

CHAPTER XL

Ominous hours had come and gone; waves of gloom had surged in and receded, but never receded far enough. It was as though the rising and falling of some primæval storm was the background of all thought and life and its pandemonium of sound foretold the far-off heaving of some vast tidal wave, gathering its unearthly power as it swelled.

Coombe talking to his close friend in her few quiet hours at Eaton Square, found a support in the very atmosphere surrounding her.

"The world at war creates a prehistoric uproar," he said. "The earth called out of chaos to take form may have produced some such tempestuous crash. But there is a far-off glow--"

"You believe--something--I believe too. But the prehistoric darkness and uproar are so appalling. One loses hold." The Duchess leaned forward her voice dropping. "What do you know that I do not?"

"The light usually breaks in the East," Coombe answered.

"It is breaking in the West to-day. It has always been there and it has been spreading from the first. At any moment it may set the sky aflame."

For as time had gone on the world had beheld the colossal spectacle of a huge nation in the melting pot. And, as it was as a nation the composite result of the fusion of all the countries of the earth, the breath-suspended lookers-on beheld it in effect, passionately commercial, passionately generous, passionately sordid, passionately romantic, chivalrous, cautious, limited, bounded. As American wealth and sympathy poured in where need was most dire, bitterness became silent through sheer discretion's sake, when for no more honest reason. As the commercial tendency expressed itself in readiness and efficiency, sneering condemnation had become less loud.

"It will happen. It is the result of the ideals really," Coombe said further. "And it will come to pass at the exact psychological moment. If they had come in at the beginning they would have faced the first full force of the monstrous tidal wave of the colossal German belief in its own omnipotence--and they would have faced it unawakened, unenraged by monstrosities and half incredulous of the truth. It was not even their fight then--and raw fighters need a flaming cause. But the tower of agonies has built itself to its tottering height before their blazing eyes. Now it is their fight because it is the fight of the whole world. Others have borne the first fierce heat and burden of the day, but they will rush in young and untouched by calamity--bounding, shouting and singing. They will come armed with all that long-borne horrors and maddening human fatigue most need. I repeat--it will occur at the exact psychological moment. They will bring red-hot blood and furious unbounded courage-- And it will be the end."

In fact Coombe waited with a tense sensation of being too tightly strung. He had hours when he felt that something might snap. But nothing must snap yet. He was too inextricably entangled in the arduous work even to go to Darreuch for rest. He did not go for weeks. All was well there however--marvellously well it seemed, even when he held in mind a letter from Robin which had ended:--

"He has not come back. But I am not afraid. I promised him I would never be afraid again."

In dark and tired hours he steadied himself with a singular half-realised belief that she would not--that somehow some strange thing would be left to her, whatsoever was taken away. It was because he felt as if he were nearing the end of his tether. He had become hypersensitive to noises, to the sounds in the streets, to the strain and grief in faces he saw as he walked or drove.

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After lying awake all one night without a moment of blank peace he came down pale and saw that his hand shook as he held his coffee cup. It was a livid sort of morning and when he went out for the sake of exercise he found he was looking at each of the strained faces as if it held some answer to an unformed question. He realised that the tenseness of both mind and body had increased. For no reason whatever he was restrung by a

sense of waiting for something--as if something were going to happen.

He went back to Coombe House and when he crossed the threshold he confronted the elderly unliveried man who had stood at his place for years--and the usually unperturbed face was agitated so nearly to panic that he stopped and addressed him.

"Has anything happened?"

"My lord--a Red Cross nurse--has brought"--he was actually quite unsteady--too unsteady to finish, for the next moment the Red Cross nurse was at his side--looking very whitely fresh and clean and with a nice, serious youngish face.

"I need not prepare you for good news--even if it is a sort of shock," she said, watching him closely. "I have brought Captain Muir back to you."

"You have brought--?" he exclaimed.

"He has been in one of the worst German prisons. He was left for dead on the field and taken prisoner. We must not ask him questions. I don't know why he is alive. He escaped, God knows how. At this time he does not know himself. I saw him on the boat. He asked me to take charge of him," she spoke very quickly. "He is a skeleton, poor boy. Come."

She led the way to his own private room. She went on talking short hurried sentences, but he scarcely heard her. This, then, was what he had been waiting for. Why had he not known? This tremendous thing was really not so tremendous after all because it had happened in other cases before-- Yet he had never once thought of it.

"He would not let his wife or his mother see him until he looked more like himself," he heard the Red Cross nurse say as he entered the room.

Donal was lying stretched at full length on a sofa. He looked abnormally long, because he was so thin that he was, as the nurse had said, a skeleton. His face was almost a death's head, but his blue eyes looked out of their great hollow sockets clear as tarn water, and with the smile which Coombe would not have forgotten howsoever long life had dragged out.

"Be very careful!" whispered the nurse.

He knew he must be careful. Only the eyes were alive. The body was a collapsed thing. He seemed scarcely breathing, his voice was a thread.

"Robin!" Coombe caught as he bent close to him. "Robin!"

"She is well, dear boy!" How his voice shook! "I have taken care of her."

The light leaped up into the blue for a second. The next the lids dropped and the nurse sprang forward because he had slipped into a faint so much like death that it might well have rent hope from a looker-on.

For the next hour, and indeed for many following, there was unflagging work to be done. The Red Cross Nurse was a capable, swiftly moving woman, with her resources at her finger's ends, and her quick wits about her. Almost immediately two doctors from the staff, in charge of the rooms upstairs were on the spot and at work with her. By what lightning-flashed sentences she conveyed to them, without pausing for a second, the facts it was necessary for them to know, was incomprehensible to Coombe, who could only stand afar off and wait, watching the dead face. Its sunken temples, cheeks and eyes, and the sharply carven bone outline were heart gripping.

It seemed hours before one of the doctors as he bent over the couch whispered,

"The breathing is a little better--"

It was not possible that he should be moved, but the couch was broad and deeply upholstered and could be used temporarily as a bed. Every resource of medical science was within reach. Nurse Jones, who had been on her way home to take a rest, was so far ensnared by unusual interest that she wished to be allowed to remain on duty. There were other nurses who could be called on at any moment of either night or day. There were

doctors of indisputable skill who were also fired by the mere histrionic features of the case. The handsome, fortunate young fellow who had been supposed torn to fragments had by some incomprehensible luck been aided to drag himself home--perhaps to die of pure exhaustion.

Was it really hours before Coombe saw the closed eyes weakly open? But the smile was gone and they seemed to be looking at something not in the room.

"They will come--in," the words dragged out scarcely to be heard.

"Jackson--said--said--they--would." The eyes dropped again and the breathing was a mere flutter.

Nurse Jones was in fact filled with much curiosity concerning and interest in the Marquis of Coombe. She was a clever and well trained person, but socially a simple creature, who in an inoffensive way "loved a lord." If her work had not absorbed her she could not have kept her eyes from this finely conventional and rather unbending-looking man who--keeping himself out of the way of all who were in charge of the seemingly almost dead boy--still would not leave the room, and watched him with a restrained passion of such feeling as it was not natural to see in the eyes of men. Marquis or not he had gone through frightful things in his life and this boy meant something tremendous to him. If he couldn't be brought back--! Despite the work her swift eye darted sideways at the Marquis.

When at length another nurse took her place and she was going out of the room, he moved quickly towards her and spoke.

"May I ask if I may speak to you alone for a few minutes? I have no right to keep you from your rest. I assure you I won't."

"I'll come," she answered. What she saw in the man's face was that, because she had brought the boy, he actually clung to her. She had been clung to many times before, but never by a man who looked quite like this. There was more than you could see.

He led her to a smaller room near by. He made her sit down, but he did not sit himself. It was plain that he did not mean to keep her from her bed--though he was in hard case if ever man was. His very determination not to impose on her caused her to make up her mind to tell him all she could, though it wasn't much.

"Captain Muir's mother believes that he is dead," he said. "It is plain that no excitement must approach him--even another person's emotion. He was her idol. She is in London. Must I send for her--or would it be safe to wait?"

"There have been minutes to-day when if I'd known he had a mother I should have said she must be sent for," was her answer. "To-night I believe--yes, I do--that it would be better to wait and watch. Of course the doctors must really decide."

"Thank you. I will speak to them. But I confess I wanted to ask you."

How he did cling to her!

"Thank you," he said again. "I will not keep you."

He opened the door and waited for her to pass--as if she had been a marchioness herself, she thought. In spite of his desperate eyes he didn't forget a single thing. He so moved her that she actually turned back.

"You don't know anything yet-- Some one you're fond of coming back from the grave must make you half mad to know how it happened," she said. "I don't know much myself, but I'll tell you all I was able to find out. He was light headed when I found him trying to get on the boat. When I spoke to him he just caught my hand and begged me to stay with him. He wanted to get to you. He'd been wandering about, starved and hiding. If he'd been himself he could have got help earlier. But he'd been ill treated and had seen things that made him lose his balance. He couldn't tell a clear story. He was too weak to talk clearly. But I asked questions now and then and listened to every word he said when he rambled because of his fever. Jackson was a fellow prisoner who died of hemorrhage brought on by brutality. Often I couldn't understand him, but he kept bringing in the name of Jackson. One thing puzzled me very much. He said several times 'Jackson taught me to dream of Robin. I should never have seen Robin if I hadn't known Jackson.' Now 'Robin' is a boy's

name--but he said 'her' and 'she' two or three times as if it were a girl's."

"Robin is his wife," said Coombe. He really found the support of the door he still held open, useful for the moment.

An odd new interest sharpened in her eyes.

"Then he's been dreaming of her." She almost jerked it out--as if in sudden illumination almost relief. "He's been dreaming of her--! And it may have kept him alive." She paused as if she were asking questions of her own mind. "I wonder," dropped from her in slow speculation, "if she has been dreaming of him?"

"He was not dead--he was not an angel--he was Donal!" Robin had persisted from the first. He had not been dead. In some incredibly hideous German prison--in the midst of inhuman horrors and the blackness of what must have been despair--he had been alive, and had dreamed as she had.

Nurse Jones looked at him, waiting. Even if nurses had not been, presumably, under some such bond of honourable secrecy as constrained the medical profession, he knew she was to be trusted. Her very look told him.

"She did dream of him," he said. "She was slipping fast down the slope

to death and he caught her back. He saved her life and her child's. She was going to have a child."

They were both quite silent for a few moments. The room was still. Then the woman drew her hand with a quick odd gesture across her forehead.

"Queer things happened in the last century, but queerer ones are going to happen in this--if people will let them. Doctors and nurses see and think a lot they can't talk about. They're always on the spot at what seems to be the beginning and the ending. These black times have opened up the ways. 'Queer things,' I said," with sudden forcefulness. "They're not queer. It's only laws we haven't known about. It's the writing on the scroll that we couldn't read. We're just learning the alphabet."

Then after a minute more of thought, "Those two--were they particularly fond of each other--more to each other than most young couples?"

"They loved each other the hour they first met--when they were little children. It was an unnatural shock to them both when they were parted. They seemed to be born mated for life."

"That was the reason," she said quite relievedly. "I can understand that. It's as orderly as the stars." Then she added with a sudden, strong, quite normal conviction, and her tiredness seemed to drop from her, "He won't die--that beautiful boy," she said. "He can't. It's not meant. They're going on, those three. He's the most splendid human thing I ever handled--skeleton as he is. His very bones are magnificent as he

lies there. And that smile of his that's deep in the blue his eyes are made of--it can only flicker up for a second now--but it can't go out. He's safe, even this minute, though you mayn't believe it."

"I do believe it," Coombe said.

And he stood there believing it, when she went through the open door and left him.