

CHAPTER XXXVI

Harrowby and the rest did not carry on their War Work in the slice of a house. It was of an order requiring a more serious atmosphere. Feather saw even the Starling less and less.

"Since the Dowager took her up she's far too grand for the likes of us," she said.

So to speak, Feather blew about from one place to another. She had never found life so exciting and excitement had become more vitally necessary to her existence as the years had passed. She still looked extraordinarily youthful and if her face was at times rather marvelous in its white and red, and her lips daring in their pomegranate scarlet, the fine grain of her skin aided her effects and she was dazzlingly in the fashion. She had never worn such enchanting clothes and never had seemed to possess so many.

"I twist my rags together myself," she used to laugh. "That's my gift. H el ene says I have genius. I don't mean that I sit and sew. I have a little slave woman who does that by the day. She admires me and will do anything that I tell her. Things are so delightfully scant and short now that you can cut two or three frocks out of one of your old petticoats--and mine were never very old."

There was probably a modicum of truth in this--the fact remained that the garments which were more scant and shorter than those of any other feathery person were also more numerous and exquisite. Her patriotic entertainment of soldiers who required her special order of support and recreation was fast and furious. She danced with them at cabarets; she danced as a nymph for patriotic entertainments, with snow-white bare feet and legs and a swathing of Spring woodland green tulle and leaves and primroses. She was such a success that important personages smiled on her and asked her to appear under undreamed of auspices. Secretly triumphant though she was, she never so far lost her head as to do anything which would bore her or cause her to appear at less than an alluring advantage. When she could invent a particularly unique and inspiring shred of a garment to startle the public with, she danced for some noble object and intoxicated herself with the dazzle of light and applause. She found herself strung to her highest pitch of excitement by the air raids, which in the midst of their terrors had the singular effect of exciting many people and filling them with an insane recklessness. Those so excited somehow seemed to feel themselves immune. Feather chattered about "Zepps" as if bombs could only wreak their vengeance upon coast towns and the lower orders.

When Lord Coombe definitely refused to allow her to fit up the roof of the slice of a house as a sort of luxurious Royal Box from which she and her friends might watch the spectacle, she found among her circle acquaintances who shared her thrills and had prepared places for

themselves. Sometimes she was even rather indecently exhilarated by her sense of high adventure. The fact was that the excitement of the seething world about her had overstrung her trivial being and turned her light head until it whirled too fast.

"It may seem horrid to say so and I'm not horrid--but I like the war. You know what I mean. London never was so thrilling--with things happening every minute--and all sorts of silly solemn fads swept away so that one can do as one likes. And interesting heroic men coming and going in swarms and being so grateful for kindness and entertainment. One is really doing good all the time--and being adored for it. I own I like being adored myself--and of course one likes doing good. I never was so happy in my life."

"I used to be rather a coward, I suppose," she chattered gaily on another occasion. "I was horribly afraid of things. I believe the War and living among soldiers has had an effect on me and made me braver. The Zepps don't frighten me at all--at least they excite me so that they make me forget to be frightened. I don't know what they do to me exactly. The whole thing gets into my head and makes me want to rush about and see everything. I wouldn't go into a cellar for worlds. I want to see!"

She saw Lord Coombe but infrequently at this time, the truth being that her exhilaration and her War Work fatigued him, apart from which his hours were filled. He also objected to a certain raffishness which in an

extremely mixed crowd of patriots rather too obviously "swept away silly old fads" and left the truly advanced to do as they liked. What they liked he did not and was wholly undisturbed by the circumstances of being considered a rigid old fossil. Feather herself had no need of him. An athletic and particularly well favoured young actor who shared her thrills of elation seemed to permeate the atmosphere about her. He and Feather together at times achieved the effect, between raids, of waiting impatiently for a performance and feeling themselves ill treated by the long delays between the acts.

"Are we growing callous, or are we losing our wits through living at such high temperature?" the Duchess asked. "There's a delirium in the air. Among those who are not shuddering in cellars there are some who seem possessed by a sort of light insanity, half defiance, half excited curiosity. People say exultantly, 'I had a perfectly splendid view of the last Zepp!' A mother whose daughter was paying her a visit said to her, 'I wish you could have seen the Zepps while you were here. It is such an experience.'"

"They have not been able to bring about the wholesale disaster Germany hoped for and when nothing serious happens there is a relieved feeling that the things are futile after all," said Coombe. "When the results are tragic they must be hushed up as far as is possible to prevent panic."

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Dowie faithfully sent him her private bulletin. Her first fears of peril had died away, but her sense of mystification had increased and was more deeply touched with awe. She opened certain windows every night and felt that she was living in the world of supernatural things. Robin's eyes sometimes gave her a ghost of a shock when she came upon her sitting alone with her work in her idle hands. But supported by the testimony of such realities as breakfasts, long untiring walks and unvarying blooming healthfulness, she thanked God hourly.

"Doctor Benton says plain that he has never had such a beautiful case and one that promised so well," she wrote. "He says she's as strong as a young doe bounding about on the heather. What he holds is that it's natural she should be. He is a clever gentleman with some wonderful comforting new ideas about things, my lord. And he tells me I need not look forward with dread as perhaps I had been doing."

Robin herself wrote to Coombe--letters whose tender-hearted comprehension of what he was doing always held the desire to surround him with the soothing quiet he had so felt when he was with her. What he discovered was that she had been born of the elect,--the women who know what to say, what to let others say and what to beautifully leave unsaid. Her unconscious genius was quite exquisite.

Now and then he made the night journey to Darreuch Castle and each time she met him with her frank childlike kiss he was more amazed and

uplifted by her aspect. Their quiet talks together were wonderful things to remember. She had done much fine and dainty work which she showed him with unaffected sweetness. She told him stories of Dowie and Mademoiselle and how they had taught her to sew and embroider. Once she told him the story of her first meeting with Donal--but she passed over the tragedy of their first parting.

"It was too sad," she said.

He noticed that she never spoke of sad and dark hours. He was convinced that she purposely avoided them and he was profoundly glad.

"I know," she said once, "that you do not want me to talk to you about the War."

"Thank you for knowing it," he answered. "I come here on a pilgrimage to a shrine where peace is. Darreuch is my shrine."

"It is mine, too," was her low response.

"Yes, I think it is," his look at her was deep. Suddenly but gently he laid his hand on her shoulder.

"I beg you," he said fervently, "I beg you never to allow yourself to think of it. Blot the accursed thing out of the Universe while--you are

here. For you there must be no war."

"How kind his face looked," was Robin's thought as he hesitated a second and then went on:

"I know very little of such--sacrosanct things as mothers and children, but lately I have had fancies of a place for them where there are only smiles and happiness and beauty--as a beginning."

It was she who now put her hand on his arm. "Little Darreuch is like that--and you gave it to me," she said.

CHAPTER XXXVII

Lord Coombe was ushered into the little drawing-room by an extremely immature young footman who--doubtless as a consequence of his immaturity--appeared upon the scene too suddenly. The War left one only servants who were idiots or barely out of Board Schools, Feather said. And in fact it was something suggesting "a scene" upon which Coombe was announced. The athletic and personable young actor--entitled upon programmes Owen Delamore--was striding to and fro talking excitedly. There was theatrical emotion in the air and Feather, delicately flushed