

CHAPTER XXIX

Coombe House had been transformed into one of the most practical nursing homes in London. The celebrated ballroom and picture gallery were filled with cots; a spacious bedroom had become a perfectly equipped operating room; nurses and doctors moved everywhere with quiet swiftness. Things were said to be marvellously well done because Lord Coombe himself held reins which diplomatically guided and restrained amateurishness and emotional infelicities.

He spent most of his time, when he was in the house, in the room on the entrance floor where Mademoiselle had found him when she had come to him in her search for Robin.

He had faced ghastly hours there as the war news struck its hideous variant note from day to day. Every sound which rolled through the street had its meaning for him, and there were few which were not terrible. They all meant inhuman struggle, inhuman suffering, inhuman passions, and wounds or death. He carried an unmoved face and a well-held head through the crowded thoroughfares. The men in the cots in his picture gallery and his ballroom were the better for the outward calm he brought when he sat and talked to them, but he often hid a mad fury in his breast or a heavy and sick fatigue.

Even in London a man saw and heard and was able, if he had an imagination, to visualise too much to remain quite normal. He had seen what was left of strong men brought back from the Front, men who could scarcely longer be counted as really living human beings; he had talked to men on leave who had a hideous hardness in their haggard eyes and who did not know that they gnawed at their lips sometimes as they told the things they had seen. He saw the people going into the churches and chapels. He sometimes went into such places himself and he always found there huddled forms kneeling in the pews, even when no service was being held. Sometimes they were men, sometimes women, and often they writhed and sobbed horribly. He did not know why he went in; his going seemed only part of some surging misery.

He heard weird stories again and again of occult happenings. He had been told all the details of Lady Maureen's case and of a number of other cases somewhat resembling it. He was of those who have advanced through experience to the point where entire disbelief in anything is not easy. This was the more so because almost all previously accepted laws had been shaken as by an earthquake. He had fallen upon a new sort of book drifting about. He had had such books put into his hands by acquaintances, some of whom were of the impressionable hysteric order, but many of whom were as analytically minded as himself. He found much of such literature in the book shops. He began to look over the best written and ended by reading them with deep attention. He was amazed to discover that for many years profoundly scientific men had been

seriously investigating and experimenting with mysteries unexplainable by the accepted laws of material science. They had discussed, argued and written grave books upon them. They had been doing all this before any society for psychical research had founded itself and the intention of new logic was to be scientific rather than psychological. They had written books, scattered through the years, on mesmerism, hypnosis, abnormal mental conditions, the powers of suggestion, even unexplored dimensions and in modern days psychotherapeutics.

"What has amazed me is my own ignorance of the prolonged and serious nature of the investigation of an astonishing subject," he said in talking with the Duchess. "To realise that analytical minds have been doing grave work of which one has known nothing is an actual shock to one's pride. I suppose the tendency would have been to pooh-pooh it. The cheap, modern popular form is often fantastic and crude, but there remains the fact that it all contains truths not to be explained by the rules we have always been familiar with."

The Duchess had read the book he had brought her and held it in her hands.

"Perhaps the time has come, in which we are to learn the new ones," she said.

"Perhaps we are being forced to learn them--as a result of our pooh-poohing," was his answer. "Some of us may learn that clear-cut

disbelief is at least indiscreet."

Therefore upon a certain morning he sat long in reflection over a letter which had arrived from Dowie. He read it a number of times.

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"I don't know what your lordship may think," Dowie said and he felt she held herself with a tight rein. "If I may say so, it's what's going to come out of it that matters and not what any of us think of it. So far it seems as if a miracle had happened. About a week ago she wakened in the morning looking as I'd been afraid she'd never look again. There was actually colour in her thin little face that almost made it look not so thin. There was a light in her eyes that quite startled me. She lay on her bed and smiled like a child that's suddenly put out of pain. She said--quite quiet and natural--that she'd seen her husband. She said he had come and talked to her a long time and that it was not a dream, and he was not an angel--he was himself. At first I was terrified by a dreadful thought that her poor young mind had given way. But she had no fever and she was as sweet and sensible as if she was talking to her Dowie in her own nursery. And, my lord, this is what does matter. She sat up and ate her breakfast and said she would take a walk with me. And walk she did--stronger and better than I'd have believed. She had a cup of tea and a glass of milk and a fresh egg and a slice of hot buttered toast. That's what I hold on to, my lord--without any thinking. I daren't write about it at first because I didn't trust it to last. But

she has wakened in the same way every morning since. And she's eaten the bits of nice meals I've put before her. I've been careful not to put her appetite off by giving her more than a little at a time. And she's slept like a baby and walked every day. I believe she thinks she sees Captain Muir every night. I wouldn't ask questions, but she spoke of it once again to me.

"Your obedient servant,
SARAH ANN DOWSON."

Lord Coombe sat in interested reflection. He felt curiously uplifted above the rolling sounds in the street and the headlines of the pile of newspapers on the table.

"If it had not been for the tea and egg and buttered toast she would have been sure the poor child was mad." He thought it out. "An egg and a slice of buttered toast guarantee even spiritual things. Why not? We are material creatures who have only material sight and touch and taste to employ as arguments. I suppose that is why tables are tipped, and banjos fly about for beginners. It's because we cannot see other things, and what we cannot see-- Oh! fools that we are! The child said he was not an angel--he was himself. Why not? Where did he come from? Personally I believe that he came."