

CHAPTER XLI

It was long before the dropped eyelids could lift and hold themselves open for more than a few seconds and long before the eyes wore their old clear look. The depths of the collapse after prolonged tortures of strain and fear was such as demanded a fierce and unceasing fight of skill and unswerving determination on the part of both doctors and nurses. There were hours when what seemed to be strange, deathly drops into abysses of space struck terror into most of those who stood by looking on. But Nurse Jones always believed and so did Coombe.

"You needn't send for his mother yet," she said without flinching. "You and I know something the others don't know, Lord Coombe. That child and her baby are holding him back though they don't know anything about it."

It revealed itself to him that her interest in things occult and apparently unexplained by material processes had during the last few years intensely absorbed her in private. Her feeling, though intense, was intelligent and her processes of argument were often convincing. He became willing to answer her questions because he felt sure of her. He lent her the books he had been reading and in her hard-earned hours of leisure she plunged deep into them.

"Perhaps I read sometimes when I ought to be sleeping, but it rests

me--I tell you it rests me. I'm finding out that there's strength outside of all this and you can draw on it. It's there waiting," she said. "Everybody will know about its being there--in course of time."

"But the time seems long," said Coombe.

Concerning the dream she had many interesting theories. She was at first disturbed and puzzled because it had stopped. She was anxious to find out whether it had come back again, but, like Lord Coombe, she realised that Robin's apparent calm must on no account be disturbed. If her health-giving serenity could be sustained for a certain length of time, the gates of Heaven would open to her. But at first Nurse Jones asked herself and Lord Coombe some troubled questions.

It came about at length that she appeared one night, in the room where their first private talk had taken place and she had presented herself on her way to bed, because she had something special to say.

"It came to me when I awakened this morning as if it had been told to me in the night. Things often seem to come that way. Do you remember, Lord Coombe, that she said they only talked about happy things?"

"Yes. She said it several times," Coombe answered.

"Do you remember that he never told her where he came from? And she knew

that she must not ask questions? How could he have told her of that hell--how could he?"

"You are right--quite!"

"I feel sure I am. When he can talk he will tell you--if he remembers. I wonder how much they remember--except the relief and the blessed happiness of it? Lord Coombe, I believe as I believe I'm in this room, that when he knew he was going to face the awful risk of trying to escape, he knew he mustn't tell her. And he knew that in crawling through dangers and hiding in ditches he could never be sure of being able to lie down to sleep and concentrate on sending his soul to her. So he told her that he might not come for some time. Oh, lord! If he'd been caught and killed he could never-- No! No!" obstinately, "even then he would have got back in some form--in some way. I've got to the point of believing as much as that. He was hers!"

"Yes. Yes. Yes," was all his slow answer. But there was deep thought in each detached word and when she went away he walked up and down the room

with leisurely steps, looking down at the carpet.

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As many hours of the day and night as those in authority would allow him Lord Coombe sat and watched by Donal's bed. He watched from well hidden

anxiousness to see every subtle change recording itself on his being; he watched from throbbing affection and longing to see at once any tinge of growing natural colour, any unconscious movement perhaps a shade stronger than the last. It was his son who lay there, he told himself, it was the son he had remotely yearned for in his loneliness; if he had been his father watching his sunk lids with bated breath, he would have felt just these unmerciful pangs.

He also watched because in the boy's hours of fevered unconsciousness he could at times catch words--sometimes broken sentences, which threw ghastly light upon things past. Sometimes their significance was such as made him shudder. A condition the doctors most dreaded was one in which monstrous scenes seem lived again--scenes in which cruelties and maddening suffering and despairing death itself rose vividly from the depth of subconsciousness and cried aloud for vengeance. Sometimes Donal shuddered, tearing at his chest with both hands, more than once he lay sobbing until only skilled effort prevented his sobs from becoming choking danger.

"It may be years after he regains his strength," the chief physician said, "years before it will be safe to ask him for detail. On my own part I would never bring such horrors back to a man. You may have noticed how the men who have borne most, absolutely refuse to talk."

"It's an accursed fool who tries to make them," broke in one of the younger men. "There was a fellow who had been pinned up against a barn

door and left to hang there--and a coarse, loud-mouthed lunatic asked him to describe how it felt. The chap couldn't stand it. Do you know what he did? He sprang at him and knocked him down. He apologized afterwards and said it was his nerves. But there's not a man who was there who will ever speak to that other brute again."

The man whose name was Jackson seemed to be a clinging memory to the skeleton when its mind wandered in the past Hades. He had been in some way very close to the boy. He had died somehow--cruelly. There had been blood--blood--and no one would help. Some devil had even laughed. When that scene came back the doctors and nurses held their breath and silently worked hard. Nothing seemed quite as heart-rending as what had happened to Jackson. But there were endless other things to shudder at.

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So the time passed and Nurse Jones found many times that she must stop at his door on her way to her rest to say, "Don't look like that, Lord Coombe. You need not send for his mother yet."

Then at last--and it had been like travelling for months waterless in a desert--she came in one day with a new and elate countenance. "Mrs. Muir is a quiet, self-controlled woman, isn't she?" she asked.

"Entirely self-controlled and very quiet," he answered.

"Then if you will speak to Dr. Beresford about it I know he will allow her to see Captain Muir for a few minutes. And, thank God, it's not because if she doesn't see him now she'll never see him alive again. He has all his life before him."

"Please sit down, Nurse," Coombe spoke hastily and placed a chair as he spoke. He did so because he had perceiving eyes.

She sat down and covered her face with her apron for a moment. She made no sound or movement, but caught a deep quick breath two or three times. The relaxed strain had temporarily overpowered her. She uncovered her face and got up almost immediately. She was not likely to give way openly to her emotions.

"Thank you, Lord Coombe," she said. "I've never had a case that gripped hold of me as this has. I've often felt as though that poor half-killed boy was more to me than he is. You might speak to Dr. Beresford now. He's just gone in."

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Therefore Lord Coombe went that afternoon to the house before which grew the plane trees whose leaves had rustled in the dawn's first wind on the morning Donal had sat and talked with his mother after the night of the Dowager Duchess of Darte's dance.

On his way his thoughts were almost uncontrollable things and he knew the first demand of good sense was that he should control them. But he was like an unbelievable messenger from another world--a dark world unknown, because shadows hid it, and would not let themselves be pierced by streaming human eyes. Donal was dead. This was what would fill this woman's mind when he entered her house. Donal was dead. It was the thought that had excluded all else from life for her, though he knew she had gone on working as other broken women had done. What did people say to women whose sons had been dead and had come back to life? It had happened before. What could one say to prepare them for the transcendent shock of joy? What preparation could there be?

"God help me!" he said to himself with actual devoutness as he stood at the door.

He had seen Helen Muir once or twice since the news of her loss had reached her and she had looked like a most beautiful ghost and shadow of herself. When she came into her drawing-room to meet him she was more of a ghost and shadow than when they had last met and he saw her lips quiver at the mere sight of him, though she came forward very quietly.

Whatsoever helped him in response to his unconscious appeal brought to him suddenly a wave of comprehension of her and of himself as creatures unexpectedly near each other as they had never been before. The feeling was remotely akin to what had been awakened in him by the pure gravity and tenderness of Robin's baptismal good-bye kiss. He was human, she was

human, they had both been forced to bear suffering. He was bringing joy to her.

He met her almost as she entered the door. He made several quick steps and he took both her hands in his and held them. It was a thing so unheard of that she stopped and stood quite still, looking up at him.

"Come and sit down here," he said, drawing her towards a sofa and he did not let her hands go, and sat down at her side while she stared at him and her breath began to come and go quickly.

"What--?" she began, "You are changed--quite different--"

"Yes, I am changed. Everything is changed--for us both!"

"For us--" She touched her breast weakly. "For me--as well as you?"

"Yes," he answered, and he still held her hands protectingly and kept his altered eyes--the eyes of a strangely new man--upon her. They were living, human, longing to help her--who had so long condemned him. His hands were even warm and held hers as if to give her support.

"You are a calm, well-balanced woman," he said. "And joy does not kill people--even hurt them."

There could be only one joy--only one! And she knew he knew there could

be no other. She sprang from her seat.

"Donal!" she cried out so loud that the room rang. "Donal! Donal!"

He was on his feet also because he still wonderfully did not let her go.

"He is at my house. He has been there for weeks because we have had to fight for his life. We should have called you if he had been dying. Only an hour ago the doctor in charge gave me permission to come to you. You may see him--for a few minutes."

She began to tremble and sat down.

"I shall be quiet soon," she said. "Oh, dear God! God! God! Donal!"

Tears swept down her cheeks but he saw her begin to control herself even the next moment.

"May I speak to him at all?" she asked.

"Kiss him and tell him you are waiting in the next room and can come back any moment. What the hospital leaves free of Coombe House is at your disposal."

"God bless you! Oh, forgive me!"

"He escaped from a German prison by some miracle. He must be made to forget. He must hear of nothing but happiness. There is happiness before him--enough to force him to forget. You will accept anything he tells you as if it were a natural thing?"

"Accept!" she cried. "What would I not accept, praising God! You are preparing me for something. Ah! don't, don't be afraid! But--is it maiming--darkness?"

"No! No! It is a perfect thing. You must know it before you see him--and be ready. Before he went to the Front he was married."

"Married!" in a mere breath.

Coombe went on in quick sentences. She must be prepared and she could bear anything in the rapture of her joy.

"He married in secret a lonely child whom the Dowager Duchess of Dartmouth had taken into her household. We have both taken charge of her since we discovered she was his wife. We thought she was his widow. She has a son. Before her marriage she was Robin Gareth-Lawless."

"Ah!" she cried brokenly. "He would have told me--he wanted to tell me--but he could not--because I was so hard! Oh! poor motherless children!"

"You never were hard, I could swear," Coombe said. "But perhaps you have changed--as I have. If he had not thought I was hard he might have told me-- Shall we go to him at once?"

Together they went without a moment's delay.

CHAPTER XLII

The dream had come back and Robin walked about the moor carrying her baby in her arms, even though Dowie followed her. She laid him on the heather and let him listen to the skylarks and there was in her face such a look, that, in times past if she had seen it, Dowie would have believed that it could only mean translation from earth.

But when Lord Coombe came for a brief visit he took Dowie to walk alone with him upon the moor. When they set out together she found herself involuntarily stealing furtive sidelong glances at him. There was that in his face which drew her eyes in spite of her. It was a look so intense and new that once she caught her breath, trembling. It was then that he turned to look at her and began to talk. He began--and went on--and as she listened there came to her sudden flooding tears and more than once a loud startled sob of joy.