

CHAPTER I

It was a soft starlit night mystically changing into dawn when Donal Muir left the tall, grave house on Eaton Square after the strangely enchanted dance given by the old Dowager Duchess of Darte. A certain impellingness of mood suggested that exercise would be a good thing and he decided to walk home. It was an impellingness of body as well as mind. He had remained later than the relative who had by chance been responsible for his being brought, an uninvited guest, to the party. The Duchess had not known that he was in London. It may also be accepted as a fact that to this festivity given for the pleasure of Mrs. Gareth-Lawless' daughter, she might not have chosen to assume the responsibility of extending him an invitation. She knew something of his mother and had sometimes discussed her with her old friend, Lord Coombe. She admired Helen Muir greatly and was also much touched by certain aspects of her maternity. What Lord Coombe had told her of the meeting of the two children in the Gardens, of their innocent child passion of attraction for each other, and of the unchildlike tragedy their enforced parting had obviously been to both had at once deeply interested and moved her. Coombe had only been able to relate certain surface incidents connected with the matter, but they had been incidents not easy to forget and from which unusual things might be deduced. No! She would not have felt prepared to be the first to deliberately throw these two young people across each other's paths at this glowing moment of their early blooming--knowing as she did Helen Muir's strongly anxious desire

to keep them apart.

She had seen Donal Muir several times as the years had passed and had not been blind to the physical beauty and allure of charm the rest of the world saw and proclaimed with suitable adjectives. When the intimate friend who was his relative appeared with him in her drawing-room and she found standing before her, respectfully appealing for welcome with a delightful smile, this quite incomparably good-looking young man, she was conscious of a secret momentary disturbance and a recognition of the fact that something a shade startling had happened.

"When a thing of the sort occurs entirely without one's aid and rather against one's will--one may as well submit," she said later to Lord Coombe. "Endeavouring to readjust matters is merely meddling with Fate and always ends in disaster. As an incident, I felt there was a hint in it that it would be the part of wisdom to leave things alone."

She had watched the two dancing with a kind of absorption in her gaze. She had seen them go out of the room into the conservatory. She had known exactly when they had returned and, seeing the look on their young faces, had understood why the eyes of the beholders followed them.

When Lord Coombe came in with the ominous story of the assassination at Sarajevo, all else had been swept from her mind. There had been place in her being for nothing but the shock of a monstrous recognition. She had been a gravely conscious looker-on at the slow but never ceasing growth

of a world peril for too many years not to be widely awake to each sign of its development.

"Serbia, Russia, Austria, Germany. It will form a pretext and a clear road to France and England," Lord Coombe had said.

"A broad, clear road," the Duchess had agreed breathlessly--and, while she gazed before her, ceased to see the whirl of floating and fluttering butterfly-wings of gauze or to hear the music to whose measure they fluttered and floated.

But no sense of any connection with Sarajevo disturbed the swing of the fox trot or the measure of the tango, and when Donal Muir walked out into the summer air of the starlit street and lifted his face, because already a faint touch of primrose dawn was showing itself on the eastern sky, in his young world there was only recognition of a vague tumult of heart and brain and blood.

"What's the matter?" he was thinking. "What have I been doing-- What have I been saying? I've been like a chap in a dream. I'm not awake yet."

All that he had said to the girl was a simple fact. He had exaggerated nothing. If, in what now seemed that long-ago past, he had not been a sturdy, normal little lad surrounded by love and friendliness, with his days full of healthy play and pleasure, the child tragedy of their being

torn apart might have left ugly marks upon his mind, and lurked there, a morbid memory. And though, in time, rebellion and suffering had died away, he had never really forgotten. Even to the cricket-playing, larking boy at Eton there had now and then returned, with queer suddenness, recollections which gave him odd moments of resurrected misery. They passed away, but at long intervals they came back and always with absolute reality. At Oxford the intervals had been longer but a certain picture was one whose haunting never lost its clearness. It was a vision of a colour-warm child kneeling on the grass, her eyes uplifted, expressing only a lonely patience, and he could actually hear her humble little voice as she said:

"I--I haven't anything." And it always roused him to rage.

Then there was the piteous break in her voice when she hid her eyes with her arm and said of her beast of a mother:

"She--doesn't like me!"

"Damn! Damn!" he used to say every time the thing came back. "Oh! damn!--damn!" And the expletive never varied in its spontaneity.

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As he walked under the primrose sky and breathed in the faint fragrant stir of the freshening morning air, he who had always felt joyously the

sense of life knew more than ever before the keen rapture of living. The springing lightness of his own step as it rang on the pavement was part of it. It was as though he were still dancing and he almost felt something warm and light in his arm and saw a little head of dark silk near his breast.

Throughout his life he had taken all his joys to his closest companion and nearest intimate--his mother. Theirs had not been a common life together. He had not even tried to explain to himself the harmony and gaiety of their nearness in which there seemed no separation of years. She had drawn and held him to the wonder of her charm and had been the fine flavour of his existence. It was actually true that he had so far had no boyish love affairs because he had all unconsciously been in love with the beautiful completeness of her.

Always when he returned home after festivities, he paused for a moment outside her bedroom door because he so often found her awake and waiting to talk to him if he were inclined to talk--to listen--to laugh softly--or perhaps only to say good-night in her marvel of a voice--a marvel because its mellow note held such love.

This time when, after entering the house and mounting the stairs he reached her door, he found it partly open.

"Come in," he heard her say. "I went to sleep very early and awakened half an hour ago. It is really morning."

She was sitting up in a deep chair by the window.

"Let me look at you," she said with a little laugh. "And then kiss me and go to bed."

But even the lovely, faint early light revealed something to her.

"You walk like a young stag on the hillside," she said. "You don't want to go to sleep at all. What is it?"

He sat on a low ottoman near her and laughed a little also.

"I don't know," he answered, "but I'm wide awake."

The English summer dawn is of a magical clear light and she could see him well. She had a thrilled feeling that she had never quite known before what a beautiful thing he was--how perfect and shining fair in his boy manhood.

"Mother," he said, "you won't remember perhaps--it's a queer thing that I should myself--but I have never really forgotten. There was a child I played with in some garden when I was a little chap. She was a beautiful little thing who seemed to belong to nobody--"

"She belonged to a Mrs. Gareth-Lawless," Helen interpolated.

"Then you do remember?"

"Yes, dear. You asked me to go to the Gardens with you to see her. And Mrs. Gareth-Lawless came in by chance and spoke to me."

"And then we had suddenly to go back to Scotland. I remember you wakened

me quite early in the morning--I thought it was the middle of the night." He began to speak rather slowly as if he were thinking it over.

"You didn't know that, when you took me away, it was a tragedy. I had promised to play with her again and I felt as if I had deserted her hideously. It was not the kind of a thing a little chap usually feels--it was something different--something more. And to-night it actually all came back. I saw her again, mother."

He was so absorbed that he did not take in her involuntary movement.

"You saw her again! Where?"

"The old Duchess of Darte was giving a small dance for her. Hallowe took me--"

"Does the Duchess know Mrs. Gareth-Lawless?" Helen had a sense of breathlessness.

"I don't quite understand the situation. It seems the little thing insists on earning her own living and she is a sort of companion and secretary to the Duchess. Mother, she is just the same!"

The last words were a sort of exclamation. As he uttered them, there came back to her the day when--a little boy--he had seemed as though he were speaking as a young man might have spoken. Now he was a young man, speaking almost as if he were a little boy--involuntarily revealing his exaltation.

As she had felt half frightened years before, so she felt wholly frightened now. He was not a little boy any longer. She could not sweep him away in her arms to save him from danger. Also she knew more of the easy, fashionably accepted views of the morals of pretty Mrs. Gareth-Lawless, still lightly known with some cynicism as "Feather." She knew what Donal did not. His relationship to the Head of the House of Coombe made it unlikely that gossip should choose him as the exact young man to whom could be related stories of his distinguished relative, Mrs. Gareth-Lawless and her girl. But through the years Helen Muir had unavoidably heard things she thought particularly hideous. And here the child was again "just the same."

"She has only grown up." His laugh was like a lightly indrawn breath. "Her cheek is just as much like a rose petal. And that wonderful little look! And her eyelashes. Just the same! Do girls usually grow up like

that? It was the look most. It's a sort of asking and giving--both at once."

There it was! And she had nothing to say. She could only sit and look at him--at his beautiful youth all alight with the sudden flame of that which can set a young world on fire and sweep on its way either carrying devastation or clearing a path to Paradise.

His own natural light unconsciousness was amazing. He only knew that he was in delightful high spirits. The dancing, the music, the early morning were, he thought, accountable for it.

She bent forward to kiss his cheek and she patted his hand.

"My dear! My dear!" she said. "How you have enjoyed your evening!"

"There never was anything more perfect," with the light laugh again.

"Everything was delightful--the rooms, the music, the girls in their pretty frocks like a lot of flowers tossed about. She danced like a bit of thistledown. I didn't know a girl could be so light. The back of her slim little neck looks as fine and white and soft as a baby's. I am so glad you were awake. Are you sure you don't want to go to sleep again?" suddenly.

"Not in the least. Look at the sun beginning to touch the tips of the little white clouds with rose. That stir among the leaves of the plane

trees is the first delicious breath of the morning. Go on and tell me all about the party."

"It's a perfect time to talk," he laughed.

And there he sat and made gay pictures for her of what he had seen and done. He thought he was giving her mere detail of the old Duchess' dance. He did not know that when he spoke of new tangos, of flowers, of music and young nymphs like tossed blossoms, he never allowed her for a moment to lose sight of Mrs. Gareth-Lawless' girl. She was the light floating over his vision of the happy youth of the assembly--she was the centre--the beginning and the ending of it all.