CHAPTER VIII

When she went back to Andrews she carried the pricked leaves with her. She could not have left them behind. From what source she had drawn a characterizing passionate, though silent, strength of mind and body, it would be difficult to explain. Her mind and her emotions had been left utterly unfed, but they were not of the inert order which scarcely needs feeding. Her feeling for the sparrows had held more than she could have expressed; her secret adoration of the "Lady Downstairs" was an intense thing. Her immediate surrender to the desire in the first pair of human eyes--child eyes though they were--which had ever called to her being for response, was simple and undiluted rapture. She had passed over her little soul without a moment's delay and without any knowledge of the giving. It had flown from her as a bird might fly from darkness into the sun. Eight-year-old Donal was the sun.

No special tendency to innate duplicity was denoted by the fact that she had acquired, through her observation of Andrews, Jennings, Jane and Mrs. Blayne, the knowledge that there were things it was best not to let other people know. You were careful about them. From the occult communications between herself and Donal, which had resulted in their intrigue, there had of course evolved a realizing sense of the value of discretion. She did not let Andrews

see the decorated leaves, but put them into a small pocket in her coat. Her Machiavellian intention was to slip them out when she was taken up to the Nursery. Andrews was always in a hurry to go downstairs to her lunch and she would be left alone and could find a place where she could hide them.

Andrews' friend started when Robin drew near to them. The child's cheeks and lips were the colour of Jacqueminot rose petals. Her eyes glowed with actual rapture.

"My word! That's a beauty if I ever saw one," said the woman. "First sight makes you jump. My word!"

Robin, however, did not know what she was talking about and in fact scarcely heard her. She was thinking of Donal. She thought of him as she was taken home, and she did not cease thinking of him during the whole rest of the day and far into the night. When Andrews left her, she found a place to hide the pricked leaves and before she put them away she did what Donal had done to her--she kissed them. She kissed them several times because they were Donal's leaves and he had made the stars and lines on them. It was almost like kissing Donal but not quite so beautiful.

After she was put to bed at night and Andrews left her she lay awake for a long time. She did not want to go to sleep because everything seemed so warm and wonderful and she could think and

think and think. What she thought about was Donal's face, his delightful eyes, his white forehead with curly hair pushed back with his Highland bonnet. His plaid swung about when he ran and jumped. When he held her tight the buttons of his jacket hurt her a little because they pressed against her body. What was "Mother" like? Did he kiss her? What pretty stones there were in his clasps and buckles! How nice it was to hear him laugh and how fond he was of laughing. Donal! Donal! Donal! He liked to play with her though she was a girl and so little. He would play with her tomorrow. His cheeks were bright pink, his hair was bright, his eyes were bright. He was all bright. She tried to see into the blueness of his eyes again as it seemed when they looked at each other close to. As she began to see the clear colour she fell asleep.

The power which had on the first morning guided Robin to the seclusion behind the clump of shrubs and had provided Andrews with an enthralling companion, extended, the next day, an even more beneficient and complete protection. Andrews was smitten with a cold so alarming as to confine her to bed. Having no intention of running any risks, whatsoever, she promptly sent for a younger sister who, temporarily being "out of place", came into the house as substitute. She was a pretty young woman who assumed no special responsibilities and was fond of reading novels.

"She's been trained to be no trouble, Anne. She'll amuse herself without bothering you as long as you keep her out," Andrews said

of Robin.

Anne took "Lady Audley's Secret" with her to the Gardens and, having led her charge to a shady and comfortable seat which exactly suited her, she settled herself for a pleasant morning.

"Now, you can play while I read," she said to Robin.

As they had entered the Gardens they had passed, not far from the gate, a bench on which sat a highly respectable looking woman who was hemming a delicate bit of cambric, and evidently in charge of two picture books which lay on the seat beside her. A fine boy in Highland kilts was playing a few yards away. Robin felt something like a warm flood rush over her and her joy was so great and exquisite that she wondered if Anne felt her hand trembling. Anne did not because she was looking at a lady getting into a carriage across the street.

The marvel of that early summer morning in the gardens of a splendid but dingy London square thing was not a thing for which human words could find expression. It was not an earthly thing, or, at least, not a thing belonging to an earth grown old. A child Adam and Eve might have known something like it in the Garden of Eden. It was as clear and simple as spring water and as warm as the sun.

Anne's permission to "play" once given, Robin found her way behind the group of lilacs and snowballs. Donal would come, not only because he was so big that Nanny would let him do what he wanted to do, but because he would do everything and anything in the world. Donal! Donal! Her heart was a mere baby's heart but it beat as if she were seventeen--beat with pure rapture. He was all bright and he would laugh and laugh.

The coming was easy enough for Donal. He had told his mother and Nanny rejoicingly about the little girl he had made friends with and who had no picture books. But he did not come straight to her. He took his picture books under his arm, and showing all his white teeth in a joyous grin, set out to begin their play properly with a surprise. He did not let her see him coming but "stalked" her behind the trees and bushes until he found where she was waiting, and then thrust his face between the branches of a tall shrub near her and laughed the outright laugh she loved. And when she turned she was looking straight into the clear blue she had tried to see when she fell asleep. "Donal! Donal!" she cried like a little bird with but one note.

The lilac and the snowball were in blossom and there was a big hawthorn tree which smelt sweet and sweet. They could not see the drift of smuts on the blossoms, they only smelled the sweetness and sat under the hawthorn and sniffed and sniffed. The sun was deliciously warm and a piano organ was playing beautifully not

far away. They sat close to each other, so close that the picture book could lie open on both pairs of knees and the warmth of each young body penetrated the softness of the other. Sometimes Donal threw an arm around her as she bent over the page. Love and caresses were not amazements to him; he accepted them as parts of the normal joy of life. To Robin they were absolute wonder. The pictures were delight and amazement in one. Donal knew all about them and told her stories. She felt that such splendour could have emanated only from him. It could not occur to her that he had not invented them and made the pictures. He showed her Robinson Crusoe and Robin Hood. The scent of the hawthorn and lilac intoxicated them and they laughed tremendously because Robin Hood's name was like Robin's own and he was a man and she was a girl. They could scarcely stop laughing and Donal rolled over and over on the grass, half from unconquerable high spirits and half to make Robin laugh still more.

He had some beautiful coloured glass marbles in his pocket and he showed her how to play with them, and gave her two of the prettiest. He could shoot them over the ground in a way to thrill the beholder. He could hop on one leg as far as he liked. He could read out of books.

"Do you like me?" he said once in a pause between displays of his prowess.

Robin was kneeling upon the grass watching him and she clasped her little hands as if she were uttering a prayer.

"Oh, yes, yes!" she yearned. "Yes! Yes!"

"I like you," he answered; "I told my mother all about you."

He came to her and knelt by her side.

"Have you a mother?" he asked.

"No," shaking her head.

"Do you live with your aunt?"

"No, I don't live with anybody."

He looked puzzled.

"Isn't there any lady in your house?" he put it to her. She brightened a little, relieved to think she had something to tell him.

"There's the Lady Downstairs," she said. "She's so pretty--so pretty."

"Is she----" he stopped and shook his head. "She couldn't be your mother," he corrected himself. "You'd know about HER."

"She wears pretty clothes. Sometimes they float about and sparkle and she wears little crowns on her head--or flowers. She laughs," Robin described eagerly. "A great many people come to see her. They all laugh. Sometimes they sing. I lie in bed and listen."

"Does she ever come upstairs to the Nursery?" inquired Donal with a somewhat reflective air.

"Yes. She comes and stands near the door and says, 'Is she quite well, Andrews?' She does not laugh then. She--she LOOKS at me."

She stopped there, feeling suddenly that she wished very much that she had more to tell. What she was saying was evidently not very satisfactory. He seemed to expect more--and she had no more to give. A sense of emptiness crept upon her and for no reason she understood there was a little click in her throat.

"Does she only stand near the door?" he suggested, as one putting the situation to a sort of crucial test. "Does she never sit on a big chair and take you on her knee?"

"No, no," in a dropped voice. "She will not sit down. She says the chairs are grubby."

"Doesn't she LOVE you at all?" persisted Donal. "Doesn't she KISS you?"

There was a thing she had known for what seemed to her a long time--God knows in what mysterious fashion she had learned it, but learned it well she had. That no human being but herself was aware of her knowledge was inevitable. To whom could she have told it? But Donal--Donal wanted to know all about her. The little click made itself felt in her throat again.

"She--she doesn't LIKE me!" Her dropped voice was the whisper of one humbled to the dust by confession, "She--doesn't LIKE me!" And the click became another thing which made her put up her arm over her eyes--her round, troubled child eyes, which, as she had looked into Donal's, had widened with sudden, bewildered tears.

Donal flung his arms round her and squeezed his buttons into her tender chest. He hugged her close; he kissed her; there was a choking in his throat. He was hot all over.

"She does like you. She must like you. I'll make her!" he cried passionately. "She's not your mother. If she was, she'd LOVE you! She'd LOVE you!"

"Do Mothers l-love you?" the small voice asked with a half sob.

"What's--what's LOVE you?" It was not vulgar curiosity. She only wanted to find out.

He loosed his embrace, sitting back on his heels to stare.

"Don't you KNOW?"

She shook her head with soft meekness.

"N-no," she answered.

Big boys like himself did not usually play with such little girls. But something had drawn him to her at their first moment of encounter. She wasn't like any other little girls. He felt it all the time and that was part of the thing which drew him. He was not, of course, aware that the male thrill at being regarded as one who is a god had its power over the emotions. She wasn't making silly fun and pretending. She really didn't know--because she was different.

"It's liking very much. It's more," he explained. "My mother loves ME. I--I LOVE you!" stoutly. "Yes, I LOVE you. That's why I kissed you when you cried."

She was so uplifted, so overwhelmed with adoring gratitude that as she knelt on the grass she worshipped him.

"I love YOU," she answered him. "I LOVE you--LOVE you!" And she looked at him with such actual prayerfulness that he caught at her and, with manly promptness, kissed her again-this being mere Nature.

Because he was eight years old and she was six her tears flashed away and they both laughed joyously as they sat down on the grass again to talk it over.

He told her all the pleasant things he knew about Mothers. The world was full of them it seemed--full. You belong to them from the time you were a baby. He had not known many personally because he had always lived at Braemarnie, which was in the country in Scotland. There were no houses near his home. You had to drive miles and miles before you came to a house or a castle. He had not seen much of other children except a few who lived at the Manse and belonged to the minister. Children had fathers as well as mothers. Fathers did not love you or take care of you quite as much as Mothers--because they were men. But they loved you too. His own father had died when he was a baby. His mother loved him as much as he loved her. She was beautiful but--it seemed to reveal itself--not like the Lady Downstairs. She did not laugh very much, though she laughed when they played together. He was too big now to sit on her knee, but squeezed into the big chair beside her when she read or told him stories. He always did what his mother told him. She knew everything in the world and so knew what he ought to

do. Even when he was a big man he should do what his mother told him.

Robin listened to every word with enraptured eyes and bated breath. This was the story of Love and Life and it was the first time she had ever heard it. It was as much a revelation as the Kiss. She had spent her days in the grimy Nursery and her one close intimate had been a bony woman who had taught her not to cry, employing the practical method of terrifying her into silence by pinching her--knowing it was quite safe to do it. It had not been necessary to do it often. She had seen people on the streets, but she had only seen them in passing by. She had not watched them as she had watched the sparrows. When she was taken down for a few minutes into the basement, she vaguely knew that she was in the way and that Mrs. Blayne's and Andrews' and Jennings' low voices and occasional sidelong look meant that they were talking about her and did not want her to hear.

"I have no mother and no father," she explained quite simply to Donal. "No one kisses me."

"No one!" Donal said, feeling curious. "Has no one ever kissed you but me?"

"No," she answered.

Donal laughed--because children always laugh when they do not know what else to do.

"Was that why you looked as if you were frightened when I said good-bye to you yesterday?"

"I-I didn't know," said Robin, laughing a little too--but not very much, "I wasn't frightened. I liked you."

"I'll kiss you as often as you want me to," he volunteered nobly. "I'm used to it--because of my mother. I'll kiss you again now." And he did it quite without embarrassment. It was a sort of manly gratuity.

Once Anne, with her book in her hand, came round the shrubs to see how her charge was employing herself, and seeing her looking at pictures with a handsomely dressed companion, she returned to "Lady Audley's Secret" feeling entirely safe.

The lilac and the hawthorn tree continued to breathe forth warmed scents of paradise in the sunshine, the piano organ went on playing, sometimes nearer, sometimes farther away, but evidently finding the neighbourhood a desirable one. Sometimes the children laughed at each other, sometimes at pictures Donal showed, or stories he told, or at his own extreme wit. The boundaries were removed from Robin's world. She began to understand that there was another

larger one containing wonderful and delightful things she had known nothing about. Donal was revealing it to her in everything he said even when he was not aware that he was telling her anything. When Eve was formed from the rib of Adam the information it was necessary for him to give her regarding her surroundings must have filled her with enthralling interest and a reverence which adored. The planted enclosure which was the central feature of the soot sprinkled, stately London Square was as the Garden of Eden.

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The Garden of Eden it remained for two weeks. Andrews' cold was serious enough to require a doctor and her sister Anne continued to perform their duties. The weather was exceptionally fine and, being a vain young woman, she liked to dress Robin in her pretty clothes and take her out because she was a beauty and attracted attention to her nurse as well as to herself. Mornings spent under the trees reading were entirely satisfactory. Each morning the children played together and each night Robin lay awake and lived again the delights of the past hours. Each day she learned more wonders and her young mind and soul were fed. There began to stir in her brain new thoughts and the beginning of questioning. Scotland, Braemarnie, Donal's mother, even the Manse and the children in it, combined to form a world of enchantment. There were hills with stags living in them, there were moors with purple heather and yellow brome and gorse; birds built their nests under the bushes

and Donal's pony knew exactly where to step even in the roughest places. There were two boys and two girls at the Manse and they had a father and a mother. These things were enough for a new heaven and a new earth to form themselves around. The centre of the whole Universe was Donal with his strength and his laugh and his eyes which were so alive and glowing that she seemed always to see them. She knew nothing about the thing which was their somehow--not-to-be-denied allure. They were ASKING eyes--and eyes which gave. The boy was in truth a splendid creature. His body and beauty were perfect life and joyous perfect living. His eyes asked other eyes for everything. "Tell me more," they said. "Tell me more! Like me! Answer me! Let us give each other everything in the world." He had always been well, he had always been happy, he had always been praised and loved. He had known no other things.

During the first week in which the two children played together, his mother, whose intense desire it was to understand him, observed in him a certain absorption of mood when he was not talking or amusing himself actively. He began to fall into a habit of standing at the windows, often with his chin in his hand, looking out as if he were so full of thought that he saw nothing. It was not an old habit, it was a new one.

"What are you thinking about, Donal?" she asked one afternoon.

He seemed to awaken, as it were, when he heard her. He turned about with his alluring smile.

"I am thinking it is FUNNY," he said. "It is funny that I should like such a little girl such a lot. She is years and years younger than I am. But I like her so. It is such fun to tell her things."
He marched over to his mother's writing table and leaned against it. What his mother saw was that he had an impassioned desire to talk about this child. She felt it was a desire even a trifle abnormal in its eagerness.

"She has such a queer house, I think," he explained. "She has a nurse and such pretty clothes and she is so pretty herself, but I don't believe she has any toys or books in her nursery."

"Where is her mother?"

"She must be dead. There is no lady in her house but the Lady Downstairs. She is very pretty and is always laughing. But she is not her mother because she doesn't like her and she never kisses her. I think that's the queerest thing of all. No one had EVER kissed her till I did."

His mother was a woman given to psychological analysis. Her eyes began to dwell on his face with slightly anxious questioning.

"Did you kiss her?" she inquired.

"Yes. I kissed her when I said good morning the first day. I thought she didn't like me to do it but she did. It was only because no one had ever done it before. She likes it very much."

He leaned farther over the writing table and began to pour forth, his smile growing and his eyes full of pleasure. His mother was a trifle alarmedly struck by the feeling that he was talking like a young man in love who cannot keep his tongue still, though in his case even the youngest manhood was years away, and he made no effort to conceal his sentiments which a young man would certainly have striven to do.

"She's got such a pretty little face and such a pretty mouth and cheeks," he touched a Jacqueminot rose in a vase. "They are the colour of that. Today a robin came with the sparrows and hopped about near us. We laughed and laughed because her eyes are like the robin's, and she is called Robin. I wish you would come into the Gardens and see her, mother. She likes everything I do."

"I must come, dear," she answered.

"Nanny thinks she is lovely," he announced. "She says I am in love with her. Am I, mother?"

"You are too young to be in love," she said. "And even when you are older you must not fall in love with people you know nothing about."

It was an unconscious bit of Scotch cautiousness which she at once realized was absurd and quite out of place. But--!

She realized it because he stood up and squared his shoulders in an odd young-mannish way. He had not flushed even faintly before and now a touch of colour crept under his fair skin.

"But I DO love her," he said. "I DO. I can't stop." And though he was quite simple and obviously little boy-like, she actually felt frightened for a moment.