

## CHAPTER XXV

Dowie put her to bed as she had done when she was a child, feeling as if the days in the nursery had come back again. She saw gradually die out of the white face the unnatural restraint which she had grieved over. It had suggested the look of a girl who was not only desolate but afraid and she wondered how long she had worn it and what she had been most afraid of.

In the depths of her comfortable being there lay hidden a maternal pleasure in the nature of her responsibility. She had cared for young mothers before, and that she should be called to watch over Robin, whose child forlornness she had rescued, filled her heart with a glowing. As she moved about the room quietly preparing for the comfort of the night she knew that the soft dark of the lost eyes followed her and that it was not quite so lost as it had looked in the church and on their singularly silent journey.

When her work was done and she turned to the bed again Robin's arms were held out to her.

"I want to kiss you, Dowie--I want to kiss you," she said with just the yearning dwelling on the one word, which had so moved the good soul long ago with its innocent suggestion of tender reverence for some sacred

rite.

Dowie hurriedly knelt by the bedside.

"Never you be frightened, my lamb--because you're so young and don't know things," she whispered, holding her as if she were a baby. "Never you let yourself be frightened for a moment. Your own Dowie's here and always will be--and Dowie knows all about it."

"Until you took me on your knee to-night," very low and in broken phrases, "I was so lonely. I was as lonely as I used to be in the old nursery before you and Mademoiselle came. Afterwards--" with a shudder, "there were so many long, long nights. There--always--will be so many. One after every day. I lie in my bed in the dark. And there is Nothing! Oh! Dowie, let me tell you!" her voice was a sweet longing wail. "When Donal came back all the world was full and shining and warm! It was full. There was no loneliness anywhere. We wanted nothing but each other. And when he was gone there was only emptiness! And I was not alive and I could not think. I can scarcely think now."

"You'll begin to think soon, my lamb," Dowie whispered. "You've got something to think of. After a while the emptiness won't be so big and black."

She ventured it very carefully. Her wise soul knew that the Emptiness must come first--the awful world-old Emptiness which for an

endless-seeming time nothing can fill-- And all smug preachers of the claims of life and duty must be chary of approaching those who stand desolate gazing into it.

"I could only remember," the broken heart-wringing voice went on. "And it seemed as if the remembering was killing me over and over again-- It is like that now. But in the Wood Lord Coombe said something strange--which seemed to make me begin to think a little. Only it was like beginning to try to write with a broken arm. I can't go on--I can only think of Donal-- And be lonely--lonely--lonely."

The very words--the mere sound of them in her own ears made her voice trail away into bitter helpless crying--which would not stop. It was the awful weeping of utter woe and weakness whose convulsive sobs go on and on until they almost cease to seem human sounds. Dowie's practical knowledge told her what she had to face. This was what she had guessed at when she had known that there had been crying in the night. Mere soothing of the tenderest would not check it.

"I had been lonely--always-- And then the loneliness was gone. And then--! If it had never gone--!"

"I know, my dear, I know," said Dowie watching her with practised, anxious eye. And she went away for a few moments and came back with an unobtrusive calming draught and coaxed her into taking it and sat down and prayed as she held the little hands which unknowingly beat upon the

pillow. Something of her steadiness and love flowed from her through her own warm restraining palms and something in her tender steady voice spoke for and helped her--though it seemed long and long before the cruelty of the storm had lessened and the shadow of a body under the bed-clothes lay deadly still and the heavy eyelids closed as if they would never lift again.

Dowie did not leave her for an hour or more but sat by her bedside and watched. Like this had been the crying in the night. And she had been alone.

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As she sat and watched she thought deeply after her lights. She did not think only of the sweet shattered thing she so well loved. She thought much of Lord Coombe. Being a relic of a class which may be regarded as forever extinct, her views on the subject of the rights and responsibilities of rank were of an unswerving reverence verging on the feudal. Even in early days her perfection of type was rare. To her unwavering mind the remarkable story she had become a part of was almost august in its subjection of ordinary views to the future of a great house and its noble name. With the world falling to pieces and great houses crumbling into nothingness, that this one should be rescued from the general holocaust was a deed worthy of its head. But where was there another man who would have done this thing as he had done it--remaining totally indifferent to the ignominy which would fall upon his memory in

the years to come when the marriage was revealed. That the explanation of his action would always be believed to be an unseemly and shameful one was to her respectable serving-class mind a bitter thing. That it would always be contemptuously said that a vicious elderly man had educated the daughter of his mistress, that he might marry her and leave an heir of her blooming youth, was almost worse than if he had been known to have committed some decent crime like honest murder. Even the servants' hall in the slice of a house, discussing the ugly whisper had somewhat revolted at it and thought it "a bit too steep even for these times." But he had plainly looked the whole situation in the face and had made up his mind to do what he had done. He hadn't cared for himself; he had only cared that the child who was to be born should be his legitimatised successor and that there should remain after him a Head of the House of Coombe. That such houses should have heads to succeed to their dignities was a simple reverential belief of Dowie's and--apart from all other feeling--the charge she had undertaken wore to her somewhat the aspect of a religious duty. His lordship was as one who had a place on a sort of altar.

"It's because he's so high in his way that he can bear it," was her thought. "He's so high that nothing upsets him. He's above things--that's what he is." And there was something else too--something she did not quite follow but felt vaguely moved by. What was happening to England came into it--and something else that was connected with himself in some way that was his own affair. In his long talk with her he had said some strange things--though all in his own way.

"Howsoever the tide of war turns, men and women will be needed as the world never needed them before," was one of them. "This one small unknown thing I want. It will be the child of my old age. I want it. Her whole being has been torn to pieces. Dr. Redcliff says that she might have died before this if her delicate body had not been stronger than it looks."

"She has never been ill, my lord," Dowie had answered, "--but she is ill now."

"Save her--save it for me," he broke out in a voice she had never heard and with a face she had never seen.

That in this plainly overwrought hour he should allow himself a moment of forgetfulness drew him touchingly near to her.

"My lord," she said, "I've watched over her since she was five. I know the ways young things in her state need to have about them to give them strength and help. Thank the Lord she's one of the loving ones and if we can hold her until she--wakes up to natural feelings she'll begin to try to live for the sake of what'll need her--and what's his as well as hers."

Of this she thought almost religiously as she sat by the bedside and watched.