

CHAPTER XXX

"It was Lord Coombe who sent the book," said Robin.

She was sitting in the Tower room, watching Dowie open the packages which had come from London. She herself had opened the one which held the models and she was holding a tiny film of lawn and fine embroidery in her hands. Dowie could see that she was quite unconscious that she loosely held it against her breast as if she were nursing it.

"It's his lordship's way to think of things," the discreet answer came impersonally.

Robin looked slowly round the small and really quite wonderful room.

"You know I said that, the first night we came here."

"Yes?" Dowie answered.

Robin turned her eyes upon her. They were no longer hollowed, but they still looked much too large.

"Dowie," she said. "He knows things."

"He always did," said Dowie. "Some do and some don't."

"He knows things--as Donal does. The secret things you can't talk about--the meaning of things."

She went on as if she were remembering bit by bit. "When we were in the Wood in the dark, he said the first thing that made my mind begin to move--almost to think. That was because he knew. Knowing things made him send the book."

The fact was that he knew much of which it was not possible for him to speak, and in passing a shop window he had been fantastically arrested by a mere pair of small sleeves--the garment to which they belonged having by chance so fallen that they seemed to be tiny arms holding themselves out in surrendering appeal. They had held him a moment or so staring and then he had gone into the shop and asked for their catalogue.

"Yes, he knew," Dowie replied.

A letter had been written to London signed by Dowie and the models and patterns had been sent to the village and brought to the castle by Jock Macaur. Later there had come rolls of fine flannel and lawn, with gossamer thread and fairy needles and embroidery floss. Then the sewing began.

Doctor Benton had gradually begun to look forward to his daily visits with an interest stimulated by a curiosity become eager. The most casual looker-on might have seen the change taking place in his patient day by day and he was not a casual looker-on. Was the improvement to be relied upon? Would the mysterious support suddenly fail them?

"What in God's name should we do if it did?" he broke out unconsciously aloud one day when Dowie and he were alone together.

"If it did what, sir?" she asked.

"If it stopped--the dream?"

Dowie understood. By this time she knew that, when he asked questions, took notes and was professionally exact, he had ceased to think of Robin merely as a patient. She had touched him in some unusual way which had drawn him within the circle of her innocent woe. He was under the spell of her pathetic youngness which made Dowie herself feel as if they were watching over a child called upon to bear something it was unnatural for a child to endure.

"It won't stop," she said obstinately, but she lost her ruddy colour because she was not sure.

But after the sewing began there grew up within her a sort of courage. A girl whose material embodiment has melted away until she has worn the

aspect of a wraith is not restored to normal bloom in a week. But what Dowie seemed to see was the lamp of life relighted and the first flickering flame strengthening to a glow. The hands which fitted together on the table in the Tower room delicate puzzles in bits of lawn and paper, did not in these days tremble with weakness. Instead of the lost look there had returned to the young doe's eyes the pretty trusting smile. The girl seemed to smile as if to herself nearly all the time, Dowie thought, and often she broke into a happy laugh at her own small blunders--and sometimes only at the sweet littleness of the things she was making.

One fact revealed itself clearly to Dowie, which was that she had lost all sense of the aspect which the dream must wear to others than herself. This was because there had been no others than Dowie who had uttered no suggestion of doubt and had never touched upon the subject unless it had been first broached by Robin herself. She had hidden her bewilderment and anxieties and had outwardly accepted the girl's own acceptance of the situation.

Of the incident of the sewing Lord Coombe had been informed later with other details.

"She sits and sews and sews," wrote Dowie. "She sewed beautifully even before she was out of the nursery. I have never seen a picture of a little saint sewing. If I had, perhaps I should say she looked like it."

Coombe read the letter to his old friend at Eaton Square.

There was a pause as he refolded it. After the silence he added as out of deep thinking, "I wish that I could see her."

"So do I," the Duchess said. "So do I. But if I were to go to her, questioning would begin at once."

"My going to Darreuch would attract no attention. It never did after the first year. But she has not said she wished to see me. I gave my word. I shall never see her again unless she asks me to come. She does not need me. She has Donal."

"What do you believe?" she asked.

"What do you believe?" he replied.

After a moment of speculative gravity came her reply.

"As without proof I believed in the marriage, so without proof I believe that in some mysterious way he comes to her--God be thanked!"

"So do I," said Coombe. "We are living in a changing world and new things are happening. I do not know what they are, but they shake me inwardly."

"You want to see her because--?" the Duchess put it to him.

"Perhaps I am changing with the rest of the world, or it may be that instincts which have always been part of me have been shaken to the surface of my being. Perhaps I was by nature an effusively affectionate and domestic creature. I cannot say that I have ever observed any signs of the tendency, but it may have lurked secretly within me."

"It caused you to rescue a child from torment and watch over its helplessness as if it had been your own flesh and blood," interposed the Duchess.

"It may have been. Who knows? And now the unnatural emotional upheaval of the times has broken down all my artificialities. I feel old and tired--perhaps childish. Shrines are being torn down and blown to pieces all over the world. And I long for a quite simple shrine to cleanse my soul before. A white little soul hidden away in peace, and sitting smiling over her sewing of small garments is worth making a pilgrimage to. Do you remember the childish purity of her eyelids? I want to see them dropped down as she sews. I want to see her."

"Alixe--and her children--would have been your shrine." The Duchess thought it out slowly.

"Yes."

He was the last of men to fall into an unconventional posture, but he dropped forward in his seat, his elbows on his knees, his forehead in his hands.

"If she lives and the child lives I shall long intolerably to see them. As her mother seemed to live in Alixe's exquisite body without its soul, so Alixe's soul seems to possess this child's body. Do I appear to be talking nonsense? Things without precedent have always been supposed to be nonsense."

"We are not so sure of that as we used to be," commented the Duchess.

"I shall long to be allowed to be near them," he added. "But I may go out of existence without seeing them at all. I gave my word."