

CHAPTER XV

The swiftness of the process by which the glowing little Miss Lawless, at whom people had found themselves involuntarily looking so often, changed from a rose of a girl into something strangely like a small waxen image which walked, called forth frequent startled comment. She was glanced at even oftener than ever.

"Is she going into galloping consumption? Her little chin has grown quite pointed and her eyes are actually frightening," was an early observation. But girls who are going into galloping consumption cough and look hectic and are weaker day by day and she had no cough, nor was she hectic and, though it was known that Dr. Redcliff saw her frequently, she insisted that she was not ill and begged the Duchess to let her go on with her work.

"But the done-for woe in her face is inexplicable--in a girl who has had no love affairs and has not even known any one who could have flirted with her and ridden away. The little thing's done for. It cries out aloud. I can't bear to look at her," one woman protested.

"I shall send her away if she does not improve," the Duchess said. "She shall go to some remote place in the Highlands and she shall not be allowed to remember that there is a war in the world. If I can manage to send her old nurse Dowie with her she will stand guard over her like an

old shepherd."

She also had been struck by the look which had been spoken of as "done-for." Girls did not look like that for any common reason. She asked herself questions and with great care sat on foot a gradual and delicate cross-examination of Robin herself. But she discovered no reason common or uncommon for the thing she recognised each time she looked at her. It was inevitable that she should talk to Lord Coombe but she met in him a sort of barrier. She could not avoid seeing that he was preoccupied. She remotely felt that he was turning over in his mind something which precluded the possibility of his giving attention to other questions.

"I almost feel as if your interest in her had lapsed," she said at last.

"No. It has taken a--an entirely new form," was his answer.

It was when his glance encountered hers after he said this that each regarded the other with a slow growing anxiousness. Something came to life in each pair of eyes and it was something disturbed and reluctant. The Duchess spoke first.

"She has had no companions," she said painfully. "The War put an end to what I thought I might do for her. There has been nobody."

"At present it is a curious fact that in one sense we know very little

of each other's lives," he answered. "The old leisurely habit of observing details no longer exists. As Redcliff said in speaking of her--and girls generally--all the gates are thrown wide open."

The Duchess was very silent for a space before she made her reply.

"Yes."

"You do not know her mother?"

"No."

"Two weeks ago she gave me something to reflect on. Her feeling for her daughter is that of a pretty cat-like woman for something enragingly younger than herself. She always resented her. She was infuriated by your interest in her. She said to me one afternoon, 'I hope the Duchess is still pleased with her companion. I saw her to-day in Bond Street and she looked like a housemaid I once had to dismiss rather suddenly. I am glad she is in her grace's house and not in mine.'"

After a few seconds--

"I am glad she is in my house and not in hers," the Duchess said.

"After I had spoken to her at some length and she had quite lost her temper, she added 'You evidently don't know that she has been meeting

Donal Muir. He told me so himself at the Erwyn's. I asked him if he had seen her since the dance and he owned that he had--and then was cross at himself for making the slip. I did not ask him how often he had met her. He would not have told me. But if he met her once he met her as often as he chose.' She was not lying when she said it. I know her. I have been thinking constantly ever since." There was a brief silence between them; then he proceeded. "Robin worshipped him when she was a mere baby. They were very beautiful together on the night of the dance. She fainted on the stairway after hearing of his death. She had been crawling up to hide herself in her room, poor child! It is one of the tragedies. Perhaps you and I together--"

The Duchess was seeing again the two who had come forth shining from the conservatory. She continued to see them as Lord Coombe went on speaking, telling her what Dr. Redcliff had told him.

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On her part Robin scarcely understood anything which was happening because nothing seemed to matter. On the morning when the Duchess told her that Dr. Redcliff wished to see her alone that fact mattered as little as the rest. She was indifferently conscious that the Duchess regarded her in an anxious kind way, but if she had been unkind instead of kind that would have meant nothing. There was only room for one thing in the world. She wondered sometimes if she were really dead--as Donal was--and did not know she was so. Perhaps after people died they walked

about as she did and did not understand that others could not see them and they were not alive. But if she were dead she would surely see Donal.

Before she went to Dr. Redcliff the Duchess took her hand and held it closely in both her own. She looked at her with a curious sort of pitifulness--as if she were sorry.

"My poor child," she said. "Whatsoever he tells you don't be frightened. Don't think you are without friends. I will take care of you."

"Thank you," she said. "I don't think anything would frighten me. Nothing seems frightening--now." After which she went into the room where Dr. Redcliff was waiting for her.

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The Duchess sat alone and thought deeply. What she thought of chiefly was the Head of the House of Coombe. She had always known that more than probably his attitude towards a circumstance of this sort would not even remotely approach in likeness that of other people. His point of view would detach itself from ordinary theories of moralities and immoralities. He would see with singular clearness all sides of the incident. He would not be indignant, or annoyed or embarrassed. He had had an interest in Robin as a creature representing peculiar loveliness

and undefended potentialities. Sometimes she had felt that this had even verged on a tenderness of which he was himself remotely, if at all, conscious. Concerning the boy Donal she had realised that he felt something stronger and deeper than any words of his own had at any time expressed. He had believed fine things of him and had watched him silently. He had wished he had been his own flesh and blood. Perhaps he had always felt a longing for a son who might have been his companion as well as his successor. Who knew whether a thwarted paternal instinct might not now be giving him such thinking to do as he might have done if Donal Muir had been the son of his body--dead on the battlefield but leaving behind him something to be gravely considered? What would a man think--what would a man do under such circumstances?

"One might imagine what some men would do--but it would depend entirely upon the type," she thought. "What he will do will be different. It might seem cold; it might be merely judicial--but it might be surprising."

She was quite haunted by the haggard look of his face as he had exclaimed:

"I wish to God I had known him better! I wish to God I had talked to him more!"

What he had done this morning was to go to Mersham Wood to see Mrs. Bennett. There were things it might be possible to learn by amiable and

carefully considered expression of interest in her loss and loneliness. Concerning such things as she did not already know she would learn nothing from his conversation, but concerning such things as she had become aware of he would learn everything without alarming her.

"If those unhappy children met at her cottage and wandered about in Mersham Wood together the tragedy is understandable."

The Duchess' thinking ended pityingly because just at this time it was that Robin opened the door and stood looking at her.

It seemed as though Dr. Redcliff must have talked to her for a long time. But she had on her small hat and coat and what the Duchess seemed chiefly to see was the wide darkness of her eyes set in a face suddenly pinched, small and snow white. She looked like a starved baby.

"Please," she said with her hands clasped against her chest, "please--may I go to Mersham Wood?"

"To--Mersham Wood," the Duchess felt aghast--and then suddenly a flood of thought rushed upon her.

"It is not very far," the little gasping voice uttered. "I must go, please! Oh! I must! Just--to Mersham Wood!"

Something almost uncontrollable rose in the Duchess' throat.

"Child," she said. "Come here!"

Robin went to her--oh, poor little soul!--in utter obedience. As she drew close to her she went down upon her knees holding up her hands like a little nun at prayer.

"Please let me go," she said again. "Only to Mersham Wood."

"Stay here, my poor child and talk to me," the Duchess said. "The time has come when you must talk to some one."

"When I come back--I will try. I--I want to ask--the Wood," said Robin. She caught at a fold of the Duchess' dress and went on rapidly.

"It is not far. Dr. Redcliff said I might go. Mrs. Bennett is there. She loves me."

"Are you going to talk to Mrs. Bennett?"

"No! No! No! No! Not to any one in the world."

Hapless young creatures in her plight must always be touching, but her touchingness was indescribable--almost unendurable to the ripe aged woman of the world who watched and heard her. It was as if she knew nothing of the meaning of things--as if some little spirit had been torn

from heaven and flung down upon the dark earth. One felt that one must weep aloud over the exquisite incomprehensible remoteness of her. And it was so awfully plain that there was some tragic connection with the Wood and that her whole soul cried out to it. And she would not speak to any one in the world. Such things had been known. Was the child's brain wavering? Why not? All the world was mad was the older woman's thought, and she herself after all the years, had for this moment no sense of balance and felt as if all old reasons for things had been swept away.

"If you will come back," she said. "I will let you go."

After the poor child had gone there formulated itself in her mind the thought that if Lord Coombe and Mrs. Bennett met her together some clarity might be reached. But then again she said to herself, "Oh why, after all, should she be asked questions? What can it matter to the rest of the woeful world if she hides it forever in her heart?"

And she sat with drooped head knowing that she was tired of living because some things were so helpless.