

CHAPTER XX

No immediate change was made in her life during the days that followed. She sat at her desk, writing letters, referring to notes and lists and answering questions as sweetly and faithfully as she had always done from the first. She tried to remember every detail and she also tried to keep before her mind that she must not let people guess that she was thinking of other things--or rather trying not to think of them. It was as though she stood guard over a dark background of thought, of which others must know nothing. It was a background which belonged to herself and which would always be there. Sometimes when she lifted her eyes she found the Duchess looking at her and then she realised that the Duchess knew it was there too.

She began to notice that almost everybody looked at her in a kindly slightly troubled way. Very important matrons and busy excited girls who ran in and out on errands had the same order of rather evasive glance.

"You have no cough, my dear, have you?" more than one amiable grand lady asked her.

"No, thank you--none at all," Robin answered and she was nearly always patted on the shoulder as her questioner left her.

Kathryn sitting by her desk one morning, watching her as she wrote a note, suddenly put her hand out and stopped her.

"Let me look at your wrist, Robin," she said and she took it between her fingers.

"Oh! What a little wrist!" she exclaimed. "I--I am sure Grandmamma has not seen it. Grandmamma--" aloud to the Duchess, "Have you seen Robin's wrist? It looks as if it would snap in two."

There were only three or four people in the room and they were all intimates and looked interested.

"It is only that I am a little thin," said Robin. "Everybody is thinner than usual. It is nothing."

The Duchess' kind look somehow took in those about her in her answer.

"You are too thin, my dear," she said. "I must tell you frankly, Kathryn, that you will be called upon to take her place. I am going to send her away into the wilds. The War only ceases for people who are sent into wild places. Dr. Redcliff is quite fixed in that opinion. People who need taking care of must be literally hidden away in corners where war vibrations cannot reach them. He has sent Emily Clare away and even her friends do not know where she is."

Later in the day Lady Lothwell came and in the course of a few minutes drew near to her mother and sat by her chair rather closely. She spoke in a lowered voice.

"I am so glad, mamma darling, that you are going to send poor little Miss Lawless into retreat for a rest cure," she began. "It's so tactless to continually chivy people about their health, but I own that I can scarcely resist saying to the child every time I see her, 'Are you any better today?' or, 'Have you any cough?' or, 'How is your appetite?' I have not wanted to trouble you about her but the truth is we all find ourselves talking her over. The point of her chin is growing actually sharp. What is Mrs. Gareth-Lawless doing?" curtly.

"Giving dinners and bridge parties to officers on leave. Robin never sees her."

"Of course the woman does not want her about. She is too lovely for officers' bridge parties," rather sharply again.

"Mrs. Gareth-Lawless is not the person one would naturally turn to for sympathy in trouble. Illness would present itself to her mind as a sort of outrage." The Duchess herself spoke in a low tone and her eyes wandered for a moment or so to the corner where Robin sat among her papers.

"She is a sensitive child," she said, "and I have not wanted to alarm

her by telling her she must give up the work her heart is in. I have seen for some time that she must have an entire holiday and that she must leave London behind her utterly for a while. Dr. Redcliff knows of the right remote sort of place for her. It is really quite settled. She will do as I advise her. She is very obedient."

"Mamma," murmured Lady Lothwell who was furtively regarding Robin also--and it must be confessed with a dewy eye--"I suppose it is because I have Kathryn--but I feel a sort of pull at my heart when I remember how the little thing bloomed only a few months ago! She was radiant with life and joy and youngness. It's the contrast that almost frightens one. Something has actually gone. Does Doctor Redcliff think--Could she be going to die? Somehow," with a tremulous breath, "one always thinks of death now."

"No! No!" the Duchess answered. "Dr. Redcliff says she is not in real danger. Nourishment and relaxed strain and quiet will supply what she needs. But I will ask you, Millicent, to explain to people. I am too tired to answer questions. I realise that I have actually begun to love the child and I don't want to hear amiable people continuously suggesting the probability that she is in galloping consumption--and proposing remedies."

"Will she go soon?" Lady Lothwell asked.

"As soon as Dr. Redcliff has decided between two heavenly little

places--one in Scotland and one in Wales. Perhaps next week or a week later. Things must be prepared for her comfort."

Lady Lothwell went home and talked a little to Kathryn who listened with sympathetic intelligence.

"It would have been better not to have noticed her poor little wrists," she said. "Years ago I believe that telling people that they looked ill and asking anxiously about their symptoms was regarded as a form of affection and politeness, but it isn't done at all now."

"I know, mamma!" Kathryn returned remorsefully. "But somehow there was something so pathetic in her little thin hand writing so fast--and the way her eyelashes lay on a sort of hollow of shadow instead of a soft cheek-- I took it in suddenly all at once-- And I almost burst out crying without intending to do it. Oh, mamma!" throwing out her hand to clutch her mother's, "Since--since George--! I seem to cry so suddenly! Don't--don't you?"

"Yes--yes!" as they slipped into each other's arms. "We all do--everybody--everybody!"

Their weeping was not loud but soft. Kathryn's girl voice had a low violin-string wail in it and was infinitely touching in its innocent love and pity.

"It's because one feels as if it couldn't be true--as if he must be somewhere! George--good nice George. So good looking and happy and silly and dear! And we played and fought together when we were children. Oh! To kill George--George!"

When they sat upright again with wet eyes and faces Kathryn added,

"And he was only one! And that beautiful Donal Muir who danced with Robin at Grandmamma's party! And people actually stared at them, they looked so happy and beautiful." She paused and thought a moment. "Do you know, mamma, I couldn't help believing he would fall in love with her if he saw her often--and I wondered what Lord Coombe would think. But he never did see her again. And now--! You know what they said about--not even finding him!"

"It is better that they did not meet again. If they had it would be easy to understand why the poor girl looks so ill."

"Yes, I'm glad for her that it isn't that. That would have been much worse. Being sent away to quiet places to rest might have been no good."

"But even as it is, mamma is more anxious I am sure than she likes to own to herself. You and I must manage to convey to people that it is better not even to verge on making fussy inquiries. Mamma has too many burdens on her mind to be as calm as she used to be."

It was an entirely uncomplicated situation. It became understood that the Duchess had become much attached to her companion as a result of her sweet faithfulness to her work. She and Dr. Redcliff had taken her in charge and prepared for her comfort and well-being in the most complete manner. A few months would probably end in a complete recovery. There were really no special questions even for the curious to ask and no one was curious. There was no time for curiosity. So Robin disappeared from her place at the small desk in the corner of the Duchess' sitting room and Kathryn took her place and used her pen.