

CHAPTER XXII

In little more than two weeks Dowie descended from her train in the London station and took a hansom cab which carried her through the familiar streets to Eaton Square. She was comforted somewhat by the mere familiarity of things--even by the grade of smoke which seemed in some way to be different from the smoke of Manchester's cotton factory chimneys--by the order of rattle and roar and rumble, which had a homelike sound. She had not felt at home in Manchester and she had not felt quite at home with Henrietta though she had done her duty by her. Their worlds had been far apart and daily adjustment to circumstances is not easy though it may be accomplished without the betrayal of any outward sign. His lordship's summons had come soon, as he had said it would, but he had made it possible for her to leave in the little house a steady and decent woman to take her place when she gave it up.

She had made her journey from the North with an anxiously heavy heart in her breast. She was going to "take on" a responsibility which included elements previously quite unknown to her. She was going to help to hide something, to live with a strange secret trouble and while she did so must wear her accustomed, respectable and decorous manner and aspect. Whatsoever alarmed or startled her, she must not seem to be startled or alarmed. As his lordship had carried himself with his usual bearing, spoken in his high-bred calm voice and not once failed in the naturalness of his expression--even when he had told her the whole

strange plan--so she must in any circumstances which arose and in any difficult situation wear always the aspect of a well-bred and trained servant who knew nothing which did not concern her and did nothing which ordinary domestic service did not require that she should do. She must always seem to be only Sarah Ann Dowson and never forget. But delicate and unusual as this problem was, it was not the thing which made her heart heavy. Several times during her journey she had been obliged to turn her face towards the window of the railway carriage and away from her fellow passengers so that she might very quickly and furtively touch her eyes with her handkerchief because she did not want any one to see the tear which obstinately welled up in spite of her efforts to keep it back.

She had heard of "trouble" in good families, had even been related to it. She knew how awful it was and what desperate efforts were made, what desperate means resorted to, in the concealment of it. And how difficult and almost impossible it was to cope with it and how it seemed sometimes as if the whole fabric of society and custom combined to draw attention to mere trifles which in the end proved damning evidence.

And it was Miss Robin she was going to--her own Miss Robin who had never known a child of her own age or had a girl friend--who had been cut off from innocent youth and youth's happiness and intimacies.

"It's been one of those poor mad young war weddings," she kept saying to herself, "though no one will believe her. If she hadn't been so ignorant

of life and so lonely! But just as she fell down worshipping that dear little chap in the Gardens because he was the first she'd ever seen--it's only nature that the first beautiful young thing her own age that looked at her with love rising up in him should set it rising in her--where God had surely put it if ever He put love as part of life in any girl creature His hand made. But Oh! I can see no one will believe her! The world's heart's so wicked. I know, poor lamb. Her Dowie knows. And her left like this!"

It was when her thoughts reached this point that the tear would gather in the corner of her eye and would have trickled down her cheek if she had not turned away towards the window.

But above all things she told herself she must present only Dowie's face when she reached Eaton Square. There were the servants who knew nothing and must know nothing but that Mrs. Dowson had come to take care of poor Miss Lawless who had worked too hard and was looking ill and was to be sent into the country to some retreat her grace had chosen because it was far enough away to allow of her being cut off from war news and work, if her attendants were faithful and firm. Every one knew Mrs. Dowson would be firm and faithful. Then there were the ladies who went in and out of the house in these days. If they saw her by any chance they might ask kind interested questions about the pretty creature they had liked. They might inquire as to symptoms, they might ask where she was to be taken to be nursed. Dowie knew that after she had seen Robin herself she could provide suitable symptoms and she knew, as she knew

how to breathe and walk, exactly the respectful voice and manner in which she could make her replies and how natural she could cause it to appear that she had not yet been told their destination--her grace being still undecided. Dowie's decent intelligence knew the methods of her class and their value when perfectly applied. A nurse or a young lady's maid knew only what she was told and did not ask questions.

But what she thought of most anxiously was Robin herself. His lordship had given her no instructions. Part of his seeming to understand her was that he had seemed to be sure that she would know what to say and what to leave unsaid. She was glad of that because it left her free to think the thing over and make her own quiet plans. She drew more than one tremulous sigh as she thought it out. In the first place--little Miss Robin seemed like a baby to her yet! Oh, she was a baby! Little Miss Robin just in her teens and with her childish asking eyes and her soft childish mouth! Her a young married lady and needing to be taken care of! She was too young to be married--if it was ever so! And if everything had been done all right and proper with wedding cake and veil, orange blossoms and St. George's, Hanover Square, she still would have been too young and would have looked almost cruelly like a child. And at a time such as this Dowie would have known she was one to be treated with great delicacy and tender reserve. But as it was--a little shamed thing to be hidden away--to be saved from the worst of fates for any girl--with nothing in her hand to help her--how would it be wisest to face her, how could one best be a comfort and a help?

How the sensible and tender creature gave her heart and brain to her reflections! How she balanced one chance and one emotion against another! Her conclusion was, as Coombe had known it would be, drawn from the experience of practical wisdom and an affection as deep as the experience was broad.

"She won't be afraid of Dowie," she thought, "if it's just Dowie that looks at her exactly as she always did. In her little soul she may be frightened to death but if it's only Dowie she sees--not asking questions or looking curious and unnatural, she'll get over it and know she's got something to hold on to. What she needs is something she can hold on to--something that won't tremble when she does--and that looks at her in the way she was used to when she was happy and safe. What I must do with her is what I must do with the others--just look and talk and act as Dowie always did, however hard it is. Perhaps when we get away to the quiet place we're going to hide in, she may begin to want to talk to me. But not a question do I ask or look until she's ready to open her poor heart to me."

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She had herself well under control when she reached her destination. She had bathed her face and freshened herself with a cup of hot tea at the station. She entered the house quite with her usual manner and was greeted with obvious welcome by her fellow servants. They had missed her

and were glad to see her again. She reported herself respectfully to Mrs. James in the housekeeper's sitting room and they had tea again and a confidential talk.

"I'm glad you could leave your niece, Mrs. Dowson," the housekeeper said. "It's high time poor little Miss Lawless was sent away from London. She's not fit for war work now or for anything but lying in bed in a quiet place where she can get fresh country air and plenty of fresh eggs, and good milk and chicken broth. And she needs a motherly woman like you to watch her carefully."

"Does she look as delicate as all that?" said Dowie concernedly.

"She'll lie in the graveyard in a few months if something's not done. I've seen girls look like her before this." And Mrs. James said it almost sharply.

But even with this preparation and though Lord Coombe had spoken seriously of the state of the girl's health, Dowie was not ready to encounter without a fearful sense of shock what she confronted a little later when she went to Robin's sitting room as she was asked to.

When she tapped upon the door and in response to a faint sounding "Come in" entered the pretty place, Robin rose from her seat by the fire and came towards her holding out her arms.

"I'm so glad you came, Dowie dear," she said, "I'm so glad." She put the arms close round Dowie's neck and kissed her and held her cheek against the comfortable warm one a moment before she let go. "I'm so glad, dear," she murmured and it was even as she felt the arms close about her neck and the cheek press hers that Dowie caught her breath and held it so that she might not seem to gasp. They were such thin frail arms, the young body on which the dress hung loose was only a shadow of the round slimness which had been so sweet.

But it was when the arm released her and they stood apart and looked at each other that she felt the shock in full force while Robin continued her greetings.

"Did you leave Henrietta and the children quite well?" she was saying.

"Is the new baby a pretty one?"

Dowie had not been one of those who had seen the gradual development of the physical change in her. It came upon her suddenly. She had left a young creature all softly rounded girlhood, sweet curves and life glow and bloom. She found herself holding a thin hand and looking into a transparent, sharpened small face whose eyes were hollowed. The silk of the curls on the forehead had a dankness and lifelessness which almost made her catch her breath again. Like Mrs. James she herself had more than once had the experience of watching young creatures slip into what the nurses of her day called "rapid decline" and she knew all the piteous portents of the early stages--the waxen transparency of

sharpened features and the damp clinging hair. These two last were to her mind the most significant of the early terrors.

And in less than five minutes she knew that the child was not going to talk about herself and that she had been right in making up her own mind to wait. Whatsoever the strain of silence, there would be no speech now. The piteous darkness of her eye held a stillness that was heart-breaking. It was a stillness of such touching endurance of something inevitable. Whatsoever had happened to her, whatsoever was going to happen to her, she would make no sound. She would outwardly be affectionate, pretty-mannered Miss Robin just as Dowie herself would give all her strength to trying to seem to be nothing and nobody but Dowie. And what it would cost of effort to do it well!

When they sat down together it was because she drew Robin by the thin little hand to an easy chair and she still held the thin hand when she sat near her.

"Henrietta's quite well, I'm glad to say," she answered. "And the baby's a nice plump little fellow. I left them very comfortable--and I think in time Henrietta will be married again."

"Married again!" said Robin. "Again!"

"He's a nice well-to-do man and he's fond of her and he's fond of children. He's never had any and he's always wanted them."

"Has he?" Robin murmured. "That's very nice for Henrietta." But there was a shadow in her eyes which was rather like frightened bewilderment.

Dowie still holding the mere nothing of a hand, stroked and patted it now and then as she described Mr. Jenkinson and the children and the life in the house in Manchester. She wanted to gain time and commonplace talk helped her.

"She won't be married again until her year's up," she explained. "And it's the best thing she could do--being left a young widow with children and nothing to live on. Mr. Jenkinson can give her more than she's ever had in the way of comforts."

"Did she love poor Jem very much?" Robin asked.

"She was very much taken with him in her way when she married him," Dowie said. "He was a cheerful, joking sort of young man and girls like Henrietta like jokes and fun. But they were neither of them romantic and it had begun to be a bit hard when the children came. She'll be very comfortable with Mr. Jenkinson and being comfortable means being happy--to Henrietta."

Then Robin smiled a strange little ghost of a smile--but there were no dimples near it.

"You haven't told me that I am thin, Dowie," she said. "I know I am thin, but it doesn't matter. And I am glad you kissed me first. That made me sure that you were Dowie and not only a dream. Everything has been seeming as if it were a dream--everything--myself--everybody--even you--you!" And the small hand clutched her hard.

A large lump climbed into Dowie's throat but she managed it bravely.

"It's no use telling people they're thin," she answered with stout good cheer. "It doesn't help to put flesh on them. And there are a good many young ladies working themselves thin in these days. You're just one of them that's going to be taken care of. I'm not a dream, Miss Robin, my dear. I'm just your own Dowie and I'm going to take care of you as I did when you were six."

She actually felt the bones of the small hand as it held her own still closer. It began to tremble because Robin had begun to tremble. But though she was trembling and her eyes looked very large and frightened, the silence was still deep within them.

"Yes," the low voice faltered, "you will take care of me. Thank you, Dowie dear. I--must let people take care of me. I know that. I am like Henrietta."

And that was all.

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"She's very much changed, your grace," Dowie said breathlessly when she went to the Duchess afterwards. There had been no explanation or going into detail but she knew that she might allow herself to be breathless when she stood face to face with her grace. "Does she cough? Has she night sweats? Has she any appetite?"

"She does not cough yet," the Duchess answered, but her grave eyes were as troubled as Dowie's own. "Doctor Redcliff will tell you everything. He will see you alone. We are sending her away with you because you love her and will know how to take care of her. We are very anxious."

"Your grace," Dowie faltered and one of the tears she had forced back when she was in the railway carriage rose insubordinately and rolled down her cheek, "just once I nursed a young lady who--looked as she does now. I did my best with all my heart, the doctors did their best, everybody that loved her did their best--and there were a good many. We watched over her for six months."

"Six months?" the Duchess' voice was an unsteady thing.

"At the end of six months we laid her away in a pretty country churchyard, with flowers heaped all over her--and her white little hands full of them. And she hadn't--as much to contend with--as Miss Robin has."

And in the minute of dead silence which followed more tears fell. No one tried to hold them back and some of them were the tears of the old Duchess.