

CHAPTER XVI

The Wood was gradually growing darker. It had been almost brilliant during a part of the afternoon because the bareness of the branches let in the wintry sun. There were no leaves to keep it out and there had been a rare, chill blue sky. All seemed cold blue sky where it was not brown or sodden yellow fern and moss. The trunks of the trees looked stark and the tall, slender white stems of the birches stood out here and there among the darker growth like ghosts who were sentinels. It was always a silent place and now its stillness seemed even added to by the one sound which broke it--the sound of sobbing--sobbing--sobbing.

It had been going on for some time. There had stolen through the narrow trodden pathway a dark slight figure and this had dropped upon the ground under a large tree which was one of a group whose branches had made a few months ago a canopy of green where birds had built nests and where one nightingale had sung night after night to the moon.

Later--Robin had said to herself--she would go to the cottage, and she would sit upon the hearth and lay her head on Mrs. Bennett's knee and they would cling together and sob and talk of the battlefields and the boys lying dead there. But she had no thought of saying any other thing to her, because there was nothing left to say. She had said nothing to Dr. Redcliff; she had only sat listening to him and feeling her eyes widening as she tried to follow and understand what he was saying in

such a grave, low-toned cautious way--as if he himself were almost afraid as he went on. What he said would once have been strange and wonderful, but now it was not, because wonder had gone out of the world. She only seemed to sit stunned before the feeling that now the dream was not a sacred secret any longer and there grew within her, as she heard, a wild longing to fly to the Wood as if it were a living human thing who would hear her and understand--as if it would be like arms enclosing her. Something would be there listening and she could talk to it and ask it what to do.

She had spoken to it as she staggered down the path--she had cried out to it with wild broken words, and then when she heard nothing she had fallen down upon the earth and the sobbing--sobbing--had begun.

"Donal!" she said. "Donal!" And again, "Donal!" over and over. But nothing answered, for even that which had been Donal--with the heavenly laugh and the blue in his gay eyes and the fine, long smooth hands--had been blown to fragments in a field somewhere--and there was nothing anywhere.

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She had heard no footsteps and she was sobbing still when a voice spoke at her side--the voice of some one standing near.

"It is Donal you want, poor child--no one else," it said.

That it should be this voice--Lord Coombe's! And that amazing as it was to hear it, she was not amazed and did not care! Her sobbing ceased so far as sobbing can cease on full flow. She lay still but for low shuddering breaths.

"I have come because it is Donal," he said. "You told me once that you had always hated me. Hatred is useless now. Don't feel it."

But she did not answer.

"You probably will not believe anything I say. Well I must speak to you whether you believe me or not."

She lay still and he himself was silent. His voice seemed to be a sudden thing when he spoke.

"I loved him too. I found it out the morning I saw him march away."

He had seen him! Since she had looked at his beautiful face this man had looked at it!

"You!" She sat up on the earth and gazed, swaying. So he knew he could go on.

"I wanted a son. I once lay on the moss in a wood and sobbed as you have

sobbed. She was killed too."

But Robin was thinking only of Donal.

"What--was his face like? Did you--see him near?"

"Quite near. I stood on the street. I followed. He did not see me. He saw nothing."

The sobbing broke forth again.

"Did--did his eyes look as if he had been crying? He did cry--he did!"

The Head of the House of Coombe showed no muscular facial sign of emotion and stood stiffly still. But what was this which leaped scalding to his glazed eyes and felt hot?

"Yes," he answered huskily. "I saw--even as he marched past--that his eyes were heavy and had circles round them. There were other eyes like his--some were boys' eyes and some were the eyes of men. They held their heads up--but they had all said 'Good-bye'--as he had."

The Wood echoed to a sound which was a heart-wrung wail and she dropped forward on the moss again and lay there.

"He said, 'Oh, let us cry--together--together! Oh little--lovely love!'"

She who would have borne torment rather than betray the secret of the dream, now that it could no longer be a secret lay left of all but memories and the wild longing to hold to her breast some shred which was her own. He let her wail, but when her wailing ceased helplessly he bent over her.

"Listen to me," he said. "If Donal were here he would tell you to listen. You are a child. You are too young to know what has come upon you--both."

She did not speak.

"You were both too young--and you were driven by fate. If he had been more than a boy--and if he had not been in a frenzy--he would have remembered. He would have thought--"

Yes--yes! She knew how young! But oh, what mattered youth--or thought--or remembering! Her small hand beat in soft impatience on the ground.

He was--strangely--on one knee beside her, his head bent close, and in his voice there was a new strong insistence--as if he would not let her alone-- Oh! Donal! Donal!

"He would have remembered--that he might leave a child!"

His voice was almost hard. She did not know that in his mind was a memory which now in secret broke him--a memory of a belief which was a thing he had held as a gift--a certain faith in a clear young highness and strength of body and soul in this one scion of his house, which even in youth's madness would have remembered. If the lad had been his own son he might have felt something of the same pang.

His words brought back what she had heard Redcliff say to her earlier in the day--the thing which had only struck her again to the earth.

"It--will have--no father," she shuddered. "There is not even a grave."

He put his hand on her shoulder--he even tried to force her to lift her head.

"It must have a father," he said, harshly. "Look at me. It must."

Stupefied and lost to all things as she was, she heard something in his harshness she could not understand and was startled by. Her small starved face stared at him piteously. There was no one but herself left in the world.

"There is no time--" he broke forth.

"He said so too," she cried out. "There was no time!"

"But he should have remembered," the harsh voice revealed more than he knew. "He could have given his child all that life holds that men call happiness. How could even a lad forget! He loved you--you loved him. If he had married you--"

He stopped in the midst of the words. The little starved face stared at him with a kind of awfulness of woe. She spoke as if she scarcely knew the words she uttered, and not, he saw, in the least as if she were defending herself--or as if she cared whether he believed her or not--or as if it mattered.

"Did you--think we were--not married?" the words dragged out.

Something turned over in his side. He had heard it said that hearts did such things. It turned--because she did not care. She knew what love and death were--what they were--not merely what they were called--and life and shame and loss meant nothing.

"Do you know what you are saying?" he heard the harshness of his voice break. "For God's sake, child, let me hear the truth."

She did not even care then and only put her childish elbows on her knees and her face in her hands and wept and wept.

"There was--no time," she said. "Every day he said it. He knew--he

knew. Before he was killed he wanted something that was his own. It was our secret. I wanted to keep it his secret till I died."

"Where," he spoke low and tensely, "were you married?"

"I do not know. It was a little house in a poor crowded street. Donal took me. Suddenly we were frightened because we thought he was to go away in three days. A young chaplain who was going away too was his friend. He had just been married himself. He did it because he was sorry for us. There was no time. His wife lent me a ring. They were young too and they were sorry."

"What was the man's name?"

"I can't remember. I was trembling all the time. I knew nothing. That was like a dream too. It was all a dream."

"You do not remember?" he persisted. "You were married--and have no proof."

"We came away so quickly. Donal held me in his arm in the cab because I trembled. Donal knew. Donal knew everything."

He was a man who had lived through tragedy but that had been long ago. Since then he had only known the things of the world. He had seen struggles and tricks and paltry craftiness. He had known of women caught

in traps of folly and passion and weakness and had learned how terror taught them to lie and shift and even show abnormal cleverness. Above all he knew exactly what the world would say if a poor wretch of a girl told a story like this of a youngster like Donal--when he was no longer on earth to refute it.

And yet if these wild things were true, here in a wintry wood she sat a desolate and undefended thing--with but one thought. And in that which was most remote in his being he was conscious that he was for the moment relieved because even worldly wisdom was not strong enough to overcome his desire to believe in a certain thing which was--that the boy would have played fair even when his brain whirled and all his fierce youth beset him.

As he regarded her he saw that it would be difficult to reach her mind which was so torn and stunned. But by some method he must reach it.

"You must answer all the questions I ask," he said. "It is for Donal's sake."

She did not lift her face and made no protest.

He began to ask such questions as a sane man would know must be answered

clearly and as he heard her reply to each he gradually reached the realisation of what her empty-handed, naked helplessness confronted.

That he himself comprehended what no outsider would, was due to his memories of heart-wrung hours, of days and nights when he too had been unable to think quite sanely or to reason with a normal brain. Youth is a remorseless master. He could see the tempest of it all--the hours of heaven--and the glimpses of hell's self--on whose brink the two had stood clinging breast to breast. With subtle carefulness he slowly gleaned it all. He followed the rising of the tide which at first had borne them along unquestioning. They had not even asked where they were going because the way led through young paradise. Then terror had awakened them. There had come to them the news of death day after day--lads they knew and had seen laughing a few weeks before--Halwyn, Meredith, Jack or Harry or Phil. A false rumour of a sudden order to the Front and they had stood and gazed into each other's eyes in a fateful hour. Robin did not know of the picture her disjointed, sobbed-forth sentences and words made clear. Coombe could see the lad as he stood before her in this very Wood and then went slowly down upon his knees and kissed her small feet in the moss as he made his prayer. There had been something rarely beautiful in the ecstasy of his tenderness--and she had given herself as a flower gives itself to be gathered. She seemed to have seen nothing, noted nothing, on the morning of the mad marriage, but Donal, who held her trembling in his arms as they drove through the crowded streets in the shabby neighbourhood she had never seen before, to the house crowded between others all like itself. She had actually not heard the young chaplain's name in her shyness and tremor. He would scarcely have been an entity but for the one moving fact that he himself had just hastily married a girl he adored and must

leave, and so sympathised and understood the stress of their hour. On their way home they had been afraid of chance recognition and had tried to shield themselves by sitting as far back as possible in the cab.

"I could not think. I could not see. It was all frightening--and unreal."

She had not dreamed of asking questions. Donal had taken care of her and tried to help her to be less afraid of seeing people who might recognise her. She had tilted her hat over her face and worn a veil. She had gone home to Eaton Square--and then in the afternoon to the cottage at Mersham Wood.

They had not written letters to each other. Robin had been afraid and they had met almost every day. Once Lord Coombe thought himself on the track of some clue when she touched vaguely on some paper Donal had meant to send her and had perhaps forgotten in the haste and pressure of the last few hours because his orders had been so sudden. But there was no trace. There had been something he wished her to have. But if this had meant that his brain had by chance cleared to sane reasoning and he had, for a few moments touched earth and intended to send her some proof which would be protection if she needed it--the moment had been too late and, at the last, action had proved impossible. And Death had come so soon. It was as though a tornado had swept him out of her arms and dashed him broken to earth. And she was left with nothing because she asked nothing--wanted nothing.

The obviousness of this, when he had ended his questioning and exhausted his resources, was a staggering thing.

"Do you know," he said grimly, after it was all over, "--that no one will believe you?"

"Donal knew," she said. "There is no one--no one else."

"You mean that there is no one whose belief or disbelief would affect you?"

The Wood was growing darker still and she had ceased crying and sat still like a small ghost in the dim light.

"There never was any one but Donal, you know," she said. To all the rest of the world she was as a creature utterly unawake and to a man who was of the world and who had lived a long life in it the contemplation of her was a strange and baffling thing.

"You do not ask whether I believe you?" he spoke quite low.

The silence of the darkening wood was unearthly and her dropped word scarcely stirred it.

"No." She had never even thought of it.

He himself was inwardly shaken by his own feeling.

"I will believe you if--you will believe me," was what he said, a singular sharp new desire impelling him.

She merely lifted her face a little so that her eyes rested upon him.

"Because of this tragic thing you must believe me. It will be necessary that you should. What you have thought of me with regard to your mother is not true. You believed it because the world did. Denial on my part would merely have called forth laughter. Why not? When a man who has money and power takes charge of a pretty, penniless woman and pays her bills, the pose of Joseph or Galahad is not a good one for him. My statement would no more have been believed than yours will be believed if you can produce no proof. What you say is what any girl might say in your dilemma, what I should have said would have been what any man might have said. But--I believe you. Do you believe me?"

She did not understand why suddenly--though languidly--she knew that he was telling her a thing which was true. It was no longer of consequence but she knew it. And if it was true all she had hated him for so long had been founded on nothing. He had not been bad--he had only looked bad and that he could not help. But what did that matter, either? She could not feel even sorry.

"I will--try," she answered.

It was no use as yet, he saw. What he was trying to deal with was in a new Dimension.

He held out his hands and helped her to her feet.

"The Wood is growing very dark," he said. "We must go. I will take you to Mrs. Bennett's and you can spend the night with her."

The Wood was growing dark indeed. He was obliged to guide her through the closeness of the undergrowth. They threaded their way along the narrow path and the shadows seemed to close in behind them. Before they reached the end which would have led them out into the open he put his hand on her shoulder and held her back.

"In this Wood--even now--there is Something which must be saved from suffering. It is helpless--it is blameless. It is not you--it is not Donal. God help it."

He spoke steadily but strangely and his voice was so low that it was almost a whisper--though it was not one. For the first time she felt something stir in her stunned mind--as if thought were wakening--fear--a vague quaking. Her wan small face began to wonder and in the dark roundness of her eyes a question was to be seen like a drowned thing

slowly rising from the deeps of a pool. But she asked no question. She only waited a few moments and let him look at her until she said at last in a voice as near a whisper as his own.

"I--will believe you."