

"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

atoms." How big were atoms--how small were they? Several times when she reached this point she descended into the abyss of blackness and fainted again, though people were doing things to her and trying to keep her awake in ways which troubled her greatly. Why should they disturb her so when sinking into blackness was better?

"Now no one will ever know."

She was lying in her bed in her own room. Some one had undressed her. It was a nice room and very quiet and there was only a dim light burning. It was a long time before she came back, after one of the descents into the black abyss, and became slowly aware that Something was near her bed. She did not actually see it because at first she could not have lifted or turned her eyes. She could only lie still. But she knew that it was near her and she wished it were not. At last--by degrees it ceased to be a mere thing and evolved into a person. It was a man who was holding her wrist and watching her quietly and steadily--as if he had been doing it for some time. No one else was in the room. The people who had been disturbing her by doing things had gone away.

"Now," she whispered dragging out word after word, "no one will--ever--ever know." But she was not conscious she had said it even in a whisper which could be heard. She thought the thing had only passed again through her mind.

"Donal! Blown--to--atoms," she said in the same way. "How small is--an

atom?" She was sinking into the blackness again when the man dropped her wrist quickly and did something to her which brought her back.

"Don't!" she moaned. "Please--don't."

But he would not let her go.

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Perhaps days and nights passed--or perhaps only one day and night before she found herself still lying in her bed but feeling somehow more awake when she opened her eyes and found the same man sitting close to her holding her wrist again.

"I am Dr. Redcliff," he said in a quiet voice. "You are much better. I want to ask you some questions. I will not tire you."

He began to ask her questions very gently as if he did not wish to alarm or disturb her. She had been found in a dead faint lying on the landing. She had remained unconscious for an abnormally long time. When she had been brought out of one faint she had fallen into another and this had happened again and again. The indication was that she had been struck down by some shock. In examining her he had found that she was underweight. He wished to discover if she had been secretly working too late at night in her deep interest in what she was doing. What exactly had her diet been? Had she taken enough exercise in the open air? How

had she slept? The Duchess was seriously anxious.

They were the questions doctors always asked people except that he seemed more desirous of being sure of the amount of exercise she had taken than about anything else. He was specially interested in the times when she had been in the country. She was obliged to tell him she had always been alone. He thought it would have been better if she had had some companion. Once when he was asking her about her visits to Mrs. Bennett's cottage the blackness almost engulfed her again. But he was watching her very closely and perhaps seeing her turn white--gave her some stimulant in time. He had a clever face which was not unkind, but she wished that it had not had such a keenly watchful look. More than once the watchfulness tired her and she closed her eyes because she did not want him to look into them--as if he were asking questions which were not altogether doctors' questions.

When he left her and went downstairs to talk to the Duchess he asked a good many quiet questions again. He was a man whose intense interest in his profession did not confine itself wholly to its scientific aspect.

An extraordinarily beautiful child swooning into death was not a mere pathological incident to him. And he knew many strange things brought about by the abnormal conditions of war. He himself was conscious of being overstrung with the rest of a tormented world.

He knew of Mrs. Gareth-Lawless and he had heard more stories of her household, her loveliness and Lord Coombe than he had time to remember.

He had, of course, heard the unsavoury rumours of the child who was being brought up for some nefarious object. As he knew Lord Coombe rather well he did not believe stories about him which went beyond a certain limit. Not until he had talked to the Duchess for some time did he discover that the hard-smitten child lying half-lifeless in her bed was the very young heroine of the quite favourite scandal. The knowledge gave him furiously to think. It was Coombe who had interested the Duchess in her. The Duchess had no doubt taken her under her protection for generously benign reasons. He pursued his questioning delicately.

"Has she had any young friends? She seems to have taken her walks alone and even to have gone into the country by herself."

"The life of the young people in its ordinary sense of companionship and amusement has been stopped by the War. There may be some who go on in the old way but she has not been one of them," the Duchess said.

"Visits to old women in remote country places are not stimulating enough. Has she had no companions?"

"I tried--" said the Duchess wearily. She was rather pale herself. "The news of the Sarajevo tragedy arrived on the day I gave a small dance for her--to bring some young people together." Her waxen pallor became even more manifest. "How they danced!" she said woefully. "What living things they were! Oh!" the exclamation broke forth at a suddenly overwhelming memory. "The beautiful boy--the splendid lad who was blown to atoms--the

news came only yesterday--was there dancing with the rest!"

Dr. Redcliff leaned forward slightly.

"To hear that any boy has been blown to atoms is a hideous thing," he said. "Who brought the news? Was Miss Lawless in the room when it was brought?"

"I think so though I am not sure. She comes in and goes out very quietly. I am afraid I forgot everything else. The shock was a great one. My old friend Lord Coombe brought the news. The boy would have succeeded him. We hear again and again of great families becoming extinct. The house of Coombe has not been prolific. The War has taken its toll. Donal Muir was the last of them. One has felt as though it was of great importance that--that a thing like that should be carried on." She began to speak in a half-numbed introspective way. "What does it matter really? Only one boy of thousands--perhaps hundreds of thousands before it is over? But--but it's the youngness--the power--the potential meaning--wasted--torn--scattered in fragments." She stopped and sat quite still, gazing before her as though into space.

"She is very young. She has been absorbed in war work and living in a highly charged atmosphere for some time." Dr. Redcliff said presently, "If she knew the poor lad--"

"She did not really know him well, though they had met as children. They

danced together that night and sat and talked in the conservatory. But she never saw him again," the Duchess explained.

"It might have been too much, even if she did not know him well. We must keep her quiet," said Dr. Redcliff.

Very shortly afterwards he rose and went away.

An hour later he was sitting in a room at Coombe House alone with Lord Coombe. It was the room in which Mademoiselle Vallé had found his lordship on the night of Robin's disappearance. No one knew now where Mademoiselle was or if she were still alive. She had been living with her old parents in a serene Belgian village which had been destroyed by the Germans. Black tales had been told of which Robin had been allowed to hear nothing. She had been protected in many ways.

Though they had not been intimates the two men knew each other well. To each individually the type of the other was one he could understand. It was plain to Lord Coombe that Redcliff found his case of rather special interest, which he felt was scarcely to be wondered at. As he himself had seen the too slender prostrate figure and the bloodless small face with its curtain of lashes lying too heavily close to the cold cheek, he had realised that their helpless beauty alone was enough to arrest more than ordinary attention. She had, as the woman had cried out, looked as if she were dead, and dead loveliness is a reaching power.

Dr. Redcliff spoke of her thoughtfully and with a certain gentleness. He at first included her with many other girls, the changes in whose methods of life he had been observing.

"The closed gates in their paths are suddenly thrown open for them because no one has to lock and unlock them," he said. "It produces curious effects. The light-minded ones take advantage of the fact and find dangerous amusement in it sometimes. The serious ones go about the work they have taken in hand. Miss Lawless is, I gather, one of the thinking and feeling ones and has gone about a great deal."

"Yes. The Duchess has tried to save her from her own ardour, but perhaps she has worked too steadily."

"Has the Duchess always known where she has gone and what people she has seen?"

"That would have been impossible. She wished her to feel free and if we had not wished it, one can see that it would not have been possible to stand guard over her. Neither was it necessary."

But he began to listen with special attention. There awakened in his mind the consciousness that he was being asked questions which suggested an object. The next one added to his awakening sense of the thing.

"Her exercise and holidays were always taken alone?" Redcliff said.

"The Duchess believed so."

"She has evidently been living under a poignant strain and some ghastly shock has struck her down. I think she must have been in the room when you brought the news of young Muir's terrible death."

"She was," said Coombe. "I saw her and then forgot."

"I thought so," Redcliff went on. "She cried out several times, 'Blown to atoms--atoms! Donal!' She was not conscious of the cries."

"Are you sure she said 'Donal'?" Coombe asked.

"Quite sure. It was that which set me thinking. I have thought a great deal. She has touched me horribly. The mere sight of her was enough. There is desolation in her childlikeness."

Lord Coombe sat extremely still. The room was very silent till Redcliff went on in dropped voice.

"There was another thing she said. She whispered it brokenly word by word. She did not know that, either. She whispered, 'Now--no one--will ever--know--ever.'"

Lord Coombe still sat silent. What he was thinking could not be read in his face but being a man of astute perception and used to the study of faces Dr. Redcliff knew that suddenly some startling thought had leaped within him.

"You were right to come to me," he said. "What is it you--suspect?"

That Dr. Redcliff was almost unbearably moved was manifest. He was not a man of surface emotions but his face actually twitched and he hastily gulped something down.

"She is a heartbreakingly beautiful thing," he said. "She has been left--through sheer kindness--in her own young hands. They were too young--and these are hours of cataclysm. She knows nothing. She does not know that--she will probably have a child."