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THE FATE OF AZUMA;

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CHAPTER VI.

And it was wonderful how her new role became her.

"It really seems to be bringing me luck," she told herself, forgetting that when a woman has reached the point when she begins to see luck coming from an abnormal mood, and a terrible resignation of all ambition, she has reached one of the most dangerous cross-roads of life. She had made a resolve, and the resolve had brought a look of calm content to her features, which hadn't been there of late.

"Judith Roach is looking quite beautiful this year" said the women who were not jealous of her. And Judith Roach herself was aware that she had never been so beautiful. Her one fear hitherto, had been of a sort of "epanouissement," which would make her look like a married woman,—give her away. Now, lately, something which she had paid no heed to, had made her thinner and more ethereal-looking, and her movements grew more willowy, in keeping with it.

Her resolve was never to do anything noble again.

If a man proposed, and she always had two or three offers every season, or could have if she would, she would accept the most eligible, and say nothing. After all, why should the woman be so much better than the man? Almost any woman was good enough for the men one met. Only one had seemed to her too good for such a fate, and he had passed out of her life, slammed the door on her in Piccadilly, and, it seemed to her, gone down some distant corridor and slammed another.

He had written her a very nice letter, telling her that he was very sorry for her, that it was hard enough for her without his telling her what a blow it was for him, that he could never cease to love her, and that he hoped she would grow happier as time went on, that he thought it very plucky and brave of her to tell him. But there was no mention of rewarding her for her valor. He had loved her she was sure of that, but not enough. Would anyone ever love her enough, she wondered, while she forgot to cultivate the qualities of the heart which alone could have made her needful above all others to some man.

The end of the letter made her give a little wicked laugh.

"You won't mind my saying as we have been such friends, that I can't help thinking that you would be far happier abroad or living quietly in the country. You are so beautiful that perhaps you are laying up for yourself a needless repetition of the pain you suffered yesterday. Men are sure to fall in love with you, and it isn't quite fair, don't you think? I know you will take this as I mean it, from a heartfelt desire that you should not suffer more than is necessary." He signed himself "Yours sincerely."

Yes, he was sincere. She laughed, then suddenly she grew grave.

"He is a dear boy, but he is a fool," she had murmured at first, then: "What on earth does he take me for, why doesn't he suggest some institution where they wear aprons and do needlework, like those one sends kitchenmaids to? Poor dear boy, how young he is." Then an awful thought came over her. In his simple way he had expressed the thought of every man. It wasn't playing fair. It was not possible that she should ever marry, ever, and she belonged to a set in which it was the primary condition that one should marry as soon as possible—as well as possible, and Judith had been out over four years. Her mother would less forgive her not marrying than she would the other episode. She had forgiven the other conditionally on its not being found out, but for nothing on earth would her mother stand her being an old maid, and with her looks, with her money—which while it was not much, was enough—with her position, why, of course, she must marry. Yet the thought pierced, was it possible that the purity of a dairymaid was a more valuable possession than wealth and beauty and good breeding? It seemed so. And as she tore up Hubert Gresham's letter she regained her cynical mood. Yes, apparently in order to marry that wonderful creature—man, especially the London young man, who comes straight perhaps from the arms of his mistress, or, more likely still, from the arms of some other man's wife, it seemed necessary to be extraordinary virtuous, not to have had a malheur, as Louise would have called it. How funny, how hugely funny men's ideas were.

Sometimes Lady Judith wondered if Louise knew. She sometimes thought she did, because she was French. One always has an idea that French women have a sort of second sight on the subject of morality, and like everyone else Lady Judith had the fancy that, because a town is far away, everyone in it meets and knows the other.

But Judith Roach had no intention of going to live in the country, or of "Coiffer Sainte Catherine."

On the contrary, she intended to make a very good marriage, and to keep silent in the future, and if it came out—why, no man on earth would publish abroad that his wife had been a "malheur," that he had been taken in.

That was what she ought to have done with Sir Hubert. How stupidly dense she had been. She did not even remember that she had felt it would be quite impossible to marry him without telling him, because she had loved him. She didn't love him any more, he was too conventional, too puritanic, she didn't believe they would ever have got on well together even if he had forgiven.

Forgiven—now and then when she thought of all she had suffered, still suffered sometimes, she asked herself how any man would dare use the word forgive!

The scenes which occurred periodically with her mother, once a fortnight, sometimes more frequently, were in themselves, it seemed to her an expiation, and she was quite aware that, for the next few days, she would be exposed to those, and she made up her mind to them, just as a person who goes out to sea is prepared for rough weather. They had been too busy, these two women, with their occupation of pleasure, which has become a sort of industry in London, in which there is more sweating than in a factory, more strenuous hours, and, if better food, very inadequate sanitation, to find time to reproach or to parry questions. They were like two adversaries, who know that they must fight a duel, but who have proclaimed a tacit truce till they shall have liberty to fight at peace. Already her mother was preparing her arguments, the while Lady Judith was laying up a store of retorts with which to meet them. She had a few which she always kept in store for the hour of crisis, the final, the most telling of them all, though perhaps the most cruel was when she said at times:

"It is all very well to blame me, but you shouldn't have allowed me to go and stay at the Lorraines alone, you knew what they were, I didn't."

It would not have convinced Judith if she had been told that her mother had been glad to get rid of her anywhere, that because their dispositions were so uncongenial she had jumped at the idea of Judith going away without her for a few days, under the chaperonage of Lady Bill Fenwick, which, as someone said, was like tying one's daughter to a balloon. Even now, notwithstanding all that had happened, Lady Glaucourt remembered, with a sigh of satisfaction, what a very pleasant week she had had while Judith was away. She never allowed her memory to dwell on how the girl looked and behaved when she came back. She had sent her to Paris, soi-disant to study art, with quite the right person, a Madame Dufour, who had once been a sort of companion governess of Judith's, and who, strange to stay, adored her; a really nice woman, called old, probably, out of sympathy for her clothes, but who had a distinct personality, which belongs to the women who will never be old, if they have also never been quite young. Madame Dufour really came of quite good parentage, and was highly recommended by a marquise of the Glaucourt's acquaintance. In the days when Judith was quite a child, she had been supposed not to speak English, now she always forgot to speak French, and made English seem as if she were still doing so. The only mistake Madame Dufour made was that she enjoyed the whole mystery of it all so much, that she forgot to be shocked enough. After a long experience of the haute noblesse on both sides of the channel, she had come to look upon these things as part of the tax grandeur pays to passion, and she had carried out the only half-suggested schemes of Lady Glaucourt with an astuteness which had made the trip to Paris seem almost a pleasure trip.

"Cette pauvre enfant" had suffered a great deal less mental agony because of Madame Dufour, and had never completely realized the enormity of it all, until she had fallen in love with Hubert Gresham. Now it seemed, even to herself, inconceivable how she had been able to enjoy his courtship, how it was she had not foreseen the end, or at least, taken precautions for the future. Instead she had floated on the tide with a renewed girlishness which was sincere, notwithstanding that, strictly speaking, her girlhood was over; and now when two years had gone by, she grew gradually to think of that girl, of the whole event of the trip to Paris, of all that went before, and all that went afterwards, and of that moment of terrible clutching at her heart, as if it had happened to someone else.

It had been characteristic of her when she returned, that she had said to her mother:

"If you ever reproach me with it, I shall leave the house."

It had been her way of checking once for always the reproaches, the recriminations, which she knew would make life intolerable. She had confided her dread of this to Madame Dufour, who could well believe that Lady Glaucourt who was "une femme de glace," suggested that Judith should ask her very nicely—"tres gentillment"—never to mention the subject. And Judith's interpretation of "tres gentillement"—had been to threaten her mother. Perhaps, after all, it had been the best way. Nevertheless, occasionally, her mother forgot her vow, made at the moment of the threats, and brought up the subject; and always there was a scene in which Judith threatened to make a clean breast of it to her father and to disappear.

It was fear of her husband knowing, which always made Lady Glaucourt the first to make it up, to entreat her not to go away, promising always not to refer to the subject again.

As a matter of fact Lady Glaucourt didn't believe that Judith would tell her father. They were both aware that while they belonged to him, and he provided them with money and every luxury, and even slept under the same roof, that they did not lead the same life at all. He was a quiet man, much given to sport and politics, and supremely unconscious that they were in any way different to what he wanted them to be. He had known when he married her that his future wife was rather cold, and had taken her coldness for reserve and good form. Now that he was sure that it was coldness, he supposed that her daughter took after her. His wife's worldliness he attributed to the natural consequence of their position and the reason that his daughter hadn't yet married, he put down to the fact that she was so extremely good-looking, that she considered that there was plenty of time, and that she could pick and choose. He perfectly agreed with her. He had one son in the army, who was very like himself, and who stayed away from home as much as possible. He was much more intelligent than his father, and had early found out that his mother, though devoted to him when he was at home, was not fast, but very worldly; he had also found out, he hardly knew how, that Judith was not worldly, but very fast—constitutionally fast.

She was so very beautiful that, in a society which is always seeking something, without quite knowing what, but certain that it hasn't got it, it was perhaps only to be expected that if she had not been fast, she would at least have been fond of flirtation. She had discovered at an early age that she was quite one of the most beautiful women in London, and of one of those particular types which attract men. She was most exquisitely formed.

Lady Glaucourt came of a family of which all the members were good-looking. There are families like that in England, of which the very name evokes grace, and of which the distant relatives, even, seem to share the family distinction of good looks; in which a plain daughter or an ordinary-looking son is a phenomenon which is talked about.

And she looked good, as nearly all beauties do, with something of the expression of a Madonna, a Madonna with "espieglerie," like those painted by the modern great painters, something like all of them; a little the look of Bodenhausen's Madonna, while her hair grew low in a natural wave like Sichel's, and the expression of the eyes reminded one of Defregger's. And later, without its being perceptible, except to those who knew her well, it had intensified, bringing a look of pain which, as the years went by, made her look more like the Madonna of Parisiani.

Yes, at moments when she remembered, that was her expression. Her coloring was exquisite, and her height, a little above the medium was not enough to prevent the exquisite grace of her movements. An ideal woman outwardly, and the delight of dressmakers, photographers, artists, with just enough consciousness of it to make her appear to be bestowing a sight of herself upon the public, and not enough to make one think her conceited. Great beauties are rarely conceited. In the evening a little crowd would assemble at the door to see her go out to parties and balls, and it had never been known that she was without a partner at a dance.

All she required, someone had said, in order to become a professional beauty, was to marry. Yes, such beauty as hers needed an impresario. But hitherto she had not quite hit it off with anyone except Sir Hubert Gresham, although she had had offers which had not been to her taste. Some men, who admired her immensely would yet have been afraid to ask her to marry them. One amusing old man had said:

"Upon my word, she's too pretty for a wife. She ought to be placed in a shrine so that everybody could come and see her." And till the "malheur" she had led a happy life, because of the constant adulation which was offered her every morning anew, like dew. Even the maid delighted in running the ribbons in her underlinen.

Till the malheur, she had been happy, even if her happiness was not based on those foundations which seem to hold in them some of the attributes of immortality. To be young, to be beautiful, to be well-off, and above all, to be well-dressed, to have a couple of horses to hunt with, and enough intelligence to enjoy the modern twaddle which is written, what more could any girl desire?

But of late, without being aware of it, she was profoundly unhappy, with an unhappiness which she felt instinctively would always be hers, even if it turned from poignancy and discontent to an acquiescent, stultified despair.

She was much sadder now than she had ever been, even at the time of the "malheur," sadder, not only because she had been as near loving as she probably ever could be, when she had captivated Sir Hubert Gresham, but because she had realized that he had voiced masculine opinion everywhere, and that henceforward either she would have to forego marriage altogether, a prospect which did not for a moment find any response on her part, or live a life of deceit.

The latter did not dismay her. It was what all men did, and it didn't seem to affect their happiness at all. After all her past was her own, and this strange code of men, that women were to be everything they were not incensed her. By what right did they enforce it? Arguing with herself in a way which, if it only gave partial and temporary satisfaction, yet because it had the counterfeit of sanity brought a little comfort, she told herself that surely it was far better for such a thing to happen before her marriage, and to be faithful afterwards. When she thought of the young married women she knew, and whose society she instinctively frequented more than that of girls, it seemed to her that there could be no possible doubt of that. It would be like a sort of feminine sowing of oats, and, like a frivolous man, she would be all the more likely to settle down into domesticity.

But there were other moments, those realistic, terrible moments, when she awoke in the night, or was ill, when she saw things as they were, and had to confess to herself that it would be very difficult for her to find a husband if anything ever leaked out. And who could tell that it wouldn't. Dear old Madame Dufour, she was safe enough, and the man himself, she did not think he had ever spoken, and yet, in these days, how men do talk of their successes, boast of them, and often invent them. She had never, either, felt quite sure, in bewilderment, that she had not heard a door open further down. When she thought of this something seemed to creep from her very feet to the roots of her hair, something that was more than shame of the fact, the shame of whether anyone, anyone knew the story, which was much worse than the shame of it.

If it leaked out, what would her chances be? One of a very few, and those few not pleasing, to marry some old man for his money and position, who was taken with her beauty enough to take pity on her, or who didn't believe what he had heard, whom she could fascinate and magnetize into acquiescence, or some man of inferior position, who wanted to get on in society, and whom she would despise, while he despised her. Or, worst of all the carrying out of her mother's suggestion, that she should marry the man, the cause of all the trouble, the man she hated and loathed, and who had neither wealth nor any particular position, except that of squire of dames and buffoon to society.

The idea she had fostered now for so many months, precluded the hope that some man would fall so desperately in love with her that he would not care. She had hoped that Sir Hubert Gresham would be that man. Now she had grown considerably less confident of her power. And as these thoughts revolved again and again, like a squirrel in its cage, she asked herself whether it would ever be possible to feel like a girl again, to go back to where she had started from, and to so forget as to bewitch and enchant by innocence?

Often and often she had wondered whether it had made any difference in her manner, her looks, even in the things she said? Sometimes she fancied so, but her mother said not.

If Judith began thinking that, everything would come to an end, and everything, in this case, meant a brilliant marriage.

As the season progressed, Lady Glaucourt grew feverishly anxious. Of course there were quantities of men hanging about Judith, but no one better than Lady Glaucourt knew that that meant nothing. Now and then she asked herself, as Judith did, whether anything had ever leaked out.

(To be continued.)

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