

CHAPTER XXXI

After the first day of cutting out patterns from the models and finely sewing tiny pieces of lawn together, Dowie saw that, before going to her bedroom for the night, Robin began to gather together all she had done and used in doing her work. She had ordered from London one of the pretty silk-lined lace-frilled baskets women are familiar with, and she neatly folded and laid her sewing in it. She touched each thing with fingers that lingered; she smoothed and once or twice patted something. She made exquisitely orderly little piles. Her down-dropped white lids quivered with joy as she did it. When she lifted them to look at Dowie her eyes were like those of a stray young spirit.

"I am going to take them into my room," she said. "I shall take them every night. I want to keep them on a chair quite near me so that I can put out my hand and touch them."

"Yes, my lamb," Dowie agreed cheerfully. But she knew she was going to hear something else. And this would be the third time.

"I want to show them to Donal." The very perfection of her naturalness gave Dowie a cold chill, even while she thanked God. She had shivered inwardly when she had opened the Tower room window, and so she shivered now despite her serene exterior. A simple unexalted body could not but

think of those fragments which were never even found. And she, standing there with her lips and eyes smiling, just like any other radiant girl mother whose young husband is her lover, enraptured and amazed by this new miracle of hers!

Robin touched her with the tip of her finger.

"It can't be only a dream, Dowie," she said. "He's too real. I am too real. We are too happy." She hesitated a second. "If he were here at Darreuch in the daytime--I should not always know where he had been when he was away. Only his coming back would matter. He can't tell me now just where he comes from. He says 'Not yet.' But he comes. Every night, Dowie."

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Every day she sewed in the Tower room, her white eyelids drooping over her work. Each night the basket was carried to her room. And each day Dowie watched with amazement the hollows in her temples and cheeks and under her eyes fill out, the small bones cover themselves, the thinned throat grow round with young tissue and smooth with satin skin. Her hair became light curled silk again; the faint colour deepened into the Jacqueminot glow at which passers by had turned to look in the street when she was little more than a baby. But she never talked of the dream. The third time was the last for many weeks.

Between Doctor Benton and Dowie there grew up an increased reserve concerning the dream. Never before had the man encountered an experience which so absorbed him. He was a student of the advanced order. He also had seen the books which had fallen into the hands of Coombe--some the work of scientific men--some the purely commercial outcome of the need of the hour written by the jackals of the literary profession. He would have been ready to sit by the bedside of his patient through the night watching over her sleep, holding her wrist with fingers on her pulse. Even his most advanced thinking involuntarily harked back to pulse and temperature and blood pressure. The rapidity of the change taking place in the girl was abnormal, but it expressed itself physically as well as mentally. How closely involved physiology and psychology were after all! Which was which? Where did one end and the other begin? Where was the line drawn? Was there a line at all? He had seen no chances for the apparently almost dying young thing when he first met her. She could not have lived through what lay before her. She had had a dream which she believed was real, and, through the pure joy and comfort of it, the life forces had begun to flow through her being and combine to build actual firm tissue and supply blood cells. The results were physical enough. The inexplicable in this case was that the curative agency was that she believed that her husband, who had been blown to atoms on the battle field, came to her alive each night--talked with her--held her in warm arms. Nothing else had aided her. And there you were--thrown upon occultism and what not!

He became conscious that, though he would have been glad to question Dowie daily and closely, a certain reluctance of mind held him back. Also he realised that, being a primitive though excellent woman, Dowie herself was secretly awed into avoidance of the subject. He believed that she knelt by her bedside each night in actual fear, but faithfully praying that for some months at least the dream might be allowed to go on. Had not he himself involuntarily said,

"She is marvellously well. We have nothing to fear if this continues."

It did continue and her bloom became a thing to marvel at. And not her bloom alone. Her strength increased with her blooming until no one could have felt fear for or doubt of her. She walked upon the moor without fatigue, she even worked in a garden Jock Macaur had laid out for her inside the ruined walls of what had once been the castle's banquet hall. So much of her life had been spent in London that wild moor and sky and the growing of things thrilled her. She ran in and out and to and fro like a little girl. There seemed no limit to the young vigour that appeared day by day to increase rather than diminish.

"It's a wonderful thing and God be thankit," said Mrs. Macaur.

Only Dowie in secret trembled sometimes before the marvel of her. As Doctor Benton had imagined, she prayed forcefully.

"Lord, forgive me if I am a sinner--but for Christ's sake don't take the

strange thing away from her until she's got something to hold on to.
What would she do-- What could she!"

Robin came into the Tower room on a fair morning carrying her pretty basket as she always did. She put it down on its table and went and stood a few minutes at a window looking out. The back of her neck, Dowie realised, was now as slenderly round and velvet white as it had been when she had dressed her hair on the night of the Duchess' dance. Dowie did not know that its loveliness had been poor George's temporary undoing; she only thought of it as a sign of the wonderful change. It had been waxen pallid and had shown piteous hollows.

She turned about and spoke.

"Dowie, dear, I am going to write to Lord Coombe."

Dowie's heart hastened its beat and she herself being conscious of the fact, hastened to answer in an unexcited manner.

"That'll be nice, my dear. His lordship'll be glad to get the good news you can give him."

She asked herself if she would not perhaps tell her something--something which would make the fourth time.

"Perhaps he's asked her to do it," she thought.

But Robin said nothing which could make a fourth time. After she had eaten her breakfast she sat down and wrote a letter. It did not seem a long one and when she had finished it she sent it to the post by Jock Macaur.

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There had been dark news both by land and sea that day, and Coombe had been out for many hours. He did not return to Coombe House until late in the evening. He was tired almost beyond endurance, and his fatigue was not merely a thing of muscle and nerve. After he sat down it was some time before he even glanced at the letters upon his writing table.

There were always a great many and usually a number of them were addressed in feminine handwriting. His hospital and other war work brought him numerous letters from women. Even their most impatient masculine opponents found themselves admitting that the women were being amazing.

Coombe was so accustomed to opening such letters that he felt no surprise when he took up an envelope without official lettering upon it, and addressed in a girlish hand. Girls were being as amazing as older women.

But this was not a letter about war work or Red Cross efforts. It was Robin's letter. It was not long and was as simple as a school girl's. She had never been clever--only exquisite and adorable, and never dull or stupid.

"Dear Lord Coombe,

"You were kind enough to say that you would come to see me when I asked you. Please will you come now? I hope I am not asking you to take a long journey when you are engaged in work too important to leave. If I am please pardon me, and I will wait until you are less occupied.

"Robin."

That was all. Coombe sat and gazed at it and read it several times. The thing which had always touched him most in her was her simple obedience to the laws about her. Curiously it had never seemed insipid--only a sort of lovely desire to be in harmony with all near her--things and people alike. It had been an innocent modesty which could not express rebellion. Her lifelong repelling of himself had been her one variation from type. Even that had been quiet except in one demonstration of her babyhood when she had obstinately refused to give him her hand. When Fate's self had sprung upon her with a wild-beast leap she had only lain still and panted like a young fawn in the clutch of a lion. She had only thought of Donal and his child. He remembered the eyes she had lifted to his own when he had put the ring on her finger in the shadow-filled old

church--and he had understood that she was thinking of the warm young hand clasp and the glow of eyes she had looked up into when love and youth had stood in his place.

The phrasing of the letter brought it all back. His precision of mind and resolve would have enabled him to go to his grave without having looked on her face again--but he was conscious that she was an integral part of his daily thought and planning and that he longed inexpressibly to see her. He sometimes told himself that she and the child had become a sort of obsession with him. He believed that this was because Alixe had shown the same soft obedience to fate, and the same look in her sorrowful young eyes. Alixe had been then as she was now--but he had not been able to save her. She had died and he was one of the few abnormal male creatures who know utter loneliness to the end of life because of utter loss. He knew such things were not normal. It had seemed that Robin would die, though not as Alixe did. If she lived and he might watch over her, there lay hidden in the back of his mind a vague feeling that it would be rather as though his care of all detail--his power to palliate--to guard--would be near the semblance of the tenderness he would have shown to Alixe. His old habit of mind caused him to call it an obsession, but he admitted he was obsessed.

"I want to see her!" he thought.