

A Woman Scorned

Chapter 1

HE SPRANG OUT at her from behind a clump of pheasant bower. “Perdition catch my soul but I do love thee!” he exclaimed.

“Oh, it’s you,” Henrietta said.

“Could you ever give us the lend of five shillings?” he added in the same ringing tone — as if that, too, were from Shakespeare.

“Go and see King. He’ll give you the lend of some work.”

“He will find me notable cause to work,” the man echoed as he shambled off through the woods in the general direction of the house.

“Who — or what — on earth was that?” Judith asked, eyeing the ragged fellow with a mixture of amusement and distaste.

“Mad McLysaght,” Henrietta replied, slightly surprised.

“Ah! So that’s what he looks like.”

“Have you never seen him before?”

Judith shook her head; her long, dark hair rippled down her back, letting in the most pleasant little draughts of air to cool her. She closed her eyes, raised her face to the skies — or, rather, to the canopy of green leaves above them — and repeated the gesture, breathing deeply.

“Did you know,” Henrietta continued, “that he used to be a schoolmaster? He knows all of Shakespeare by heart. Now he tramps the lanes and sleeps under the ditches and begs for his living. And he’s ‘great gas,’ as they say, and always ready with a bit of crack.” She sighed the single word: “Men!” in the tones of her elder sister, Winifred.

Judith, who was doing her best to be grown up now that she had reached the magical age of fifteen — which seemed about ten times older than fourteen — sighed, too. Then, feeling this small token of agreement wasn’t enough, she said scornfully: “A man with education, too!” She envied her friend’s decisive manner and firm opinions. Henrietta was sixteen on that very same day — poised now between the schoolroom and the world.

“Crossed in love — or so they say,” Henrietta added. She repeated the word, with a scorn equal to Judith’s: “Love!”

“Quite.” Judith replied severely. Her thoughts dwelled briefly on Rick Bellingham, who was still only fourteen. He was hopelessly and passionately in love with her — which was nice in one way and rather alarming in another.

“You were very firm with him,” she added.

Henrietta, basking in her young acolyte’s admiration, tried one of her father’s sentiments: “Firm is it!” she exclaimed. “If I had my way, they’d bring back the stocks for men like that. Rick adores him, of course.”

“Golly!” Judith was thrilled at her severity. She wondered could you learn to be like that or did you have to be born to it? Henrietta — indeed, all the Bellinghams — seemed born to it; but then Judith remembered overhearing her own parents talking about their rich neighbours once and remarking that they had been nothing but small farmers in the seventeen-forties, “which was only four generations back, after all.”

The two girls came out from under the trees and onto the drive. Henrietta ran a critical eye over the gravel, looking for tyre-marks the rakers might have missed, for Castle Moore was not one of those leaking, impoverished old country seats with buckets and umbrellas in every bedroom; Castle Moore had two groundsmen who did nothing but rake the gravel drives and the paths in the formal gardens all day — and God help them if the marks of a visitor’s arrival were still there at his or her departure! Finding all to her satisfaction, she linked arms with Judith. “Well, young ’un,” she said, “it hasn’t turned into much of a birthday for either of us, has it! Just another tediously hot August day.”

Her reward was immediate. “Golly, Hen,” Judith gushed. “Just being let come over here and be with you is better than any old present.”

Henrietta drew a deep draught of satisfaction and hugged her young friend’s elbow tight. The drive led beneath two large, sentinel trees, a chestnut and a beech, before widening to form the carriage sweep in front of the castle. Their shade engulfed the two girls, who paused on its farther brink, delaying the plunge back into the harsh light of the sun. Neither mentioned the real reason for the postponement of their joint birthday party — the funeral of Major O’Neill. It wouldn’t be right to hold a *proper* birthday party until after the old fellow was decently laid to rest. They had not liked him much, what little they had seen of him. Indeed, very few of his acquaintance would mourn his passing. But the manner of it had spread alarm throughout the entire countryside — or at least among those families that actually *owned* the countryside; for it was said that Land Leaguers had lured him to the lake and drowned him, making it seem like an accident. Henrietta’s father, Colonel Bellingham, had gone about saying it was typical of their cowardice; they were afraid to come out and fight in the open like men. His friends in the Property Protection Society considered that a very courageous opinion — though this was not, perhaps, the wisest moment to deliver it.

Relishing the shade, the two girls let their eyes roam across the sunstruck gardens. Laid out almost a century ago, they were now approaching that perfection of colour, line, and tone which their original designers had seen only in their minds’ eye. Castle Moore nestled on the westward slope of Mount

Argus, one of the highest hills in that great glacial esker which runs across the Bog of Allen — indeed, across the whole of Ireland, from Dublin to Galway. At some unimaginably remote time in the past the Shannon had burst through this barrier and poured on down to where Limerick now stands, at the head of the estuary. In the wake of that geological catastrophe it had left a number of lakes, Lough Derg and Lough Cool among them. But the lake over which Castle Moore presided was man-made from shore to shore, as was the canal that connected it to Lough Cool. It had been started as a measure of relief for the poor in one of the many famines of the previous century; its present size of almost six acres was both a tribute to that charity and a grim commentary on the frequency of such famines.

Today, however, all was serene. Swans did their graceful duty upon its limpid waters, guiding their cygnets along its reedy fringes and sending out ripples to shatter the blinding white reflection of the marble pavilion on its farther bank. The nearer bank was free of reeds; indeed, it was not a bank at all but a stout wall of cut and dressed stone over whose top the lowest lawn grew to the very edge — a sort of watery haha, which drew a sharp line between the silver of the lake and the emerald turf. From there a meandering progression of Italian cypresses and balsam poplars, black by gold, led the eye up over a series of terraced lawns, five in all, to the castle itself.

Fifteen gardeners and five boys kept it all immaculate. Many of them were visible now, toiling in the blistering sun and no doubt, Henrietta thought, envying the two young ladies their vantage in the shade. She gave another sigh of happiness. “I do so love watching people work. Don’t you?”

Judith shrugged her shoulders up tight to her neck and shivered. “Yes!” she murmured.

Through the wide-open windows of the castle came the muted sound of the luncheon gong. “Crikey!” Henrietta exclaimed as she set off at a brisk walk, dragging Judith with her. At the foot of the front steps, however, she caught sight of her mother, coming up from the garden with two maids, laden with baskets of cut flowers. “Oh, we’re safe,” she said and relaxed their pace to a saunter. “I say,” she added, “you are going to stay the night, I hope?”

Judith nodded but said nothing, as if to speak might tempt the gods too far.

“And you will sleep in my bed and share your chocolate with me?”

Another nod.

“And d’you know what else?” Henrietta licked her lips and gazed furtively around.

“What?” Judith whispered.

“We’ll pull the sheet over our heads and tell each other our deepest, secretest secret. All right?”

Judith nodded, and blinked, and tried to swallow down the lump of gratitude in her throat.