

## CHAPTER XIX

Robin had spent the night at the cottage and Mrs. Bennett had been very good to her. They had sat by the fire together for a long time and had talked of the dead boys on the battlefield, while Robin's head had rested against the old fairy woman's knee and the shrivelled hand had stroked and patted her tremulously. It had been nearing dawn when the girl went to bed and at the last Mrs. Bennett had held on to her dress and asked her a pleading question.

"Isn't there anything you'd like me to do for you--anything on earth, Miss, dear? Sometimes there's things an old woman can do that young ones can't. If there was anything you'd like to tell me about--that I could keep private--? It'd be as safe with me as if I was a dumb woman. And it might just happen that--me being so old--I might be a help some way." She was giving her her chance, as in the course of her long life she had given it to other poor girls she loved less. One had to make ways and open gates for them.

But Robin only kissed her as lovingly as a child.

"I don't know what is going to happen to me," she said. "I can't think yet. I may want to ask you to let me come here--if--if I am frightened and don't know what to do. I know you would let me come and--talk to you--?"

The old fairy woman almost clutched her in enfolding arms. Her answer was a hoarse and trembling whisper.

"You come to me, my poor pretty," she said. "You come to me day or night--whatsoever. I'm not so old but what I can do anything--you want done."

The railroad journey back to London seemed unnaturally long because her brain began to work when she found herself half blindly gazing at the country swiftly flying past the carriage window. Perhaps the anxiousness in Mrs. Bennett's face had wakened thought in connecting itself with Lord Coombe's words and looks in the wood.

When the door of the house in Eaton Square opened for her she was conscious of shrinking from the sympathetic eyes of the war-substituted woman-servant who was the one who had found her lying on the landing. She knew that her face was white and that her eyelids were stained and heavy and that the woman saw them and was sorry for her.

The mountain climb of the stairs seemed long and steep but she reached her room at last and took off her hat and coat and put on her house dress. She did it automatically as if she were going downstairs to her work, as though there had been no break in the order of her living.

But as she was fastening the little hooks and buttons her stunned brain

went on with the thought to which it had begun to awaken in the train. Since the hour when she had fallen unconscious on the landing she had not seemed to think at all. She had only felt things which had nothing to do with the real world.

There was a fire in the grate and when the last button was fastened she sat down on a seat before it and looked into the redness of the coals, her hands loosely clasped on her knee. She sat there for several minutes and then she turned her head and looked slowly round the room. She did it because she was impelled by a sense of its emptiness--by the fact that she was quite alone in it. There was only herself--only Robin in it.

That was her first feeling--the aloneness--and then she thought of something else. She seemed to feel again the hand of Lord Coombe on her shoulder when he held her back in the darkened wood and she could hear his almost whispered words.

"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."

Then she was not alone--even as she sat in the emptiness of the room. She put up her hands and covered her face with them.

"What--will happen?" she murmured. But she did not cry.

The deadliness of the blow which had stupefied her still left her barely conscious of earthly significances. But something of the dark mistiness was beginning to lift slowly and reveal to her vague shadows and shapes, as it were. If no one would believe that she was married to Donal, then people would think that she had been the kind of girl who is sent away from decent houses, if she is a servant, and cut off in awful disgrace from her family and never spoken to again, if she belongs to the upper classes. Books and Benevolent Societies speak of her as "fallen" and "lost." Her vision of such things was at once vague and primitive. It took the form of pathetic fictional figures or memories of some hushed rumour heard by mere chance, rather than of anything more realistic. She dropped her hands upon her lap and looked at the fire again.

"Now I shall be like that," she said listlessly. "And it does not matter. Donal knew. And I do not care--I do not care."

"The Duchess will send me away," she whispered next. "Perhaps she will send me away to-day. Where shall I go!" The hands on her lap began to tremble and she suddenly felt cold in spite of the fire. The sound of a knock on the door made her start to her feet. The woman who had looked sorry for her when she came in had brought a message.

"Her grace wishes to see you, Miss," she said.

"Thank you," Robin answered.

After the servant had gone away she stood still a moment or so.

"Perhaps she is going to tell me now," she said to the empty room.

\* \* \* \* \*

Two aspects of her face rose before the Duchess as the girl entered the room where she waited for her with Lord Coombe. One was that which had met her glance when Mademoiselle Vallé had brought her charge on her first visit. She recalled her impression of the childlikeness which seemed all the dark dew of appealing eyes, which were like a young doe's or a bird's rather than a girl's. The other was the star-like radiance of joy which had swept down the ballroom in Donal's arms with dancing whirls and swayings and pretty swoops. About them had laughed and swirled the boys now lying dead under the heavy earth of Flemish fields. And Donal--!

This face looked small and almost thin and younger than ever. The eyes were like those of a doe who was lost and frightened--as if it heard quite near it the baying of hounds, but knew it could not get away.

She hesitated a moment at the door.

"Come here, my dear," the Duchess said.

Lord Coombe stood by a chair he had evidently placed for her, but she did not sit down when she reached it. She hesitated again and looked from one to the other.

"Did you send for me to tell me I must go away?" she said.

"What do you mean, child?" said the Duchess.

"Sit down," Lord Coombe said and spoke in an undertone rapidly. "She thinks you mean to turn her out of the house as if she were a kitchen-maid."

Robin sat down with her listless small hands clasped in her lap.

"Nothing matters at all," she said, "but I don't know what to do."

"There is a great deal to do," the Duchess said to her and she did not speak as if she were angry. Her expression was not an angry one. She looked as if she were wondering at something and the wondering was almost tender.

"We know what to do. But it must be done without delay," said Lord Coombe and his voice reminded her of Mersham Wood.

"Come nearer to me. Come quite close. I want--" the Duchess did not explain what she wanted but she pointed to a small square ottoman which

would place Robin almost at her knee. Her own early training had been of the stater Victorian type and it was not easy for her to deal freely with outward expression of emotion. And here emotion sprang at her throat, so to speak, as she watched this childish thing with the frightened doe's eyes. The girl had been an inmate of her house for months; she had been kind to her and had become fond of her, but they had never reached even the borders of intimacy.

And yet emotion had seized upon her and they were in the midst of strange and powerful drama.

Robin did as she was told. It struck the Duchess that she always did as she was told and she spoke to her hoping that her voice was not ungentle.

"Don't look at me as if you were afraid. We are going to take care of you," she said.

But the doe's eyes were still great with hopeless fearfulness.

"Lord Coombe said--that no one would believe me," Robin faltered. "He thought I was not married to Donal. But I was--I was. I wanted to be married to him. I wanted to do everything he wanted me to do. We loved each other so much. And we were afraid every one would be angry. And so many were killed every day--and before he was killed--Oh!" with a sharp little cry, "I am glad--I am glad! Whatever happens to me I am glad I

was married to him before he was killed!"

"You poor children!" broke from the Duchess. "You poor--poor mad young things!" and she put an arm about Robin because the barrier built by lack of intimacy was wholly overthrown.

Robin trembled all over and looked up in her face.

"I may begin to cry," she quavered. "I do not want to trouble you by beginning to cry. I must not."

"Cry if you want to cry," the Duchess answered.

"It will be better," said Lord Coombe, "if you can keep calm. It is necessary that you should be calm enough to think--and understand. Will you try? It is for Donal's sake."

"I will try," she answered, but her amazed eyes still yearningly wondered at the Duchess. Her arm had felt almost like Dowie's.

"Which of us shall begin to explain to her?" the Duchess questioned.

"Will you? It may be better."

They were going to take care of her. She was not to be turned into the street--though perhaps if she were turned into the street without money



she would die somewhere--and that would not matter because she would be thankful.

The Duchess took one of her hands and held it on her knee. She looked kind still but she was grave.

"Do not be frightened when I tell you that most people will not believe what you say about your marriage," she said. "That is because it is too much like the stories other girls have told when they were in trouble. It is an easy story to tell when a man is dead. And in Donal's case so much is involved that the law would demand proofs which could not be denied. Donal not only owned the estate of Braemarnie, but he would have been the next Marquis of Coombe. You have not remembered this and--" more slowly and with a certain watchful care--"you have been too unhappy and ill--you have not had time to realise that if Donal has a son--"

She heard Robin's caught breath.

"What his father would have inherited he would inherit also. Braemarnie would be his and in his turn he would be the Marquis of Coombe. It is because of these important things that it would be said that it would be immensely to your interest to insist that you were married to Donal Muir and the law would not allow of any shade of doubt."

"People would think I wanted the money and the castles--for myself?"

Robin said blankly.

"They would think that if you were a dishonest woman--you wanted all you could get. Even if you were not actually dishonest they would see you would want it for your son. You might think it ought to be his--whether his father had married you or not. Most women love their children."

Robin sat very still. The stunned brain was slowly working for itself.

"A child whose mother seems bad--is very lonely," she said.

"It is not likely to have many friends."

"It seems to belong to no one. It must be unhappy. If--Donal's mother had not been married--even he would have been unhappy."

No one made any reply.

"If he had been poor it would have made it even worse. If he had belonged to nobody and had been poor too--! How could he have borne it!"

Lord Coombe took the matter up gently, as it were removing it from the Duchess' hands.

"But he had everything he wished for from his birth," he said. "He was

always happy. I like to remember the look in his eyes. Thank God for it!"

"That beautiful look!" she cried. "That beautiful laughing look--as if all the world were joyful!"

"Thank God for it," Coombe said again. "I once knew a wretched village boy who had no legal father though his mother swore she had been married. His eyes looked like a hunted ferret's. It was through being shamed and flouted and bullied. The village lads used to shout 'Bastard' after him."

It was then that the baying of the hounds suddenly seemed at hand. The large eyes quailed before the stark emptiness of the space they gazed into.

"What shall I do--what shall I do?" Robin said and having said it she did not know that she turned to Lord Coombe.

"You must try to do what we tell you to do--even if you do not wish to do it," he said. "It shall be made as little difficult for you as is possible."

The expression of the Duchess as she looked on and heard was a changing one because her mind included so many aspects of the singular situation. She had thought it not unlikely that he would do something unusual.

Could anything much more unusual have been provided than that a man, who had absolute splendour of rank and wealth to offer, should for strange reasons of his own use the tact of courts and the fine astuteness of diplomatists in preparing the way to offer marriage to a penniless, friendless and disgraced young "companion" in what is known as "trouble"? It was because he was himself that he understood what he was dealing with--that splendour and safety would hold no lure, that protection from disgrace counted as nothing, that only one thing had existence and meaning for her. And even as this passed through her mind, Robin's answer repeated it.

"I will do it whether it is difficult or not," she said, "but--" she actually got up from her ottoman with a quiet soft movement and stood before them--not a defiant young figure, only simple and elementally sweet-- "I am not ashamed," she said. "I am not ashamed and I do not matter at all."

There was that instant written upon Coombe's face--so far at least as his old friend was concerned--his response to the significance of this. It was the elemental thing which that which moved him required; it was what the generations and centuries of the house of Coombe required--a primitive creature unashamed and with no cowardice or weak vanity lurking in its being. The Duchess recognised it in the brief moment of almost breathless silence which followed.

"You are very splendid, child," he said after it, "though you are not at all conscious of it."

"Sit down again." The Duchess put out a hand which drew Robin still nearer to her. "Explain to her now," she said.

Robin's light soft body rested against her when it obeyed. It responded to more than the mere touch of her hand; its yielding was to something which promised kindness and even comfort--that something which Dowie and

Mademoiselle had given in those days which now seemed to have belonged to another world. But though she leaned against the Duchess' knee she still lifted her eyes to Lord Coombe.

"This is what I must ask you to listen to," he said. "We believe what you have told us but we know that no one else will--without legal proof. We also know that some form may have been neglected because all was done in haste and ignorance of formalities. You can give no clue--the ordinary methods of investigation are in confusion as the whole country is. This is what remains for us to face. You are not ashamed, but if you cannot prove legal marriage Donal's son will know bitter humiliation; he will be robbed of all he should possess--his life will be ruined. Do you understand?"

"Yes," she answered without moving her eyes from his face. She seemed to him again as he stood before her in the upper room of Lady Etyng's

house when, in his clear aloof voice, he had told her that he had come to save her. He had saved her then, but now it was not she who needed saving.

"There is only one man who can give Donal's child what his father would have given him," he went on.

"Who is he?" she asked.

"I am the man," he answered, and he stood quite still.

"How--can you do it?" she asked again.

"I can marry you," his clear, aloof voice replied.

"You!--You!--You!" she only breathed it out--but it was a cry.

Then he held up his hand as if to calm her.

"I told you in the wood that hatred was useless now and that your reason for hating me had no foundation. I know how you will abhor what I suggest. But it will not be as bad as it seems. You need not even endure the ignominy of being known as the Marchioness of Coombe. But when I am dead Donal's son will be my successor. It will not be held against him that I married his beautiful young mother and chose to keep the matter a secret. I have long been known as a peculiar person given to arranging

my affairs according to my own liking. The Head of the House of Coombe"--with an ironic twitch of the mouth--"will have the law on his side and will not be asked for explanations. A romantic story will add to public interest in him. If your child is a daughter she will be protected. She will not be lonely, she will have friends. She will have all the chances of happiness a girl naturally longs for--all of them. Because you are her mother."

Robin rose and stood before him as involuntarily as she had risen before, but now she looked different. Her hands were wrung together and she was the blanched embodiment of terror. She remembered things Fräulein Hirsh had said.

"I could not marry you--if I were to be killed because I didn't," was all she could say. Because marriage had meant only Donal and the dream, and being saved from the world this one man had represented to her girl mind.

"You say that because you have no doubt heard that it has been rumoured that I have a depraved old man's fancy for you and that I have always hoped to marry you. That is as false as the other story I denied. I am not in love with you even in an antediluvian way. You would not marry me for your own sake. That goes without saying. But I will repeat what I said in the Wood when you told me you would believe me. There is Something--not you--not Donal--to be saved from suffering."

"That is true," the Duchess said and put out her hand as before. "And there is something longer drawn out and more miserable than mere dying--a dreary outcast sort of life. We know more about such things than you do."

"You may better comprehend my action if I add a purely selfish reason for it," Coombe went on. "I will give you one. I do not wish to be the last Marquis of Coombe."

He took from the table a piece of paper. He had actually made notes upon it.

"Do not be alarmed by this formality," he said. "I wish to spare words. If you consent to the performance of a private ceremony you will not be required to see me again unless you yourself request it. I have a quiet place in a remote part of Scotland where you can live with Dowie to take care of you. Dowie can be trusted and will understand what I tell her. You will be safe. You will be left alone. You will be known as a young widow. There are young widows everywhere."

Her eyes had not for a moment left his. By the time he had ended they looked immense in her thin and white small face. Her old horror of him had been founded on a false belief in things which had not existed, but a feeling which has lasted almost a lifetime has formed for itself an atmosphere from whose influence it is not easy to escape. And he stood now before her looking as he had always looked when she had felt him to



be the finely finished embodiment of evil. But--

"You are--doing it--for Donal," she faltered.

"You yourself would be doing it for Donal," he answered.

"Yes. And--I do not matter."

"Donal's wife and the mother of Donal's boy or girl matters very much," he gave back to her. He did not alter the impassive aloofness of his manner, knowing that it was better not to do so. An astute nerve specialist might have used the same method with a patient.

There was a moment or so of silence in which the immense eyes gazed before her almost through him--piteously.

"I will do anything I am told to do," she said at last. After she had said it she turned and looked at the Duchess.

The Duchess held out both her hands. They were held so far apart that it seemed almost as if they were her arms. Robin swept towards the broad footstool but reaching it she pushed it aside and knelt down laying her face upon the silken lap sobbing soft and low.

"All the world is covered with dead--beautiful boys!" her sobbing said.

"All alone and dead--dead!"