

CHAPTER VIII

The other woman who loved and was loved by him moved about her world in these days with a face less radiant than the one people turned to look at in the street or in its passing through the house in Eaton Square.

Helen Muir's eyes were grave and pondered. She had always known of the sometime coming of the hour in which would rise the shadow--to him a cloud of rapture--which must obscure the old clearness of vision which had existed between them. She had been too well balanced of brain to allow herself to make a tragedy of it or softly to sentimentalise of loss. It was mere living nature that it should be so. He would be as always, a beloved wonder of dearness and beauty when his hour came and she would look on and watch and be so cleverly silent and delicately detached from his shy, aloof young moods, his funny, dear involuntary secrets and reserves. But at any moment--day or night--at any elate emotional moment ready!

She had the rare accomplishment of a perfect knowledge of how to wait, and to wait--if necessary--long. When the first golden down had shown itself on his cheek and lip she had not noticed it too much and when his golden soprano voice began to change to a deeper note and annoyed him with its uncertainties she had spared him awkwardness by making him feel the transition a casual natural thing, instead of a personal and characteristic weakness. She had loved every stage of innocence and ignorance and adorable silliness he had passed through and he had grown

closer to her through the medium of each, because nothing in life was so clear as her lovely wiseness and fine perceptive entirety of sympathy and poise.

"I never have to explain really," he said more than once. "You would understand even if I were an idiot or a criminal. And you'd understand if I were an archangel."

With a deep awareness she knew that, when she first realised that the shadow was rising, it would be different. She would have to watch it with an aloofness more delicate and yet more warmly sensitive than any other. In the days when she first thought of him as like one who is listening to a far-off sound, it seemed possible that in the clamour of louder echoes this one might lose itself and at last die away even from memory. It was youth's way to listen and youth's way to find it easy to forget. He heard many reverberations in these days and had much reason for thought and action. He thought a great deal, he worked energetically, he came and went, he read and studied, he obeyed orders and always stood ready for new ones. Her pride in his vigorous initiative and practical determination was a glowing flame in her heart. He meant to be no toy soldier.

As she became as practical a worker as he was, they did much together and made plans without ceasing. When he was away she was always doing things in which he was interested and when he returned he always brought to her suggestions for new service or the development of the old. But as

the days passed and became weeks she knew that the far-off sound was still being listened to. She could not have told how--but she knew. And she saw the beloved dearness and beauty growing in him. He came into the house each day in his khaki as if khaki were a shining thing. When he laughed, or sat and smiled, or dreamed--forgetting she was there--her very heart quaked with delight in him. Another woman than Robin counted over his charms and made a tender list of them, wondering at each one. As a young male pheasant in mating time dons finer gloss and brilliancy of plumage, perhaps he too bloomed and all unconscious developed added colour and inches and gallant swing of tread. As people turned half astart to look at Robin bending over her desk or walking about among them in her modest dress, so also did they turn to look after him as he went in springing march along the streets.

"Some day he will begin to tell me," Helen used to say to herself at night. "He may only begin--but perhaps it will be to-morrow."

It was not, however, to-morrow--or to-morrow. And in the midst of his work he still listened. As he sat and dreamed he listened and sometimes he was very deep in thought--sitting with his arms folded and his eyes troubled and questioning of the space into which he looked. The time was really not very long, but it began to seem so to her.

"But some day--soon--he will tell me," she thought.

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One afternoon Donal walked into a room where a number of well-dressed women were talking, drinking tea and knitting or crocheting. It had begun already to be the fashion for almost every woman to carry on her arm a work bag and produce from its depths at any moment without warning

something she was making. In the early days the bag was usually highly decorated and the article being made was a luxury. Only a few serious and pessimistic workers had begun to produce plain usefulness and in this particular Mayfair drawing-room "the War" as yet seemed to present itself rather as a dramatic and picturesque social asset. A number of good-looking young officers moved about or sat in corners being petted and flirted with, while many of the women had the slightly elated excitement of air produced in certain of their sex by the marked preponderance of the presence of the masculine element. It was a thing which made for high spirits and laughs and amiable semi-caressing chaff. The women who in times of peace had been in the habit of referring to their "boys" were in these days in great form.

Donal had been taken to the place by an amusement-loving acquaintance who professed that a special invitation made it impossible to pass by without dropping in. The house was Mrs. Erwyn's and had already attracted attention through the recent débuts of Eileen and Winifred who had grown up very pretty and still retained their large, curious eyes and their tendency to giggle musically.

In very short and slimly alluring frocks they were assisting their mother in preparing young warriors for the seat of war by giving them chocolate in egg-shell cups and little cakes. Winifred carried a coral satin work-bag embroidered with carnations and was crocheting a silk necktie peculiarly suited to fierce onslaught on the enemy.

"Oh!" she gasped, clutching in secret at Eileen's sleeve when Donal entered the room. "There he is! Jack said he would make him come! Just look at him!"

"Gracious!" ejaculated Eileen. "I daren't look! It's not safe!"

They looked, however, to their irresistible utmost when he came to make his nice, well-behaved bow to his hostess.

"I love his bow," Eileen whispered. "It is such a beautiful tall bow. And he looks as good as he is beautiful."

"Oh! not good exactly!" protested Winifred. "Just sweet--as if he thinks you are quite as nice as himself."

He was taken from one group to another and made much of and flattered quite openly. He was given claret cup and feathery sandwiches and asked questions and given information. He was chattered to and whispered about and spent half an hour in a polite vortex of presentation. He was not as highly entertained as his companion was because he was thinking of

something else--of a place which seemed incredibly far away from London drawing-rooms--even if he could have convinced himself that it existed on the same earth. The trouble was that he was always thinking of this place--and of others. He could not forget them even in the midst of any clamour of life. Sometimes he was afraid he forgot where he was and might look as if he were not listening to people. There were moments when he caught his breath because of a sudden high throb of his heart. How could he shut out of his mind that which seemed to be his mind--his body--the soul of him!

It was at a moment when he was thinking of this with a sudden sense of disturbance that a silver toned voice evidently speaking to him attracted his attention.

The voice was of silver and the light laugh was silvery.

"You look as if you were not thinking of any of us," the owner said.

He turned about to find himself looking at one of the prettiest of the filmily dressed creatures in the room. Her frock was one of the briefest and her tiny heels the highest and most slender. The incredible foot and ankle wore a flesh silk stocking so fine that it looked as though they were bare--which was the achievement most to be aspired to. Every atom of her was lovely and her small deep-curved mouth and pure large eyes were like an angel's.

"I believe you remember me!" she said after a second or so in which they held each other's gaze and Donal knew he began to flush slowly.

"Yes," he answered. "I do--now I have looked again. You were--The Lady Downstairs."

She flung out the silver laugh again.

"After all these years! After one has grown old and withered and wrinkled--and has a grown-up daughter."

He answered with a dazzling young-man-of-the-world bow and air. He had not been to Eton and Oxford and touched the outskirts of two or three London seasons, as a boy beauty and a modest Apollo Belvidere in his teens, without learning a number of pleasant little ways.

"You are exactly as you were the morning you came into the Gardens dressed in crocuses and daffodils. I thought they were daffodils and crocuses. I said so to my mother afterwards."

He did not like her but he knew how her world talked to her. And he wanted to hear her speak--The Lady Downstairs--who had not "liked" the soft-eyed, longing, warm little lonely thing.

"All people say of you is entirely true," she said. "I did not believe it at first but I do now." She patted the seat of the small sofa she had

dropped on. "Come and sit here and talk to me a few minutes. Girls will come and snatch you away presently but you can spare about three minutes."

He did as he was told and wondered as he came nearer to the shell fineness of her cheek and her seraphic smile.

"I want you to tell me something about my only child," she said.

He hoped very much that he did not flush in his sometimes-troublesome blond fashion then. He hoped so.

"I shall be most happy to tell you anything I have the honour of knowing," he answered. "Only ask."

"You would be capable of putting on a touch of Lord Coombe's little stiff air--if you were not so young and polite," she said. "It was Lord Coombe who told me about the old Duchess' dance--and that you tangoed or swooped--or kicked with my Robin. He said both of you did it beautifully."

"Miss Gareth-Lawless did--at least."

He was looking down and so did not chance to see the look of a little cat which showed itself in her quick side glance.

"She is not my Robin now. She belongs to the Dowager Duchess of Darte--for a consideration. She is one of the new little females who are obstinately determined to earn an honest living. I haven't seen her for months--perhaps years. Is she pretty?" The last three words came out like the little cat's pounce on a mouse. Donal even felt momentarily startled.

But he remained capable of raising clear eyes to hers and saying, "She was prettier than any one else at the Duchess' house that night. Far prettier."

"Have you never seen her since?"

This was a pounce again and he was quite aware of it.

"Yes."

Feather gurgled.

"That was really worthy of Lord Coombe," she said. "I wasn't being pushing, really, Mr. Muir. If any one asks you your intentions it will be the Dowager--not little Miss Gareth-Lawless' mother. I never pretended to chaperon Robin. She might run about all over London without my asking any questions. I am afraid I am not much of a mother. I am not in the least like yours."

"Like mine?" He wondered why his mother should be so suddenly dragged in.

She laughed with a bright air of being much entertained.

"Do you remember how Mrs. Muir whisked you away from London the day after she found out that you were playing with my vagabond of a Robin--unknowing of your danger? There was a mother for you! It nearly killed my little pariah."

She rose and held out her hand.

"I have not really had my three minutes, but 'I must not detain you any longer,' as Royal Highnesses say. I must go."

"Why?" he ejaculated with involuntary impatience.

"Because Eileen Erwyn is standing with her back markedly turned towards us, pretending to talk. I know the expression of her little ears and she has just laid them back close to her head, which means business. Why do you all at once look quite like Lord Coombe?" Perhaps he did look a trifle like his relative. He had risen to his feet.

"I was not aware that I was whisked away from London," he said.

"I was," with pretty impudence. "You were bundled back to Scotland

almost before daylight. Lord Coombe knew about it. We laughed immensely together. It was a great joke because Robin fainted and fell into the mud, or something of the sort, when you didn't turn up the next morning. She almost pined away and died of grief, tiresome little thing! I told you Eileen was preparing to assault. Here she is! Hordes of girls will now advance upon you. So glad to have had you even for a few treasured seconds. Good afternoon."