance remarked, coldly, that her Grace’s opinion was unfortunately, in most important matters, exactly opposite to her own and to that of her friends, and she was contented to disagree with her. She then informed the Chancellor that as no decision had been given as to the marriage of Lord Chester, the case was still before her, and, she submitted, the proposals both of herself and of the Duchess should be weighed by her ladyship. ‘And,’ she added, ‘I would humbly submit that there are many other considerations, in the case of so old and great a House as that represented by Lord Chester, which should be taken account of. Higher rank than his own, for instance, need not be desired, nor greater wealth; nor many other things which in humbler marriages may be considered. I will go further: in this room, which is, as it were, a secret chamber, I say boldly that care should be taken to continue so old and illustrious a line.’

‘And why,’ cried the Duchess sharply, and dropping her stick – ‘why should it not be continued?’

Here a remarkable thing happened. Lord Chester should have affected a complete ignorance of the insult which Constance had deliberately flung in her rival’s teeth: what he did do was to turn slowly round and stare, in undisguised wonder, at the Duchess, as if surprised at her audacity. Even her Grace, with all her pride and experience, could not sustain this calm, cold look. She faltered and said no more. Lord Chester picked up the stick, and handed it to her with a low bow.

‘I am much obliged to you, Lady Carlyon,’ said the Chancellor, tapping her knuckles with her glasses; ‘very much obliged to you, I am sure, for laying down rules for *my* guidance – MINE! – in the interpretation of the law and my duty. That, however, may pass. It is my business – although I

confess that this interruption is of a most surprising and unprecedented nature – to proceed with the case before me, which is that of the proposal made by the Duchess of Dunstanburgh.’

‘Do I understand,’ asked Lady Carlyon, ‘that you refuse to receive my proposal? Remember that you *must* receive it. You cannot help receiving it. This is a public matter, which shall, if necessary, be brought before the House and before the nation. I say that your ladyship must receive my proposal.’

‘Upon my word!’ cried the Chancellor. ‘Upon my word!’

‘Perhaps,’ said the Duchess, ‘if Lady Carlyon’s proposal were to be received – let me ask that it may be received, even if against precedent – the consideration of the case could be proceeded with at once, and perhaps your ladyship’s decision might be given on the spot.’

‘Very good – very good.’ The Chancellor was glad to get out of a difficulty. ‘I will take the second proposal into consideration as well as the first. Now then, my Lord. You have been already informed that the Duchess has asked me for your hand.’

Here the Duchess made a gesture, and slowly rose, as if about to speak. ‘A proposition of this kind,’ she said, in a clear and firm voice, ‘naturally brings with it, to any young man, and especially a young man of our Order, some sense of embarrassment. He has been taught – that is’ (here she bent her brows and put on her glasses at the Professor, who was bowing her head at every period, keeping time with her hands, as if in deference to the words of the Duchess, and as if they contained truths which could not be suffered to be forgotten), ‘if he has been properly taught – the sacredness of the marriage state, the unworthiness of man, the duties of submission and obedience, which, when rightly carried out, lead to the higher levels. And in proportion to the soundness of his training, and the goodness of his heart, is he embarrassed when the time of his great happiness arrives.’ The Professor bowed, and spread her hands as if in agreement with so much wisdom so beautifully expressed. ‘Lord Chester,’ continued the Duchess, ‘I have long watched you in silence; I have seen in you qualities which, I believe, befit a consort of my rank. You possess pride of birth, dexterity, skill, grace; you know how to wield such authority as becomes a man. You will exchange your earl’s coronet for the higher one of a duke. I am sure you will wear it worthily. You will – ’ Here Constance interrupted.

‘Permit me, your Grace, to remind you that the Chancellor’s decision has not yet been given.’

The Duchess sat down frowning. This young lady should be made to feel her resentment. But for the moment she gave way and scowled, leaning her chin upon her stick. It was a hard face even when she smiled; when she frowned it was a face to look upon and tremble.

The Chancellor turned over her papers impatiently.

‘I see nothing,’ she said. – ‘I see nothing at all in the proposition made by Lady Carlyon to alter my opinion, previously formed, that the Duchess has made an offer which seems in every way calculated to promote the moral, spiritual, and material happiness of my ward.’

‘May I ask,’ said Lord Chester quietly, ‘if I may express my own views on this somewhat important matter?’

‘You?’ the Chancellor positively shrieked. ‘You? The ignorance in which boys are brought up is disgraceful! A ward in Chancery to express an opinion upon his own marriage! Positively a real ward in Chancery! Is the world turning upside down?’

The audacity of the remark, and the happy calmness with which it was proffered, were irresistible. All the ladies, except the Chancellor, laughed. The Duchess loudly. This little escapade of youth and ignorance amused her. Constance laughed too, with a little pity. The Professor laughed with some show of shame, as if Lord Chester’s ignorance reflected in a manner upon herself.

Then the Chancellor went on again with some temper.

‘Let me resume. It is my duty to consider nothing but the interests of my ward. Very good. I have considered them. My Lord Chester, in giving your hand to the Duchess of Dunstanburgh, I serve your best and highest interests. The case is decided. There is no more to be said.’

‘There is, on the contrary, much more to be said,’ observed Constance. ‘I give your ladyship notice of appeal to the House of Peereses. I shall appeal to them, and to the nation through them,

whether your decision in this case is reasonable, just, and in accordance with the interests of your ward.'

This was, indeed, a formidable threat. An appeal to the House meant, with such fighting-power as Constance and her party, although a minority, possessed, and knew how to direct, a delay of perhaps six months, even if the case came on from day to day. Even the practised old Duchess, used to the wordy warfare of the House, shrank from such a contest.

'You will not, surely, Lady Carlyon,' she said, 'drag your cousin's name into the Supreme Court of Appeal.'

'I certainly will,' replied Constance.

'It will cost hundreds of thousands, and months – months of struggle.'

'As for the cost, that is my affair; as for the delay, I can wait – perhaps longer than your Grace.'

The Duchess said no more. Twice had Lady Carlyon insulted her. But her revenge would wait.

'We have already,' she said, 'occupied too much of the Chancellor's valuable time. I wish your ladyship good morning.'

Lord Chester offered his arm.

'Thank you,' she said accepting it, 'as far as the carriage-door only, *for the present*. I trust, my lord, that before long you will have the right to enter the carriage with me. Meanwhile, believe me, that it is not through my fault that your name is to be made the subject of public discussion. Pending the appeal, let us not betray, by appearing together, any feeling other than that of pure friendship. And I hope,' viciously addressing Constance, 'that you, young lady, will observe the same prudence.'

Constance simply bowed and said nothing. The Chancellor rose, shook hands with her ward, and retired.

The Duchess leaned upon the strong arm which led her to her carriage, and kissed her hand in farewell to the young man with so much affection and friendly interest that it was beautiful to behold. After this act of politeness, the young man returned to Constance.

'Painted – ' he began.

'Edward, I will not allow it. Silence, sir! We part here for the present.'

'Constance,' he whispered, 'you will not forget —*all* that I said?'

'Not one word,' she replied with troubled brow. 'But we must meet no more for a while.'

'Courage!' cried the Professor, 'we have gained time.'

CHAPTER IV

THE GREAT DUCHESS

IMPOSSIBLE, of course, that so important a case as the appeal of Lady Carlyon should be concealed. In fact Constance's policy was evidently to give it as much publicity as possible. She rightly judged that although, in her own Order, and in the House, which has to look at things from many points of view, motives of policy might be considered sufficient to override sentimental objections, and it was not likely that much weight would be attached to a young man's feelings; yet the Duchess had many enemies, even on her own side of the House – private enemies wounded by her pride and insolence – who would rejoice at seeing her meet with a check in her self-willed and selfish course. But, besides the House, there was the outside world to consider. There was never greater need on the part of the governing caste for conciliation and respect to public opinions than at this moment – a fact perfectly well understood by all who were not blind to the meaning of things current. The abolition of the Lower House, although of late years it had degenerated into something noisier than a vestry, something less decorous than a school-board in which every woman has her own hobby of educational methods, had never been a popular act. A little of the old respect for so ancient a House still survived, – a little of the traditional reverence for a Parliament which had once protected the liberties of the people, still lingered in the hearts of the nation. The immediate relief, it is true, was undoubtedly great when the noise of elections – which never ceased, because the House was continually dissolved – the squabbles about corruption, the scandals in the House itself, the gossip about the jobs perpetrated by the members, all ceased at once, and as if by magic the country became silent; yet the pendulum of opinion was going back again – women who took up political matters were looking around for an outlet to their activity, and were already at their clubs asking awkward questions about what they had gained by giving up all the power to hereditary legislators. Nor did the old plan of sending round official orators to lecture on the advantages of oligarchical and maternal government seem to answer any longer. The women who used to draw crowded audiences and frantic applause as they depicted and laid bare the scandals and miseries and ridiculous squabbles of the Lower House, who pointed to session after session consumed in noisy talk, now shouted to empty benches, or worse still, benches crowded with listless men, who only sat bored with details in which they were forbidden to take any part, and therefore had lost all interest. Sometimes the older women would attend and add a few words from their own experience; or they would suggest, sarcastically, that the Upper House was going the way of the Lower. As for the younger women, either they would not attend at all, or else they came to ask questions, shout denials, groan and hiss, or even pass disagreeable resolutions. Constance knew all this; and though she would have shrunk, almost as much as the Duchess, from lending any aid to revolutionary designs, she could not but feel that the popular sympathy awakened in her favour at such a moment as the present might assume such strength as to be an irresistible force.

How could the sympathies of the people be otherwise than on her side? These marriages of old or middle-aged women with young men, common though they had become, could never be regarded by the youth of either sex as natural. The young women bitterly complained that the lovers provided for them by equality of age were taken from them, and that times were so bad that in no profession could one look to marry before forty. The young men, who were not supposed to have any voice in the matter, let it be clearly known that their continual prayer and daily dream was for a young wife. The general discontent found expression in songs and ballads, written no one knew by whom: they passed from hand to hand; they were sung with closed doors; they all had the same *motif*; they celebrated the loves of two young people, maiden and youth; they showed how they were parted by the elderly woman who came to marry the tall and gallant youth; how the girl's life was embittered, or how she pined away, or how she became misanthropic; and how the young man spent the short

remainder of his days in an apathetic endeavour to discharge his duty, fortified on his deathbed with the consolations of religion and the hopes of meeting, not his old wife, but his old love, in a better and happier world. Why, there could be nothing but sympathy with Constance and Lord Chester. Why, all the men, old and young alike, whose influence upon women and popular opinion, though denied by some, was never doubted by Constance, would give her cause their most active sympathies.

She remained at home that day, taking no other step than to charge a friend with the task of communicating the intelligence to her club, being well aware that in an hour or two it would be spread over London, and, in fact, over the whole realm of England. The next day she went down to the House, and had the satisfaction of finding that the excitement caused by her resignation – a ministerial resignation was too common a thing to cause much talk – had given way altogether to the excitement caused by this great Appeal. No one even took the trouble of asking who was going to be the new Home Secretary. It was taken for granted that it would be some friend of the Duchess of Dunstanburgh. The lobbies were crowded – reporters, members of clubs, diners-out, talkers, were hurrying backwards and forwards, trying to pick up a tolerably trustworthy anecdote; and there was the *va et vient*, the nervous activity, which is so much more easily awakened by personal quarrels than by political differences. And here was a personal quarrel! The young and beautiful Countess against the old and powerful Duchess.

‘Yes,’ said Constance loudly, in answer to a whispered question put by one of her friends – she may have observed two or three listeners standing about with eager ears and parted lips – ‘yes, it is all quite true; it was an understood thing – this match with my second cousin. The pretensions of the Duchess rest upon too transparent a foundation – the poor man’s money, my dear. As if she were not rich enough already! as if three husbands are not enough for any one woman to lament! Thank you; yes, I have not the slightest doubt of the result. In a matter of good feeling as well as equity one may always depend upon the House, whatever one’s political opinions.’

The Duchess certainly had not expected this resistance to her will. In fact, during the whole of her long life she had never known any resistance at all, except such as befalls every politician. But in her private life her will was law, which no one questioned or disputed. Nor did it even occur to her to inquire, before speaking to the Chancellor, whether there would be any rival in the field. Proud as she was, and careless of public opinion in a general way, it was far from pleasant, even for her, to reflect on the things which would be said of her proposal when the Appeal was brought before the House – on the motives which would be assigned or insinuated by her enemies; on the allusions to youth and age – the more keen the more skilfully they were disguised and wrapped in soft words; the open pity which would be expressed for the youth whose young life – she knew very well what would be said – was to be sacrificed; the sarcastic questions which would be asked about the increase of her property by the new marriage, and so forth. The plain speech of Peereses in debate was well known to her. Yet pride forbade a retreat: she would fight it out; she could command, by ways and by methods only known to herself, a majority; yet she felt sure, beforehand, that it would be a cold and unsympathetic majority – even a reproachful majority. Nor was her temper improved by a visit from her old friend, once her schoolfellow, Lady Despard. She came with a long face, which portended expostulation.

‘You have quite made up your mind, Duchess?’ she began, without a word of explanation or preamble, but with a comfortable settlement in the chair, which meant a good long talk.

‘I have quite made up my mind,’ Between such old friends, no need to ask what was intended.

‘Lord Chester,’ said Lady Despard, thoughtfully, ‘who is, no doubt, all that you think him – worthy in every way, I mean, of this promotion and your name – is, after all, a very young man.’

‘That,’ replied the Duchess spitefully, ‘is my affair. His age need not be considered. I am not afraid of myself, Julia. With my experience, at all events, I can say so much.’

‘Surely, Duchess; I did not mean that. The most powerful mind, coupled with the highest rank, – how should that fail to attract and fix the affection and gratitude of a man? No, dear friend; what

I meant was this: he is too young, perhaps, for the full development either of virtues – or their opposites, – too young, perhaps, to know the reality of the prize you offer him.’

‘I think not, Julia,’ the Duchess spoke kindly, – ‘I think not. It is good of you to consider this possibility in so friendly a way; but I have the greatest reliance on the good qualities of Lord Chester. Lady Boltons is his guardian; who would be safer? Professor Ingleby has been his tutor; who could be more discreet?’

‘Yes, – Professor Ingleby. She is certainly learned; and yet – yet – at Cambridge there is an uneasy feeling about her orthodoxy.’

‘I care little,’ said the Duchess, ‘about a few wild notions which he may have picked up. On such a man, a little freedom of thought sits gracefully. A Duke of Dunstanburgh cannot possibly be anything but orthodox. Yes, Julia; and the sum of it all is that I am getting old, and I am going to make myself happy with the help of this young gentleman.’

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.