

CHAPTER XXXIII

After they had dined they sat together in the long Highland twilight before her window in the Tower room where he had found her sitting when he arrived. Her work basket was near her and she took a piece of sheer lawn from it and began to embroider. And he sat and watched her draw delicate threads through the tiny leaves and flowers she was making. So he might have watched Alixe if she had been some unroyal girl given to him in one of life's kinder hours. She seemed to draw near out of the land of lost shadows as he sat in the clear twilight stillness and looked on. As he might have watched Alixe.

The silence, the paling daffodil tints of the sky, the non-existence of any other things than calm and stillness seemed to fill his whole being as a cup might be filled by pure water falling slowly. She said nothing and did not even seem to be waiting for anything. It was he who first broke the rather long silence and his voice was quite low.

"Do you know you are very good to me?" he said. "How did you learn to be so kind to a man--with your quietness?"

He saw the hand holding her work tremble a very little. She let it fall upon her knee, still holding the embroidery. She leaned forward slightly and in her look there was actually something rather like a sort of timid

prayer.

"Please let me," she said. "Please let me--if you can!"

"Let you!" was all that he could say.

"Let me try to help you to rest--to feel quiet and forget for just a little while. It's such a small thing. And it's all I can ever try to do."

"You do it very perfectly," he answered, touched and wondering.

"You have been kind to me ever since I was a child--and I did not know," she said. "Now I know, because I understand. Oh! will you forgive me? Please--will you?"

"Don't, my dear," he said. "You were a baby. I understood. That prevented there being anything to forgive--anything."

"I ought to have loved you as I loved Mademoiselle and Dowie." Her eyes filled with tears. "And I think I hated you. It began with Donal," in a soft wail. "I heard Andrews say that his mother wouldn't let him know me because you were my mother's friend. And then as I grew older--"

"Even if I had known what you thought I could not have defended myself," he answered, faintly smiling. "You must not let yourself think of it. It

is nothing now."

The hand holding the embroidery lifted itself to touch her breast. There was even a shade of awe of him in her eyes.

"It is something to me--and to Donal. You have never defended yourself. You endure things and endure them. You watched for years over an ignorant child who loathed you. It was not that a child's hatred is of importance--but if I had died and never asked you to forgive me, how could I have looked into Donal's eyes? I want to go down on my knees to you!"

He rose from his chair, and took in his own the unsteady hand holding the embroidery. He even bent and lightly touched it with his lips, with his finished air.

"You will not die," he said. "And you will not go upon your knees. Thank you for being a warm hearted child, Robin."

But still her eyes held the touch of awe of him.

"But what I have spoken of is the least." Her voice almost broke. "In the Wood--in the dark you said there was something that must be saved from suffering. I could not think then--I could scarcely care. But you cared, and you made me come awake. To save a poor little child who was not born, you have done something which will make people believe you

were vicious and hideous--even when all this is over forever and ever.
And there will be no one to defend you. Oh! What shall I do!"

"There are myriads of worlds," was his answer. "And this is only one of them. And I am only one man among the myriads on it. Let us be very quiet again and watch the coming out of the stars."

In the pale saffron of the sky which was mysteriously darkening, sparks like deep-set brilliants were lighting themselves here and there. They sat and watched them together for long. But first Robin murmured something barely above her lowest breath. Coombe was not sure that she expected him to hear it.

"I want to be your little slave. Oh! Let me!"