

CHAPTER IX

It was not a long time before he had left the house, but it seemed long and as if he had thought a great many rather incoherent things before he had reached the street and presently parted from his gay acquaintance and was on his way to his mother's house where she was spending a week, having come down from Scotland as she did often.

He walked all the way home because he wanted movement. He also wanted time to think things over because the intensity of his own mood troubled him. It was new for him to think much about himself, but lately he had found himself sometimes wondering at, as well as shaken by, emotional mental phases through which he passed. A certain moving fancy always held its own in his thoughts--as a sort of background to them. It was in his feeling that he was in those weeks a Donal Muir who was unknown and unseen by the passing world. No one but himself--and Robin--could know the meaning, the feeling, the nature of this Donal. It was as if he lived in a new Dimension of whose existence other people did not know. He could not have explained because it would not have been understood. He could vaguely imagine that effort at explanation would end--even begin--by being so clumsy that it would be met by puzzled or unbelieving smiles.

To walk about--to sleep--to awaken surrounded by rarefied light and air in which no object or act or even word or thought wore its past familiar

meaning, or to go about the common streets, feeling as though somehow one were apart and unseen, was a singular thing. Having had a youth filled with quite virile pleasures and delightful emotions--and to be lifted above them into other air and among other visions--was, he told himself, like walking in a dream. To be filled continually with one thought, to rebel against any obstacle in the path to one desire, and from morning until night to be impelled by one eagerness for some moment or hour for which there was reason enough for its having place in the movings of the universe, if it brought him face to face with what he must stand near to--see--hear--perhaps touch.

It was because of the world's madness, because of the human fear and weeping everywhere, because of the new abysses which seemed to yawn every day on every side, that both soul and senses were so abnormally overstrung. He was overwhelmed by exquisite compassions in his thoughts of Robin, he was afraid for her youngness, her sweetness, the innocent defencelessness which was like a child's. He was afraid of his own young rashness and the entrancement of the dream. The great lunging chariot of War might plunge over them both.

But never for one moment could he force himself to regret or repent. Boys in their twenties already lay in their thousands on the fields over there. And she would far, far rather remember the kind hours and know that they were hidden in his heart for him to remember as he died--if he died! She had lain upon his breast holding him close and fast and she had sobbed hard--hard--but she had said it again and again and over and

over when he had asked her.

It was this aspect of her and things akin to it which had risen in his incoherent thoughts when he was manoeuvring to get away from the drawing-room full of chattering people. He knew himself overwhelmed again by the exquisite compassion because the thing Mrs. Gareth-Lawless had told him had brought back all the silent anguish of impotent childish rebellion the morning when he had been awakened before the day, and during the day when he had thought his small breast would burst as the train rushed on with him--away--away!

And Robin had told him the rest--sitting one afternoon in the same chair with him--a roomy, dingy red arm-chair in an old riverside inn where they had managed to meet and had spent a long rainy day together. She had told him--in a queer little strained voice--about the waiting--and waiting--and waiting. And about the certainty of her belief in his coming. And the tiny foot which grew numb. And the slow lump climbing in her throat. And the rush under the shrubs--and the beating hands--and cries--and of the rose dress and socks and crushed hat covered with mud. She had not been piteous or dramatic. She had been so simple that she had broken his heart in two and he had actually hidden his face in her hair.

"Oh! Donal, dear. You're crying!" she had said and she had broken down too and for a few seconds they had cried together rocking in each other's arms, while the rain streamed down the window panes and

beautifully shut them in, since there are few places more enclosing than the little, dingy private parlour of a remote English inn on a ceaselessly rainy day.

It had all come back before he reached the house in Kensington whose windows looked into the thick leaves of the plane trees. And at the same time he knew that the burning anger which kept rising in him was perhaps undue and not quite fair. But he was thinking it had not been mere cruel chance--it could have been helped--it need never have been! It had been the narrow cold hard planning of grown-up people who knew that they were powerful enough to enforce any hideous cruelty on creatures who had no defence. He actually found his heated mind making a statement of the case as wild as this and its very mercilessness of phrase checked him. The grown-up person had been his mother--his long-beloved--and he was absolutely calling her names. He pulled himself up vigorously and walked very fast. But the heat did not quite die down and other thoughts surged up in spite of his desire to keep his head and be reasonably calm. There had been a certain narrowness in the tragic separation of two happy children if the only reason for it had been that the mother of one was a pretty, frivolous, much gossiped about woman belonging to a rather too rapid set. And if it had been a reason then, how would it present itself now? What would happen to an untouched dream if argument and disapproval crashed into it? If his first intensely passionate impulse had been his desire to save it even from the mere touch of ordinary talk and smiling glances because he had felt that they would spoil the perfect joy of it, what would not open displeasure and

opposition make of the down on the butterfly's wing--the bloom on the peach? It was not so he phrased in his thoughts the things which tormented him, but the figures would have expressed his feeling. What if his mother were angry--though he had never seen her angry in his life and could only approach the idea because he had just found out that she had once been cruel--yes, it had been cruel! What if Coombe actually chose to interfere. Coombe with his unmoving face, his perfection of exact phrase and his cold almost inhuman eye! After all the matter concerned him closely.

"While Houses threaten to crumble and Heads may fall into the basket there are things we must remember until we disappear," he had said not long ago with this same grey eye fixed on him. "I have no son. If Marquisates continue to exist you will be the Head of the House of Coombe."

What would he make of a dream if he handled it? What would there be left? Donal's heart burned in his side when he recalled Feather's impudent little laugh as she had talked of her "vagabond Robin," her "small pariah." He was a boy entranced and exalted by his first passion and because he was a sort of young superman it was not a common one, though it shared all the unreason and impetuous simplicities of the most rudimentary of its kind. He could not think very calmly or logically; both the heaven and the earth in him swept him along as with the rush of the spheres. It was Robin who was foremost in all his thoughts. It was because she was so apart from all the world that it had seemed beautiful

to keep her so in his heart. She had always been so aloof a little creature--so unclaimed and naturally left alone. Perhaps that was why she had retained through the years the untouched look which he had recognised even at the dance, in the eyes which only waited exquisitely for kindness and asked for love. No one had ever owned her, no one really knew her--people only saw her loveliness--no one knew her but himself--the little beautiful thing--his own--his own little thing! Nothing on earth should touch her!

Because his thinking ended--as it naturally always did--in such thoughts as these last, he was obliged to turn back when he saw the plane trees and walk a few hundred feet in the opposite direction to give himself time. He even turned a corner and walked down another street. It was just as he turned that poignant chance brought him face to face with a girl in deep new mourning with the border of white crêpe in the brim of her close hat. Her eyes were red and half-closed with recent crying and she had a piteous face. He knew what it all meant and involuntarily raised his hand in salute. He scarcely knew he did it and for a second she seemed not to understand. But the next second she burst out crying and hurriedly took out her handkerchief and hid her face as she passed. One of the boys lying on the blood-wet mire in Flanders, was Donal's bitter thought, but he had had his kind hours to recall at the last moment--and even now she had them too.

Helen Muir from her seat at the window looking into the thick leafage of the trees saw him turn at the entrance and heard him mount the steps.

The days between them and approaching separation were growing shorter and shorter. She thought this every morning when she awakened and realised anew that the worst of it all was that neither knew how short they were and that the thing which was to happen would be sudden--as death is always sudden however long one waits. He had never reached even that beginning of the telling--whatsoever he had to tell. Perhaps it was coming now. She had tried to prepare herself by endeavouring to imagine how he would look when he began--a little shy--even a little lovably awkward? But his engaging smile--his quite darling smile--would show itself in spite of him as it always did.

But when he came into the room his look was a new one to her. It was not happy--it was not a free look. There was something like troubled mental reservation in it--and when had there ever been mental reservation between them? Oh, no--that must not--must not be now! Not now!

He sat down with his cap in his hand as if he had forgotten to lay it aside or as if he were making a brief call.

"What has happened, Donal?" she said. "Have you come to tell me that--?"

"No, not that--though that may come any moment now. It is something else."

"What else?"

"I don't know how to begin," he said. "There has never been anything like this before. But I must know from you that a--silly woman--has not been telling me spiteful lies. She is the kind of woman who would say anything it amused her to say."

"What was it she said?"

"I was dragged into a house by Clonmel. He said he had promised to drop in to tea. There were a lot of people. Mrs. Gareth-Lawless was there and began to talk to me."

"Why did you think she might be telling you spiteful lies?"

"That is it," he broke out miserably impetuous. "Perhaps it may all seem childish and unimportant to you. But you have always been perfect. You were the one perfect being. I have never doubted you--"

"Do you doubt me now?"

"Perhaps no one but myself could realise that a sort of sore spot--yes, a sore spot--was left in my mind for years because of a wretched thing which happened when I was a child. Did you deliberately take me back to Scotland so suddenly that early morning? Was it a thing which could have been helped?"

"I thought not, Donal. Perhaps I was wrong, perhaps I was right."

"Was it because you wanted to separate me from a child I was fond of?"

"Yes."

"And your idea was that because her mother was a flighty woman with bad taste and the wrong surrounding her poor little girl would contaminate me?"

"It was because her mother was a light woman and all her friends were like her. And your affection for the child was not like a child's affection."

"No, it wasn't," he said and he leaned forward with his forehead in his hands.

"I wanted to put an end to it before it was too late. I saw nothing but pain in it for you. It filled me with heart-broken fear to think of the girl such a mother and such a life would make."

"She was such a little thing--" said Donal, "--such a tender mite of a thing! She's such a little thing even now."

"Is she?" said Helen.

Now she knew he would not tell her. And she was right. Up to that afternoon there had always been the chance that he would. Night after night he had been on the brink of telling her of the dream. Only as the beauty and wonder of it grew he had each day given himself another day, and yet another and another. But he had always thought the hour would come and he had been sure she would not grudge him a moment he had held

from her. Now he shut everything within himself.

"I wish you had not done it. It was a mistake," was all he said.

Suddenly he felt thrown back upon himself, heartsick and cold. For the first time in his life he could not see her side of the question. The impassioned egotism of first love overwhelmed him.

"You met her on the night of the old Duchess' dance," Helen said.

"Yes."

"You have met her since?"

"Yes."

"It is useless for older people to interfere," she said. "We have loved each other very much. We have been happy together. But I can do nothing to help you. Oh! Donal, my own dear!"

Her involuntary movement of putting her hand to her throat was a piteous gesture.

"You are going away," she pleaded. "Don't let anything come between us--not now! It is not as if you were going to stay. When you come back perhaps--"

"I may never come back," he answered and as he said it he saw again the widowed girl who had hurried past him crying because he had saluted her. And he saw Robin as he had seen her the night before--Robin who belonged to no one--whom no one missed at any time when she went in or out--who could come and go and meet a man anywhere as if she were the only little soul in London. And yet who had always that pretty, untouched air.

"I only wanted to be sure. It was a mistake. We will never speak of it again," he added.

"If it was a mistake, forgive it. It was only because I could not hear that your life should not be beautiful. These are not like other days. Oh! Donal my dear, my dear!" And she broke into weeping and took him in her arms and he held her and kissed her tenderly. But whatsoever happened--whatsoever he did he knew that if he was to save and hold his bliss to the end he could not tell her now.