

CHAPTER XXXII

Many other thoughts filled his mind on his railroad journey to Scotland. He questioned himself as to how deeply he still felt the importance of there coming into the racked world a Head of the House of Coombe, how strongly he was still inspired by the centuries old instinct that a House of Coombe must continue to exist as part of the bulwarks of England. The ancient instinct still had its power, but he was curiously awakening to a slackening of the bonds which caused a man to specialise. It was a reluctant awakening--he himself had no part in the slackening. The upheaval of the whole world had done it and of the world England herself was a huge part--small, huge, obstinate, fighting England. Bereft of her old stately beauties, her picturesque splendours of habit and custom, he could not see a vision of her, and owned himself desolate and homesick. He was tired. So many men and women were tired--worn out with thinking, fearing, holding their heads up while their hearts were lead. When all was said and done, when all was over, what would the new England want--what would she need? And England was only a part. What would the ravaged world need as it lay--quiet at last--in ruins physical, moral and mental? He had no answer. Wiser men than he had no answer. Only time would tell. But the commonest brain cells in the thickest skull could argue to the end which proved that only men and women could do the work to be done. The task would be one for gods, or

demigods, or supermen--but there remained so far only men and women to face it--to rebuild, to reinspire with life, to heal unearthly gaping wounds of mind and soul. Each man or woman born strong and given the chance to increase in vigour which would build belief in life and living, in a future, was needed as breath and air are needed--even such an one as in the past would have wielded a sort of unearned sceptre as a Head of the House of Coombe. A man born a blacksmith, if he were of like quality, would meet equally the world's needs, but each would be doing in his way his part of that work which it seemed to-day only demigod and superman could fairly confront.

There was time for much thinking in long hours spent shut in a railroad carriage and his mind was, in these days, not given to letting him rest.

He had talked with many men back from the Front on leave and he had always noted the marvel of both minds and bodies at the relief from strain--from maddening noise, from sights of death and horror, from the needs of decency and common comfort and cleanliness which had become unheard of luxury. London, which to the Londoner seemed caught in the tumult and turmoil of war, was to these men rest and peace.

Coombe felt, when he descended at the small isolated station and stood looking at the climbing moor, that he was like one of those who had left the roar of battle behind and reached utter quiet. London was a world's width away and here the War did not exist. In Flanders and in France it filled the skies with thunders and drenched the soil with blood. But

here it was not.

The partly rebuilt ruin of Darreuch rose at last before his view high on the moor as he drove up the winding road. The space and the blue sky above and behind it made it seem the embodiment of remote stillness. Nothing had reached nor could touch it. It did not know that green fields and deep woods were strewn with dead and mangled youth and all it had meant of the world's future. Its crumbled walls and remaining grey towers stood calm in the clear air and birds' nests were hidden safely in their thick ivy.

Robin was there and each night she believed that a dead man came to her a seeming living being. He was not like Dowie, but his realisation of the mystery of this thing touched his nerves as a wild unexplainable sound heard in the darkness at midnight might have done. He wondered if he should see some look which was not quite normal in her eyes and hear some unearthly note in her voice. Physically the effect upon her had been good, but might he not be aware of the presence of some mental sign?

"I think you'll be amazed when you see her, my lord," said Dowie, who met him. "I am myself, every day."

She led him up to the Tower room and when he entered it Robin was sitting by a window sewing with her eyelids dropped as he had pictured them. The truth was that Dowie had not previously announced him because

she had wanted him to come upon just this.

Robin rose from her chair and laid her bit of sewing aside. For a moment he almost expected her to make the little curtsey Mademoiselle had taught her to make when older people came into the schoolroom. She looked so exactly as she had looked before life had touched her. There was very little change in her girlish figure; the child curve of her cheek had returned; the Jacqueminot rose glowed on it and her eyes were liquid wonders of trust. She came to him holding out both hands.

"Thank you for coming," she said in her pretty way. "Thank you, Lord Coombe, for coming."

"Thank you, my child, for asking me to come," he answered and he feared that his voice was not wholly steady.

There was no mystic sign to be seen about her. The only mystery was in her absolutely blooming health and naturalness and in the gentle and clear happiness of her voice and eyes. She was not tired; she was not dragged or anxious looking as he had seen even fortunate young wives and mothers at times. There actually flashed back upon him the morning, months ago, when he had met her in the street and said to himself that she was like a lovely child on her birthday with all her gifts about her. Her radiance had been quiet even then because she was always quiet.

She led him to a seat near her window and she sat by him.

"I put this chair here for you because it is so lovely to look out at the moor," she said.

That moved him to begin with. She had been thinking simply and kindly of him even before he came. He had always been prepared for, waited upon either with flattering attentions or ceremonial service, but the quiet pretty things mothers and sisters and wives did had not been part of his life and he had always noticed and liked them and sometimes wondered that most men received them with a casual air. This small thing alone caused the roar he had left behind to recede still farther.

"I was afraid that you might be too busy to come," she went on. "You see, I remembered how important the work was and that there are things which cannot wait for an hour. I could have waited as long as you told me to wait. But I am so glad you could come!"

"I will always come," was his answer. "I have helpers who could be wholly trusted if I died to-night. I have thought of that. One must."

She hesitated a moment and then said, "I am quite away here as you wanted me to be. I see it was the only thing. I read nothing, hear nothing. London--the War--" her voice fell a little.

"They go on. Will you be kind to me and help me to forget them for a while?" He looked through the window at the sky and the moor. "They are

not here--they never have been. The men who come back will do anything to make themselves forget for a little while. This place makes me feel that I am a man who has come back."

"I will do anything--everything--you wish me to do," she said eagerly.

"Dowie wondered if you would not want to be very quiet and not be reminded. I--wondered too."

"You were both right. I want to feel that I am in another world. This seems like a new planet."

"Would you--" she spoke rather shyly, "would you be able to stay a few days?"

"I can stay a week," he answered. "Thank you, Robin."

"I am so glad," she said. "I am so glad."

So they did not talk about the War or about London, though she inquired about the Duchess and Lady Lothwell and Kathryn.

"Would you like to go out and walk over the moor?" she asked after a short time. "It's so scented and sweet, and darling things scurry about. I don't think they are really frightened, because I try to walk softly. Sometimes there are nests with eggs or soft little things in them."

They went out together and walked side by side, sometimes on the winding road and sometimes through the heather. He found himself watching every step she made and keeping his eye on the path ahead of them to make sure she would avoid roughness or irregularities. In some inner part of his being there remotely worked the thought that this was the way in which he might have walked side by side with Alixe, watching over each step taken by her sacred little feet.

The day was a wonder of peace and relaxation to him. Farther and farther, until lost in nothingness, receded the roar and the tensely strung sense of waiting for news of unbearable things. As they went on he realised that he need not even watch the path before her because she knew it so well and her step was as light and firm as a young roe's. Her very movements seemed to express the natural physical enjoyment of exercise.

He knew nothing of her mind but that Mademoiselle had told him that she was intelligent. They had never talked together and so her mentality was an unexplored field to him. She did not chatter. She said fresh picturesque things about life on the moor, about the faithful silent Macaurs, about Dowie, and now and then about something she had read. She showed him beauties and small curious things she plainly loved. It struck him that the whole trend of her being lay in the direction of being fond of people and things--of loving and being happy,--and even merry if life had been kind to her. Her soft laugh had a naturally merry

note. He heard it first when she held him quite still at her side as they watched the frisking of some baby rabbits.

There was a curious relief in realising, as the hours passed, that her old dislike and dread of him had melted into nothingness like a mist blown away in the night. She was thinking of him as if he were some mature and wise friend who had always been kind to her. He need not rigidly watch his words and hers. She was not afraid of him at all; there was no shrinking in her eyes when they met his. If Alixe had had a daughter who was his own, she might have lifted such lovely eyes to him.

They lunched together and Dowie served them with deft ability and an expression which Coombe was able to comprehend the at once watchful and directing meaning of. It directed him to observation of Robin's appetite and watched for his encouraged realisation of it as a supporting fact.

He went to his own rooms in the afternoon that she might be alone and rest. He read an old book for an hour and then talked with the Macaurs about the place and their work and their new charge. He wanted to hear what they were thinking of her.

"It's wonderful, my lord!" was Mrs. Macaur's repeated contribution. "She came here a wee ghost. She frightened me. I couldna see how she could go through what's before her. I lay awake in my bed expectin' Mrs. Dowie to ca' me any hour. An' betwixt one night and anither the change cam. She's a well bairn--for woman she isna, puir wee thing! It's a wonder--a

wonder--a wonder, my lord!"

When he saw Dowie alone he asked her a question.

"Does she know that you have told me of the dream?"

"No, my lord. The dream's a thing we don't talk about. She's only mentioned it three times. It's in my mind that she feels it's too sacred to be made common by words."

He had wondered if Robin had been aware of his knowledge. After Dowie's answer he wondered if she would speak to him about the dream herself. Perhaps she would not. It might be that she had asked him to come to Darreuch because her thought of him had so changed that she had realised something of his grave anxiety for her health and a gentle consideration had made her wish to give him the opportunity to see her face to face. Perhaps she had intended only this.

"I want to see her," he had said to himself. The relief of the mere seeing had been curiously great. He had the relief of sinking, as it were, into the deep waters of pure peace on this new planet. In this realisation every look at the child's face, every movement she made, every tone of her voice, aided. Did she know that she soothed him? Did she intend to try to soothe? When they were together she gave him a feeling that she was strangely near and soft and warm. He had felt it on the moor. It was actually as if she wanted to be quieting to him--almost

as if she had realised that he had been stretched upon a mental rack with maddening tumult all around him. It was part of her pretty thought of him in the matter of the waiting chair and he felt it very sweet.

But she had had other things in her mind when she had asked him to come. This he knew later.