CHAPTER XXIV

The little feudal fastness in the Highlands which was called Darreuch Castle--when it was mentioned by any one, which was rarely--had been little more than a small ruin when Lord Coombe inherited it as an unconsidered trifle among more imposing and available property. It had indeed presented the aspect not so much of an asset as of an entirely useless relic. The remote and--as far as record dwelt on him--obviously unnotable ancestor who had built it as a stronghold in an almost unreachable spot upon the highest moors had doubtlessly had picturesque reasons for the structure, but these were lost in the dim past and appeared on the surface, unexplainable to a modern mind. Lord Coombe himself had not explained an interest he chose to feel in it, or his own reasons for repairing it a few years after it came into his possession. He rebuilt certain breaches in the walls and made certain rooms sufficiently comfortable to allow of his spending a few nights or weeks in it at rare intervals. He always went alone, taking no servant with him, and made his retreat after his own mood, served only by the farmer and his wife who lived in charge from year's end to year's end, herding a few sheep and cultivating a few acres for their own needs.

They were a silent pair without children and plainly not feeling the lack of them. They had lived in remote moorland places since their birth. They had so little to say to each other that Lord Coombe sometimes felt a slight curiosity as to why they had married instead of

remaining silent singly. There was however neither sullenness nor resentment in their lack of expression. Coombe thought they liked each other but found words unnecessary. Jock Macaur driving his sheep to fold in the westering sun wore the look of a man not unpleased with life and at least undisturbed by it. Maggy Macaur doing her housework, churning or clucking to her hens, was peacefully cheerful and seemed to ask no more of life than food and sleep and comfortable work which could be done without haste. There were no signs of knowledge on her part or Jock's of the fact that they were surrounded by wonders of moorland and hillside colour and beauty. Sunrise which leaped in delicate flames of dawn meant only that they must leave their bed; sunset which lighted the moorland world with splendour meant that a good night's sleep was coming.

Jock had heard from a roaming shepherd or so that the world was at war and that lads were being killed in their thousands. One good man had said that the sons of the great gentry were being killed with the rest. Jock did not say that he did not believe it and in fact expressed no opinion at all. If he and Maggy gave credit to the story, they were little disturbed by any sense of its reality. They had no neighbours and their few stray kinfolk lived at remote distances and were not given to visits or communications. There had been vague rumours of far away wars in the years past, but they had assumed no more reality than legends. This war was a shadow too and after Jock came home one night and mentioned it as he might have mentioned the death of a cow or the buying of a moor pony the subject was forgotten by both.

"His lordship" it was who reminded them of it. He even bestowed upon the rumour a certain reality. He appeared at the stout little old castle one day without having sent them warning, which was unusual. He came to give some detailed orders and to instruct them in the matter of changes. He had shown forethought in bringing with him a selection of illustrated newspapers. This saved time and trouble in the matter of making the situation clear. The knowledge which conveyed itself to Maggy and Jock produced the effect of making them even more silent than usual if such a condition were possible. They stared fixedly and listened with respect but beyond a rare "Hech!" they had no opinion to express. It became plain that the war was more than a mere rumour-- The lads who had been blown to bits or bayoneted! The widows and orphans that were left! Some of the youngest of the lads had lost their senses and married young things only to go off to the ill place folk called "The Front" and leave them widows in a few days' or weeks' time. There were hundreds of bits of girls left lonely waiting for their bairns to come into the world--Some with scarce a penny unless friends took care of them. There was a bit widow in her teens who was a distant kinswoman of his lordship's, and her poor lad was among those who were killed. He had been a fine lad and he would never see his bairn. The poor young widow had been ill with grief and the doctors said she must be hidden away in some quiet place where she would never hear of battles or see a newspaper. She must be kept in peace and taken great care of if she was to gain strength to live through her time. She had no family to watch over her and his lordship and an old lady who was fond of her had taken

her trouble in hand. The well-trained woman who had nursed her as a child would bring her to Darreuch Castle and there would stay.

His lordship had been plainly much interested in the long time past when he had put the place in order for his own convenience. Now he seemed even more interested and more serious. He went from room to room with a grave face and looked things over carefully. He had provided himself with comforts and even luxuries before his first coming and they had been of the solid baronial kind which does not deteriorate. It was a little castle and a forgotten one, but his rooms had beauty and had not been allowed to be as gloomy as they might have been if stone walls and black oak had not been warmed by the rich colours of tapestry and pictures which held light and glow. But other things were coming from London. He himself would wait to see them arrive and installed. The Macaurs wondered what more the "young leddy" and her woman could want but took their orders obediently. Her woman's name was Mrs. Dowson and she was a quiet decent body who would manage the household. That the young widow was to be well taken care of was evident. A doctor was to ride up the moorland road each day to see her, which seemed a great precaution even though the Macaurs did not know that he had consented to live temporarily in the locality because he had been well paid to do so. Lord Coombe had chosen him with as discreet selection as he had used in his choice of the vicar of the ancient and forsaken church. A rather young specialist who was an enthusiast in his work and as ambitious as he was poor, could contemplate selling some months of his time for value received if the terms offered were high enough. That silence and

discretion were required formed no objections.

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The rain poured down on the steep moorland road when the carriage slowly climbed it to the castle. Robin, seeming to gaze out at the sodden heath, did not really see it because she was thinking of Dowie who sat silently by her side. Dowie had taken her from the church to the station and they had made the long journey together. They had talked very little in the train though Dowie had been tenderly careful and kind. Robin knew she would ask no questions and she dully felt that the blows which were falling on everybody every day must have stunned her also. What she herself was thinking as she seemed to gaze at the sodden heather was a thing of piteous and helpless pain. She was achingly wondering what Dowie was thinking--what she knew and what she thought of the girl she had taken such care of and who was being sent away to be hidden in a ruined castle whose existence was a forgotten thing. The good respectable face told nothing but it seemed to be trying to keep itself from looking too serious; and once Robin had thought that it looked as if Dowie might suddenly have broken down if she would have allowed herself but she would not allow herself.

The truth was that the two or three days at Eaton Square had been very hard for Dowie to manage perfectly. To play her accepted part before her fellow servants required much steady strength. They were all fond of "poor little Miss Lawless" and had the tendency of their class to

discuss and dwell upon symptoms with sympathetic harrowingness of detail. It seemed that all of them had had some friend or relative who had "gone off in a quick decline. It's strange how many young people do!" A head housemaid actually brought her heart into her throat one afternoon by saying at the servants' hall tea:

"If she was one of the war brides, I should say she was just like my cousin Lucy--poor girl. She and her husband were that fond of each other that it was a pleasure to see them. He was killed in an accident. She was expecting. And they'd been that happy. She went off in three months. She couldn't live without him. She wasn't as pretty as Miss Lawless, of course, but she had big brown eyes and it was the way they looked that reminded me. Quick decline always makes people's eyes look big and--just as poor little Miss Lawless does."

To sit and eat buttered toast quietly and only look normally sad and slowly shake one's head and say, "Yes indeed. I know what you mean, Miss Tompkins," was an achievement entitled to much respect.

The first night Dowie had put her charge to bed and had seen the faint outline under the bedclothes and the sunken eyes under the pale closed lids whose heaviness was so plain because it was a heaviness which had no will to lift itself again and look at the morning, she could scarcely bear her woe. As she dressed the child when morning came and saw the delicate bones sharply denoting themselves, and the hollows in neck and throat where smooth fairness had been, her hands almost shook as she

touched. And hardest of all to bear was the still, patient look in the enduring eyes. She was being patient--patient, poor lamb, and only God himself knew how she cried when she was left alone in her white bed, the door closed between her and all the house.

"Does she think I am wicked?" was what was passing through Robin's mind as the carriage climbed the moor through the rain. "It would break my heart if Dowie thought I was wicked. But even that does not matter. It is only my heart."

In memory she was looking again into Donal's eyes as he had looked into hers when he knelt before her in the wood. Afterwards he had kissed her dress and her feet when she said she would go with him to be married so that he could have her for his own before he went away to be killed.

It would have been his heart that would have been broken if she had said "No" instead of whispering the soft "Yes" of a little mating bird, which had always been her answer when he had asked anything of her.

When the carriage drew up at last before the entrance to the castle, the Macaurs awaited them with patient respectful faces. They saw the "decent body" assist with care the descent of a young thing the mere lift of whose eyes almost caused both of them to move a trifle backward.

"You and Dowie are going to take care of me," she said quiet and low and with a childish kindness. "Thank you."

She was taken to a room in whose thick wall Lord Coombe had opened a window for sunlight and the sight of hill and heather. It was a room warm and full of comfort--a strange room to find in a little feudal stronghold hidden from the world. Other rooms were near it, as comfortable and well prepared. One in a tower adjoining was hung with tapestry and filled with wonderful old things, uncrowded and harmonious and so arranged as to produce the effect of a small retreat for rest, the reading of books or refuge in stillness.

When Robin went into it she stood for a few moments looking about her--looking and wondering.

"Lord Coombe remembers everything," she said very slowly at last, "--everything. He remembers."

"He always did remember," said Dowie watching her. "That's it."

"I did not know--at first," Robin said as slowly as before. "I do--now."

In the evening she sat long before the fire and Dowie, sewing near her, looked askance now and then at her white face with the lost eyes. It was Dowie's own thought that they were "lost." She had never before seen anything like them. She could not help glancing sideways at them as they gazed into the red glow of the coal. What was her mind dwelling on? Was she thinking of words to say? Would she begin to feel that they were far

enough from all the world--remote and all alone enough for words not to be sounds too terrible to hear even as they were spoken?

"Oh! dear Lord," Dowie prayed, "help her to ease her poor, timid young heart that's so crushed with cruel weight."

"You must go to bed early, my dear," she said at length. "But why don't you get a book and read?"

The lost eyes left the fire and met hers.

"I want to talk," Robin said. "I want to ask you things."

"I'll tell you anything you want to know," answered Dowie. "You're only a child and you need an older woman to talk to."

"I want to talk to you about--me," said Robin. She sat straight in her chair, her hands clasped on her knee. "Do you know about--me, Dowie?" she asked.

"Yes, my dear," Dowie answered.

"Tell me what Lord Coombe told you."

Dowie put down her sewing because she was afraid her hands would tremble

when she tried to find the proper phrase in which to tell as briefly as she could the extraordinary story.

"He said that you were married to a young gentleman who was killed at the Front--and that because you were both so young and hurried and upset you perhaps hadn't done things as regular as you thought. And that you hadn't the papers you ought to have for proof. And it might take too much time to search for them now. And--and--Oh, my love, he's a good man, for all you've hated him so! He won't let a child be born with shame to blight it. And he's given you and it--poor helpless innocent--his own name, God bless him!"

Robin sat still and straight, with clasped hands on her knee, and her eyes more lost than before, as she questioned Dowie remorselessly. There was something she must know.

"He said--and the Duchess said--that no one would believe me if I told them I was married. Do you believe me, Dowie? Would Mademoiselle believe me--if she is alive--for Oh! I believe she is dead! Would you both believe me?"

Dowie's work fell upon the rug and she held out both her comfortable nursing arms, choking:

"Come here, my lamb," she cried out, with suddenly streaming eyes. "Come and sit on your old Dowie's knee like you used to do in the nursery."

"You do believe me--you do!" As she had looked in the nursery days--the Robin who left her chair and was swept into the well known embrace--looked now. She hid her face on Dowie's shoulder and clung to her with shaking hands.

"I prayed to Jesus Christ that you would believe me, Dowie!" she cried. "And that Mademoiselle would come if she is not killed. I wanted you to know that it was true--I wanted you to know!"

"That was it, my pet lamb!" Dowie kept hugging her to her breast "We'd both of us know! We know you--we do! No one need prove things to us. We know!"

"It frightened me so to think of asking you," shivered Robin. "When you came to Eaton Square I could not bear it. If your dear face had looked different I should have died. But I couldn't go to bed to-night without finding out. The Duchess and Lord Coombe are very kind and sorry for me and they say they believe me--but I can't feel sure they really do. And nobody else would. But you and Mademoiselle. You loved me always and I loved you. And I prayed you would."

Dowie knew how Mademoiselle had died--of the heap of innocent village people on which she had fallen bullet-riddled. But she said nothing of her knowledge.

"Mademoiselle would say what I do and she would stay and take care of you as I'm going to do," she faltered. "God bless you for asking me straight out, my dear! I was waiting for you to speak and praying you'd do it before I went to bed myself. I couldn't have slept a wink if you hadn't."

For a space they sat silent--Robin on her knee like a child drooping against her warm breast. Outside was the night stillness of the moor, inside the night stillness held within the thick walls of stone rooms and passages, in their hearts the stillness of something which yet waited--unsaid.

At last--

"Did Lord Coombe tell you who--he was, Dowie?"

"He said perhaps you would tell me yourself--if you felt you'd like me to know. He said it was to be as you chose."

Robin fumbled with a thin hand at the neck of her dress. She drew from it a chain with a silk bag attached. Out of the bag she took first a small folded package.

"Do you remember the dry leaves I wanted to keep when I was so little?" she whispered woefully. "I was too little to know how to save them. And you made me this tiny silk bag."

Dowie's face was almost frightened as she drew back to look. There was in her motherly soul the sudden sense of panic she had felt in the nursery so long ago.

"My blessed child!" she breathed. "Not that one--after all that time!"

"Yes," said Robin. "Look, Dowie--look."

She had taken a locket out of the silk bag and she opened it and Dowie looked.

Perhaps any woman would have felt what she felt when she saw the face which seemed to laugh rejoicing into hers, as if Life were such a supernal thing--as if it were literally the blessed gift of God as all the ages have preached to us even while they have railed at the burden of living and called it cruel nothingness. The radiance in the eyes' clearness, the splendid strength and joy in being, could have built themselves into nothing less than such beauty as this.

Dowie looked at it in dead silence, her breast heaving fast.

"Oh! blessed God!" she broke out with a gasp. "Did they kill--that!"

"Yes," said Robin, her voice scarcely more than a breath, "Donal."