

"BLACK ORCHIDS" by F. V. W. MASON

CHAPTER XI

Iran Gray, announced an announcement in a dark blue dress as he threw back curtains and doors which opened from a flight of carpeted stairs.

Iran sauntered into the living room that was a masterpiece of well restrained art modernism. At the far end of the room, Lolita von Waldeck was sitting on a black spitz dog. She was thought, dainty, clean and agile as a Servet figure in her smart afternoon gown of pale crepe.

Iran made a bow to that sheam of a girl had risen to advance with a lovely entrancing smile upon lips resembled red velvet.

Iran had a good memory, Monsieur Gray. I had feared that you would not take my invitation seriously.

Iran had an air of gentle enthusiasm that seemed wholly convincing. How incredible was that this lovely creature had driven her car to the edge of the estate. What a perfect actress she

have never see anything like them. It would almost seem as though Dame Nature had gone to Bruges and copied the lace work.

"A pretty thought," laughed Ian, his eyes busy with the transparent luster of her complexion. "What do you say to a drive out along the Varosliget and, later perhaps, a cocktail at the Schloss? I have my car below."

The frank and unaffected eagerness with which Lolita accepted the suggestion puzzled her. Such was not a coquette's usual pose. She seemed rather like some friend's younger sister who has been noticed for the first time by some handsome classmate. He wondered whether di Valasto and the others had experienced the same reaction.

With a perfection that would have commanded the respect of a master actor, he played his part, lingering as he helped her into a short jacket of gray chincilla and shamelessly feasting his eyes on her, as flushed with pleasure, she pinned the orchids to her slender waist.

"Voila," she cried gaily, and now we are ready. I won't bother calling in Cousin Ernst—he is busy with some papers."

Some papers, Ian suspected they were the first part of Treaty X-2!

In Ian's long-hooded gray two-seater they whirled out along the broad, chestnut-shaded Vazci Korut and drew the frank admiration of brilliantly uniformed officers cantering along the bridge paths to either side of the road.

"Look! What a smart car—such a handsome couple!" Giggling nurse maids on the benches along that broad avenue pointed out the couple to their soldier swains.

As a warm breeze fluttered the brim of his gray felt hat, Ian sighed—too bad he couldn't merely enjoy the fragrant perfection of the spring afternoon and drive on and on watching how the breeze stirred the two or three ash-blond curls that had escaped below Lolita von Waldeck's wide brimmed leghorn hat.

"It is wonderful only to be alive on such a day," she smiled and Ian hated her for those words. Poor Leonard was but half-alive!

As the words left her lips a little flicker of wind twitched the handkerchief from her lap and deposited on the floor of the tonneau. Too late, Ian noticed it, for the girl had already bent forward and was extending an arm to retrieve the restless bit of lace. With her motion the lace sleeve fell apart to reveal on the soft white flesh just below the shoulder an angry red mark. He had barely time to recover from his surprise when she smiled at him—apparently she had not noticed that amazing expose.

"I beg your pardon, I didn't see the handkerchief until you'd gotten it. It was careless of me."

"Really Monsieur—this car almost sings; its motor is so low and smooth."

"Oh it's a good bus," replied Ian absently.

What the devil did that mark mean? It was new beyond a doubt. Still it probably didn't mean a thing—probably a careless maid accidentally touched a hot curling iron against the arm. Then again—but they were roaring up the winding gravel drive at the "Schloss" before he got the matter well thought out.

She said, "Oh, let's not sit up there on the terrace—if we are to expound philosophy. There are too many people and besides, I hate crowds. Down beside the old moat there are some tables, Josef!" She beckoned the maitre d'hotel.

Apparently that unctuous individual knew exactly what was wanted, for he bowed, washed his hands with invisible water and led off. The girl followed a step behind and a vastly perplexed Ian Gray tugged along a little behind her.

CHAPTER XII

Once they were seated in a little bower, undoubtedly designed for assignations which called for discretion if not for seclusion, Ian ordered cocktails, then settled back in a cane easy chair, quite unconscious that his rugged bronzed features were flatteringly outlined against the tenderly green spring foliage behind his head.

He wasted no time in launching his carefully prepared gambit, and so summoned a frown. She commented upon it with flattering promptness.

"Why so serious, Monsieur?"

"I was thinking," he observed,

"that life is very difficult. It seems always my fate to meet a lovely woman only to find that another has a prior claim!"

From under her very long lashes she smiled almost demurely at him, then said with a little shrug: "And just what makes you think that someone has a 'prior claim' (as you so tactfully put it) on me?"

"Leonard, for instance."

"Oh, Leonard?" She made an airy gesture that delighted Ian. "He is un beau garcon—a good companion, pour passer le temps, but love—jamais!"

Beneath the table, Ian's hands locked themselves together. Then it was true—and for all her amazing deception, she was indeed the expert heart-breaker that rumor had pictured her. Disgust filled him. So she had not even the excuse of love for precipitating the tragedy of Leonard.

"But Leonard was—is mad about you—are you sure the devotion is all on his side?"

"Yes," she said, definitely. "It is not that I am ungrateful, Leonard has been very good to me. I—I like Leonard—but it was very rude of him to go away without saying anything."

"He couldn't. Mr. King sent him off without warning."

"Poor boy—he was so eager for our partie a deux tonight." Her eyes suddenly sought his, engaged and dazzled them as she said: "But I do not love Leonard; he is too young, too uninformed. You, there came a sudden richness in that melow voice, 'you are so much older, I am sure you have lived a full life.'"

Obeying an inexplicable impulse, Ian shamelessly deserted his chair to sit on the love-seat beside her. Through the open door of the bowler he could see weeping willows bending over the ancient moat beyond. In it a big white swan was cruising slowly along, looking this way and that with bright yellow rimmed eyes—the only spectator.

Exhilarated by the proximity of the graceful beauty beside him, Ian found it alarmingly easy to launch into a subtle courtship that was at once so breathless and so headlong that Lolita von Waldeck's pale cheeks commenced to glow with color. He had loved her, he declared, from the first moment he had seen her surrounded by admirers in Baron von Satzmar's salon. . . . He knew she would refuse to believe that—such a sudden affection could be genuine. But it was.

Was she moved? Certainly, she seemed not ill-pleased. He was afraid that his very headlong manner would be taken as unconvincing; yet for some reason she appeared glad, very eager, to credit the genuineness of his admiration. To it all Lolita listened, prettily uncertain, her great eyes fixed on his, with a provocative intent expression.

"You—you make love prettily," she murmured. "You almost sound as though you meant it."

"I do," declared Ian with an earnestness that surprised him.

Half wistful, half gay, Lolita von Waldeck suddenly lifted her cocktail glass, and looking into the earnest brown face of her vis-a-vis said: "Bien. Time is short, I—I leave for Romania very soon. Tomorrow, perhaps. So, cher ami, let us make the most of that time that is permitted to us, for I—I like you, Ian. I like you very much!" To Ian it sounded, strangely enough, as though she meant her words, as though there was more she yearned to say, but could not. "You see, Ian, I love bravery, strength and quick wit," she was saying, her voice so low he could barely hear it. "Last night when you dealt with that wretched Sobeloff—do you know? You reminded me of a preur chevalier. It was superb how you carried off that dreadful affair. Your quiet courage—it—it did something to me. I thought of that all night—I am shameless to admit it, no?"

"No. You are charming—"

What a queer, mad affair this was. Quite suddenly, he came to the realization that he was very seriously intrigued by Lolita von Waldeck. Here was a certain simplicity and innate charm that defied analysis. She was, indeed, a modern Circe to enchant and bemuse all men. Then to his amazed horror he suddenly realized that he wanted this strange girl and wanted her with all his heart and soul!

Panic-stricken at the enormity of the emotion, he summoned all his will power to fight off this incredible thing. Could it be that he, Ian Knowles Gray, was falling in love with the girl who was responsible for his best friend's impending disgrace, for his attempt at suicide? Even while he struggled within himself the scent of the Orchidees Noires remained tantalizingly faint in his nostrils, and her calm, deep blue eyes asked questions of his innermost being.

Will power achieved a faint and, he feared a temporary victory when he flagellated his mind with the thought of the impending disasters.

Leonard Holt might have been such a fool, but he, Ian Gray, would never throw away an old and honored name for any woman. It was his job to save the victims of her duplicity, not to yield to it himself.

She was speaking. Gazing on the water and hand gracefully lax in her lap.

"I don't know why it is, mon ami,

but ever since we met at the Austrian Minister's dinner, I—I have felt happy—strangely happy and yet, at the same time, afraid of something."

Ian felt a little panic-stricken. He had thought he must act but, all at once, it was only too easy to sound convincing. Some impulse, unrecognizable but powerful as a flood tide, was carrying him on, winging his mad courtship with a fluent earnestness.

"It is queer, Lolita," he continued in bewildered tones, "but I, also, felt that our meeting was something more than a simple rencontre. I used to wonder why Leonard talked so much about you. But now—"

With a sense of despair he saw his whole carefully planned campaign swept away. All the world mattered nothing—Lolita dominated everything, he could see neither before nor beyond her; she filled the universe. He knew only he had fallen in love and that he wanted Lolita Waldeck. It was useless to remind himself of di Valasto, the attache at Bucharest, Ilya and Leonard. What of them? Straws, unimportant straws!!!

Handsome ruddy features lit with intensity, Ian leaned forward, his voice softly hoarse as he spoke, and though she made a quick spasmodic gesture of negation said: "Lolita, dear, there's no use beating around the bush, I want you. It's come on me all of a sudden. You mustn't think I am insulting you—that I should have taken more time. Things like this are timeless—are they not?"

There was now a misty tender light in the depths of Lolita von Waldeck's eyes, he realized, and re-

joined. Yes, all the rest of the world was out of focus except that lovely face so near his own. His blood was racing like a mill stream. He seized her hand.

"No, Ian, no," she whispered, red lips suddenly aquiver. She drew back on the seat, almost frightened it seemed. "You must not, for your own good, you must not—"

As abruptly as though she had switched herself and a sudden terror darted into her eyes like a fugitive into an alley, then was gone. Then that inscrutable smile reappeared on her lips as she said: "Ian, mon ami, there is no reason why we should not become the closest of friends. You are coming tonight to Kerrepsi Ut. I will arrange that we have the apartment to ourselves. My cousin will go to some stuffy old relations over in Buda—"

Furious at himself, Ian vainly sought to suppress a tide of exultation that swept him as a wave roars over a half-tide rock. All at once he had caught the warm fragrance of her body in his arms. With a breathless little sigh she yielded the scarlet provocation of her mouth. Then suddenly she broke away, stood up, breast heaving as though torn by conflicting emotions.

"No," she murmured. "This is the end. Go away, Ian—leave me—I beg you—for your own sake—"

Utterly taken aback, Ian beheld that the slender, beautifully gowned form was shaking with silent but racking sobs. He stood up and took her by the hand.

"Sit down, my dear," said he gently. "There are many things I don't understand—"

Try as he would, Ian could not

fathom that sudden volte face. For example why had she stammered forth that sudden warning against herself? Why? Was it a clever play for credulity? He suspected so—

As they sat there silent, uncertainly gazing at each other, and handsome as two young divinities, a swan came gliding up, its snake-like snowy neck gracefully undulating as it probed the pebbled bottom for food.

"Voila!" Smiling wanly, Lolita tossed the great shiplike bird a bit of bread, then settled back on the seat, chin resting on breast.

As the fire of a forge flares when the bellows beneath it is pressed, so the heat of Ian's strange love grew into a consuming fire. In spite of all—in spite of the cold reasoning of his brain, he loved her above life itself. He knew it. Strange that love should happen so suddenly, so unhappily. He slowly raised his eyes and found she was looking at him steadily with a curious almost wistful tenderness.

She said: "Several times, Ian I for—for reasons, have said to men 'I love you.' I—I lied. Is it not irony that now, when I really mean those words—you do not, in your heart, believe me—?"

Her lips formed a stiff little smile that was like a tiny wound in her pale features when he vehemently shook his head.

"Oh, no," she sighed, dropping troubled eyes to the swan. "You have been suspicious of me from the first. You are only here because you are fine. You are afraid for Leonard's little financee."

There was infinite pathos in her tone, a patient resignation to fate

that somehow br—

"It is strange, without looking up commune with her this particular mon have fallen in love. A things would have been. We could have had a petty courtship. But sprang to her feet and her big—"now" I must go of Olushka and Feodor— Olushka? Feodor? Ian's him that they were Russian. He started—she had almost the door, her small slipped crumpling the clean, white under foot. The swan raised a d ping head and cocked a hopeful eye. Suddenly he had caught her, bent her back in a fiercely, tender embrace and, with earth and sky reeling about, pressed kiss after kiss upon the exotic fragrance of her mouth. At first she lay passive, eyes closed and body lax, then she met his kisses with a hunger that was somehow pathetic.

"I think we'd better stay a little long, Lolita," he said quietly. She looked at him, lips curled in terror. "No, no, I cannot."

"Why?" he inquired softly. (To be Continued)

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All male persons between the ages of 21 and 50 are required to list their polls during the same time.

All persons who own property and fail to list it and all who are liable for poll tax and fail to give themselves in will be deemed guilty of a misdemeanor.

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