CHAPTER XIII

But there were no letters. And she was obliged to sit at her desk in the corner and listen to what people said about what was happening, and now and then to Lord Coombe speaking in low tones to the Duchess of his anxiety and uncertainty about Donal. Anxiety was increasing on every side and such of the unthinking multitude as had at last ceased to believe that one magnificent English blow would rid the earth of Germany, had begun to lean towards belief in a vision of German millions adding themselves each day to other millions advancing upon France, Belgium, England itself, a grey encroaching mass rolling forward and ever forward, overwhelming even neutral countries until not only Europe but the whole world was covered, and the mailed fist beat its fragments into such dust as it chose. Even those who had not lost their heads and who knew more than the general public, wore grave faces because they felt they knew too little and could not know more. Coombe's face was hard and grey many days.

"It seems as if one lost them in the flood sometimes," Robin heard him say to the Duchess. "I saw his mother yesterday and could give her no definite news. She believes that he is where the worst fighting is going on. I could not tell her he was not."

As, when they had been together, the two had not thought of any future,

so, now Robin was alone, she could not think of any to-morrow--perhaps she would not. She lived only in the day which was passing. She rose, dressed and presented herself to the Duchess for orders; she did the work given her to do, she saw the day gradually die and the lights lighted; she worked as long as she was allowed to do so--and then the day was over and she climbed the staircase to her room.

Sometimes she sat and wrote letters to Donal--long yearning letters, but when they were written she tore them into pieces or burned them. If they were to keep their secret she could not send such letters because there were so many chances that they would be lost. Still there was a hopeless comfort in writing them, in pouring out what she would not have written even if she had been sure that it would reach him safely. No girl who loved a man who was at the Front would let him know that it seemed as if her heart were slowly breaking. She must be brave--brave! But she was not brave, that she knew. The news from the Front was worse every day; there were more women with awful faces; some workers had dropped out and
came no more. One of them who had lost three sons in one battle had died a few days after the news arrived because the shock had been too great for her strength to endure. There were new phases of anguish on all sides. She did all she was called on to do with a secret passion of eagerness; each smallest detail was the sacred thing. She begged the Duchess to allow her to visit and help the mothers of sons who were fighting--or wounded or missing. That made her feel nearer to things she wanted to feel near to. When they cried or told her stories, she could

understand. When she worked she might be doing things which might somehow reach Donal or boys like Donal.

Howsoever long her life was she knew one thing would never be blotted out by time--the day she went down to Mersham Wood to see Mrs. Bennett, whose three grandsons had been killed within a few days of each other. She had received the news in one telegram. There was no fairy wood any longer, there were only bare branched trees standing holding out naked arms to the greyness of the world. They looked as if they were protesting against something. The grass and ferns were brown and sodden with late rains and there were no hollyhocks and snapdragons in the cottage garden--only on either side of the brick path dead brown stalks, some of them broken by the wind. Things had not been neatly cut down and burned and swept away. The grandsons had made the garden autumn-tidy every year before this one.

The old fairy woman sat on a clean print-covered arm chair by a very small fire. She had a black print dress on and a black shawl and a black ribbon round her cap. Her Bible lay on a little table near her but it was closed.

"Don't get up, please, Mrs. Bennett," Robin said when she lifted the latch and entered.

The old fairy woman looked at her in a dazed way.

"I'm so eye-dimmed with crying that I can scarcely see," she said.

Robin came to her and knelt down on the hearth.

"I'm your lodger," she faltered, "who--who used to love the fairy wood so."

She had not known what she would say when she spoke first but she had certainly not thought of saying anything like this. And she certainly had not known that she would suddenly find herself overwhelmed by a rising tidal wave of unbearable woe and drop her face on to the old woman's lap with wild sobbing. She had not come down from London to do this--but away from the world--in the clean, still little cottage room which seemed to hold only grief and silence and death the wave rose and broke and swept her with it.

Mrs. Bennett only gave herself up to the small clutching hands and sat and shivered.

"No one--will come in--will they?" Robin was gasping. "There is no one to hear, is there?"

"No one on earth," said the old fairy woman. "Quiet and loneliness are left if there's naught else."

What she thought it would be hard to say. The blow which had come to her

at the end of a long life had, as it were, felled her as a tree might have been felled in Mersham Wood. As the tree might have lain for a short time with its leaves still seeming alive on its branches so she seemed living. But she had been severed from her root. She listened to the girl's sobbing and stroked her hair.

"Don't be afraid. There's no one left to hear but the walls and the bare trees in the wood," she said.

Robin sobbed on.

"You've a kind heart, but you're not crying for me," she said next. "You've a black trouble of your own. There's few that hasn't these days. And it's worse for the young that's got to live through it and after it. When Mary Ann comes to see after me to-morrow morning I may be lying dead, thank God. But you're a child." The small clutching hands clutched more piteously because it was so true--so true. Whatsoever befell there were all the long, long years to come--with only the secret left and the awful fear that sometime she might begin to be afraid that it was not a real thing--since no one had ever known or ever would know and since she could never speak of it or hear it spoken of.

"I'm so afraid," she shuddered at last in a small low voice. "I'm so lonely!" The old fairy woman's stroking hand stopped short.

"Is there--anything--you'd like to tell me--anything in the world?" she

asked tremulously. "There's nothing I'd mind."

The pretty head on her lap shook itself to and fro.

"No! No! No! No!" the small choked voice gave out. "Nothing--nothing! Nothing. That's why it's so lonely."

As she had waited alone through the night in her cradle, as she had watched the sparrows on the roofs above her in the nursery, as she had played alone until Donal came, so it was her fate to be alone now.

"But you came away from London because there were too many people there and you wanted to be in a place where there was nothing but an empty cottage and an old woman. Some would call it lonelier here."

"The wood is here--the fairy wood!" she cried and her sobbing broke forth tenfold more bitterly.

Mrs. Bennett had seen in her day much of the troubles of others and many of the things she had seen had been the troubles of women who were young. Sometimes it had been possible to help them, sometimes it had not, but in any case she had always known that help could be given only if one asked careful questions. The old established rules with regard to one's behaviour in connection with duchesses and their belongings had strangely faded away since the severing of her root as all things on earth had faded and lost consequence. She remembered no rules as she

bent her head over the girl and almost whispered to her.

"I won't ask no questions after this one, Miss dear," she said quaking. "But was there ever--a young gentleman--in the wood?"

"No! No! No! No!" four times again Robin cried it. "Never! Never!" And she lifted her face and let her see it white and streaming and with eyes which desperately defied and as they defied implored for love and aid and mercy.

The old fairy woman's nutcracker mouth trembled. It mumbled pathetically before she was able to control it. She knew she had heard this kind of thing before though in cases with which great ladies had nothing whatever to do. And at the same time there was something in this case that was somehow different.

"I don't know what to say or do," she faltered helplessly. "With the world like this--we've got to try to comfort each other--and we don't know how."

"Let me come into your arms," said Robin like a child. "Hold me and let me hold you." She crept near and folding soft arms about the old figure laid her cheek against the black shawl. "Let us cry. There's nothing for either of us to do but cry until our hearts break in two. We are all alone and no one can hear us."

"There's naught but the wood outside," moaned the old fairy woman.

The voice against the shawl was a moan also.

"Perhaps the wood hears us--perhaps it hears. Oh! me! Oh! me!"

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When she reached London she saw that there were excited groups of people talking together in the streets. Among them were women who were crying, or protesting angrily or comforting others. But she had seen the same thing before and would not let herself look at people or hear anything she could shut her ears against. Some new thing had happened, perhaps the Germans had taken some important town and wreaked their vengeance on
the inhabitants, perhaps some new alarming move had been made and disaster stared the Allies in the face. She staggered through the crowds in the station and did not really know how she reached Eaton Square.

Half an hour later she was sitting at her desk quiet and neat in her house dress. She had told the Duchess all she could tell her of her visit to old Mrs. Bennett.

"We both cried a good deal," she explained when she saw her employer look at her stained eyes. "She keeps remembering what they were like when they were babies--how rosy and fat they were and how they learned

to walk and tumbled about on her little kitchen floor. And then how big they grew and how fine they looked in their khaki. She says the worst thing is wondering how they look now. I told her she mustn't wonder. She mustn't think at all. She is quite well taken care of. A girl called Mary Ann comes in three times a day to wait on her--and her daughter comes when she can but her trouble has made her almost wander in her mind. It's because they are all gone. When she comes in she forgets everything and sits and says over and over again, 'If it had only been Tom--or only Tom and Will--or if it had been Jem--or only Jem and Tom--but it's Will--and Jem--and Tom,'--over and over again. I am not at all sure I know how to comfort people. But she was glad I came."

When Lord Coombe came in to make his daily visit he looked rigid indeed--as if he were stiff and cold though it was not a cold night.

He sat down by the Duchess and took a telegram from his pocket. Glancing up at him, Robin was struck by a whiteness about his mouth. He did not speak at once. It was as though even his lips were stiff.

"It has come," he said at last. "Killed. A shell." The Duchess repeated his words after him. Her lips seemed stiff also.

"Killed. A shell."

He handed the telegram to her. It was the customary officially

sympathetic announcement. She read it more than once. Her hands began to

tremble. But Coombe sat with face hidden. He was bowed like an old man.

"A shell," he said slowly as if thinking the awful thing out. "That I heard unofficially." Then he added a strange thing, dragging the words out. "How could that--be blown to atoms?"

The Duchess scarcely breathed her answer which was as strange as his questioning.

"Oh! How could it!"

She put out her shaking hand and touched his sleeve, watching his face as if something in it awed her.

"You loved him?" She whispered it. But Robin heard.

"I did not know I had loved anything--but I suppose that has been it. His physical perfection attracted me at first--his extraordinary contrast to Henry. It was mere pride in him as an heir and successor. Afterwards it was a beautiful look his young blue eyes had. Beautiful seems an unmasculine word for such a masculine lad, but no other word expresses it. It was a sort of valiant brightness and joy in living and being friends with the world. I saw it every time he came to talk to me. I wished he were my son. I even tried to think of him as my son." He

uttered a curious low sound like a sudden groan, "My son has been killed."

* * * * *

When he was about to leave the house and stood in the candle-lighted hall he was thinking of many dark things which passed unformedly through his mind and made him move slowly. He was slow in his movements as the elderly maid servant assisted him to put on his overcoat, and he was as slowly drawing on his gloves when his eyes--slow also--travelled up the staircase and stopped at the first landing, where he seemed to see an indefinite heap of something lying.

"Am I mistaken or is--something--lying on the landing?" he said to the woman.

The fact that he was impelled to make the inquiry seemed to him part of his abnormal state of mind. What affair of his after all were curiously dropped bundles upon his hostess' staircase? But--

"Please go and look at it," he added, and the woman gave him a troubled look and went up the stairs.

He himself was only a moment behind her. He actually found himself following her as if he were guessing something. When the maid cried out, he vaguely knew what he had been guessing.

"Oh!" the woman gasped, bending down. "It's poor little Miss Lawless! Oh, my lord," wildly after a nearer glance, "She looks as if she was dead!"

CHAPTER XIV

"Now no one will ever know."

Robin waking from long unconsciousness found her mind saying this before consciousness which was clear had actually brought her back to the world.

"Now no one will ever know--ever."

She seemed to have been away somewhere in the dark for a very long time. She was too tired to try to remember what had happened before she began to climb the staircase, which grew steeper and longer as she dragged herself from step to step. But in the back of her mind there was one particular fact she knew without trying to remember how she learned it. A shell had fallen somewhere and when it had burst Donal was "blown to