CHAPTER IX

On the afternoon of the day upon which this occurred, Coombe was standing in Feather's drawing-room with a cup of tea in his hand and wearing the look of a man who is given up to reflection.

"I saw Mrs. Muir today for the first time for several years," he said after a silence. "She is in London with the boy."

"Is she as handsome as ever?"

"Quite. Hers is not the beauty that disappears. It is line and bearing and a sort of splendid grace and harmony."

"What is the boy like?"

Coombe reflected again before he answered.

"He is--amazing. One so seldom sees anything approaching physical perfection that it strikes one a sort of blow when one comes upon it suddenly face to face."

"Is he as beautiful as all that?"

"The Greeks used to make statues of bodies like his. They often called them gods--but not always. The Creative Intention plainly

was that all human beings should be beautiful and he is the expression of it."

Feather was pretending to embroider a pink flower on a bit of gauze and she smiled vaguely.

"I don't know what you mean," she admitted with no abasement of spirit, "but if ever there was any Intention of that kind it has not been carried out." Her smile broke into a little laugh as she stuck her needle into her work. "I'm thinking of Henry," she let drop in addition.

"So was I, it happened," answered Coombe after a second or so of pause.

Henry was the next of kin who was--to Coombe's great objection--his heir presumptive, and was universally admitted to be a repulsive sort of person both physically and morally. He had brought into the world a weakly and rickety framework and had from mere boyhood devoted himself to a life which would have undermined a Hercules. A relative may so easily present the aspect of an unfortunate incident over which one has no control. This was the case with Henry. His character and appearance were such that even his connection with an important heritage was not enough to induce respectable persons to accept him in any form. But if Coombe remained without issue Henry would be the Head of the House.

"How is his cough?" inquired Feather.

"Frightful. He is an emaciated wreck and he has no physical cause for remaining alive."

Feather made three or four stitches.

"Does Mrs. Muir know?" she said.

"If Mrs. Muir is conscious of his miserable existence, that is all," he answered. "She is not the woman to inquire. Of course she cannot help knowing that--when he is done with--her boy takes his place in the line of succession."

"Oh, yes, she'd know that," put in Feather.

It was Coombe who smiled now--very faintly.

"You have a mistaken view of her," he said.

"You admire her very much," Feather bridled. The figure of this big Scotch creature with her "line" and her "splendid grace and harmony" was enough to make one bridle.

"She doesn't admire me," said Coombe. "She is not proud of me as

a connection. She doesn't really want the position for the boy, in her heart of hearts."

"Doesn't want it!" Feather's exclamation was a little jeer only because she would not have dared a big one.

"She is Scotch Early Victorian in some things and extremely advanced in others," he went on. "She has strong ideas of her own as to how he shall be brought up. She's rather Greek in her feeling for his being as perfect physically and mentally as she can help him to be. She believes things. It was she who said what you did not understand--about the Creative Intention."

"I suppose she is religious," Feather said. "Scotch people often are but their religion isn't usually like that. Creative Intention's a new name for God, I suppose. I ought to know all about God. I've heard enough about Him. My father was not a clergyman but he was very miserable, and it made him so religious that he was ALMOST one. We were every one of us christened and catechized and confirmed and all that. So God's rather an old story."

"Queer how old--from Greenland's icy mountains to India's coral strand," said Coombe. "It's an ancient search--that for the Idea--whether it takes form in metal or wood or stone."

"Well," said Feather, holding her bit of gauze away from her

the better to criticize the pink flower. "As ALMOST a clergyman's daughter I must say that if there is one tiling God didn't do, it was to fill the world with beautiful people and things as if it was only to be happy in. It was made to-to try us by suffering and-that sort of thing. It's a-a-what d'ye call it? Something beginning with P."

"Probation," suggested Coombe regarding her with an expression of speculative interest. Her airy bringing forth of her glib time-worn little scraps of orthodoxy--as one who fished them out of a bag of long-discarded remnants of rubbish--was so true to type that it almost fascinated him for a moment.

"Yes. That's it--probation," she answered. "I knew it began with a P. It means 'thorny paths' and 'seas of blood' and, if you are religious, you 'tread them with bleeding feet--' or swim them as the people do in hymns. And you praise and glorify all the time you're doing it. Of course, I'm not religious myself and I can't say I think it's pleasant--but I do KNOW! Every body beautiful and perfect indeed! That's not religion--it's being irreligious. Good gracious, think of the cripples and lepers and hunchbacks!"

"And the idea is that God made them all--by way of entertaining himself?" he put it to her quietly.

"Well, who else did?" said Feather cheerfully.

"I don't know," he said. "Certain things I heard Mrs. Muir say suggested to one that it might be interesting to think it out."

"Did she talk to you about God at afternoon tea?" said Feather. "It's the kind of thing a religious Scotch woman might do."

"No, she did not talk to me. Perhaps that was her mistake. She might have reformed me. She never says more to me than civility demands. And it was not at tea. I accidentally dropped in on the Bethunes and found an Oriental had been lecturing there. Mrs. Muir was talking to him and I heard her. The man seemed to be a scholar and a deep thinker and as they talked a group of us stood and listened or asked questions."

"How funny!" said Feather.

"It was not funny at all. It was astonishingly calm and serious--and logical. The logic was the new note. I had never thought of reason in that connection."

"Reason has nothing to do with it. You must have faith. You must just believe what you're told not think at all. Thinking is wickedness--unless you think what you hear preached." Feather was even a trifle delicately smug as she rattled off her orthodoxy--but she laughed after she had done with it. "But it MUST have been

funny--a Turk or a Hindoo in a turban and a thing like a tea gown and Mrs. Muir in her Edinburgh looking clothes talking about God."

"You are quite out of it," Coombe did not smile at all as he said it. "The Oriental was as physically beautiful as Donal Muir is. And Mrs. Muir--no other woman in the room compared with her. Perhaps people who think grow beautiful."

Feather was not often alluring or coquettish in her manner to Coombe but she tilted her head prettily and looked down at her flower through lovely lashes.

"I don't think," she said. "And I am not so bad looking."

"No," he answered coldly. "You are not. At times you look like a young angel."

"If Mrs. Muir is like that," she said after a brief pause, "I should like to know what she thinks of me?"

"No, you would not--neither should I--if she thinks at all," was his answer. "But you remember you said you did not mind that sort of thing."

"I don't. Why should I? It can't harm me." Her hint of a pout made her mouth entrancing. "But, if she thinks good looks are the

result of religiousness I should like to let her see Robin--and compare her with her boy. I saw Robin in the park last week and she's a perfect beauty."

"Last week?" said Coombe.

"She doesn't need anyone but Andrews. I should bore her to death if I went and sat in the Nursery and stared at her. No one does that sort of thing in these days. But I should like to see Mrs. Muir to see the two children together!" "That could not easily be arranged, I am afraid," he said.

"Why not?"

His answer was politely deliberate.

"She greatly disapproves of me, I have told you. She is not proud of the relationship."

"She does not like ME you mean?"

"Excuse me. I mean exactly what I said in telling you that she has her own very strong views of the boy's training and surroundings. They may be ridiculous but that sort of thing need not trouble you."

Feather held up her hand and actually laughed.

"If Robin meets him in ten years from now-THAT for her very strong views of his training and surroundings!"

And she snapped her fingers.

Mrs. Muir's distaste for her son's unavoidable connection the man he might succeed had a firm foundation. She had been brought up in a Scottish Manse where her father dominated as an omnipotent and almost divine authority. As a child of imagination she had not been happy but she had been obedient. In her girlhood she had varied from type through her marriage with a young man who was a dreamer, an advanced thinker, an impassioned Greek scholar and a lover of beauty. After he had from her terrors of damnation, they had been profoundly happy. They were young and at ease and they read and thought together ardently. They explored new creeds and cults and sometimes found themselves talking nonsense and sometimes discovering untrodden paths of wisdom. They were youthful enough to be solemn about things at times, and clever enough to laugh at their solemnity when they awakened to it. Helen Muir left the reverent gloom of the life at the Manse far behind despite her respect for certain meanings they beclouded.

"I live in a new structure," she said to her husband, "but it is built on a foundation which is like a solid subterranean chamber.

I don't use the subterranean chamber or go into it. I don't want to. But now and then echoes--almost noises--make themselves heard in it. Sometimes I find I have listened in spite of myself."

She had always been rather grave about her little son and when her husband's early death left him and his dignified but not large estate in her care she realized that there lay in her hands the power to direct a life as she chose, in as far as was humanly possible. The pure blood and healthy tendencies of a long and fine ancestry expressing themselves in the boy's splendid body and unusual beauty had set the minds of two imaginative people working from the first. One of Muir's deepest interests was the study of development of the race. It was he who had planted in her mind that daringly fearless thought of a human perfection as to the Intention of the Creative Cause. They used to look at the child as he lay asleep and note the beauty of him--his hands, his feet, his torso, the tint and texture and line of him.

"This is what was MEANT--in the plan for every human being--How could there be scamping and inefficiency in Creation. It is we ourselves who have scamped and been incomplete in our thought and life. Here he is. Look at him. But he will only develop as he is--if living does not warp him." This was what his father said. His mother was at her gravest as she looked down at the little god in the crib.

"It's as if some power had thrust a casket of loose jewels into our hands and said, 'It is for you to see that not one is lost'," she murmured. Then the looked up and smiled.

"Are we being solemn--over a baby?" she said.

"Perhaps," he was always even readier to smile than she was. "I've an idea, however, that there's enough to be solemn about--not too solemn, but just solemn enough. You are a beautiful thing, Fair Helen! Why shouldn't he be like you? Neither of us will forget what we have just said."

Through her darkest hours of young bereavement she remembered the words many times and felt as if they were a sort of light she might hold in her hand as she trod the paths of the "Afterwards" which were in the days before her. She lived with Donal at Braemarnie and lived FOR him without neglecting her duty of being the head of a household and an estate and also a good and gracious neighbour to things and people. She kept watch over every jewel in his casket, great and small. He was so much a part of her religion that sometimes she realized that the echoes from the subterranean chamber were perhaps making her a little strict but she tried to keep guard over herself.

He was handsome and radiant with glowing health and vitality. He was a friendly, rejoicing creature and as full of the joy of life

as a scampering moor pony. He was clever enough but not too clever and he was friends with the world. Braemarnie was picturesquely ancient and beautiful. It would be a home of sufficient ease and luxury to be a pleasure but no burden. Life in it could be perfect and also supply freedom. Coombe Court and Coombe Keep were huge and castellated and demanded great things. Even if the Head of the House had been a man to like and be proud of--the accession of a beautiful young Marquis would rouse the hounds of war, so to speak, and set them racing upon his track. Even the totally unalluring "Henry" had been beset with temptations from his earliest years. That he promptly succumbed to the first only brought forth others. It did not seem fair that a creature so different, a splendid fearless thing, should be dragged from his hills and moors and fair heather and made to breathe the foul scent of things, of whose poison he could know nothing. She was not an ignorant childish woman. In her fine aloof way she had learned much in her stays in London with her husband and in their explorings of foreign cities.

This was the reason for her views of her boy's training and surroundings. She had not asked questions about Coombe himself, but it had not been necessary. Once or twice she had seen Feather by chance. In spite of herself she had heard about Henry. Now and then he was furbished up and appeared briefly at Coombe Court or at The Keep. It was always briefly because he inevitably began to verge on misbehaving himself after twenty-four hours had passed. On his last visit to Coombe House in town, where he had turned

up without invitation, he had become so frightfully drunk that he had been barely rescued from the trifling faux pas of attempting to kiss a very young royal princess. There were quite definite objections to Henry.

Helen Muir was NOT proud of the Coombe relationship and with unvaried and resourceful good breeding kept herself and her boy from all chance of being drawn into anything approaching an intimacy. Donal knew nothing of his prospects. There would be time enough for that when he was older, but, in the meantime, there should be no intercourse if it could be avoided.

She had smiled at herself when the "echo" had prompted her to the hint of a quaint caution in connection with his little boy flame of delight in the strange child he had made friends with. But it HAD been a flame and, though she, had smiled, she sat very still by the window later that night and she had felt a touch of weight on her heart as she thought it over. There were wonderful years when one could give one's children all the things they wanted, she was saying to herself--the desires of their child hearts, the joy of their child bodies, their little raptures of delight. Those were divine years. They were so safe then. Donal was living through those years now. He did not know that any happiness could be taken from him. He was hers and she was his. It would be horrible if there were anything one could not let him keep--in this early unshadowed time!

She was looking out at the Spring night with all its stars lit and gleaming over the Park which she could see from her window. Suddenly she left her chair and rang for Nanny.

"Nanny," she said when the old nurse came, "tell me something about the little girl Donal plays with in the Square gardens."

"She's a bonny thing and finely dressed, ma'am," was the woman's careful answer, "but I don't make friends with strange nurses and I don't think much of hers. She's a young dawdler who sits novel reading and if Master Donal were a young pickpocket with the measles, the child would be playing with him just the same as far as I can see. The young woman sits under a tree and reads and the pretty little thing may do what she likes. I keep my eye on them, however, and they're in no mischief. Master Donal reads out of his picture books and shows himself off before her grandly and she laughs and looks up to him as if he were a king. Every lad child likes a woman child to look up to him. It's pretty to see the pair of them. They're daft about each other. Just wee things in love at first sight."

"Donal has known very few girls. Those plain little things at the Manse are too dull for him," his mother said slowly.

"This one's not plain and she's not dull," Nanny answered. "My

word! but she's like a bit of witch fire dancing--with her colour and her big silk curls in a heap. Donal stares at her like a young man at a beauty. I wish, ma'am, we knew more of her forbears."

"I must see her," Mrs. Muir said. "Tomorrow I'll go with you both to the Gardens."

Therefore the following day Donal pranced proudly up the path to his trysting place and with him walked a tall lady at whom people looked as she passed. She was fair like Donal and had a small head softly swathed with lovely folds of hair. Also her eyes were very clear and calm. Donal was plainly proud and happy to be with her and was indeed prancing though his prance was broken by walking steps at intervals.

Robin was waiting behind the lilac bushes and her nurse was already deep in the mystery of Lady Audley.

"There she is!" cried Donal, and he ran to her. "My mother has come with me. She wants to see you, too," and he pulled her forward by her hand. "This is Robin, Mother! This is Robin." He panted with elation and stood holding his prize as if she might get away before he had displayed her; his eyes lifted to his tall mother's were those of an exultant owner.

Robin had no desire to run away. To adore anything which belonged

to Donal was only nature. And this tall, fair, wonderful person was a Mother. No wonder Donal talked of her so much. The child could only look up at her as Donal did. So they stood hand in hand like little worshippers before a deity.

Andrews' sister in her pride had attired the small creature like a flower of Spring. Her exquisiteness and her physical brilliancy gave Mrs. Muir something not unlike a slight shock. Oh! no wonder--since she was like that. She stooped and kissed the round cheek delicately.

"Donal wanted me to see his little friend," she said. "I always want to see his playmates. Shall we walk round the Garden together and you shall show me where you play and tell me all about it."

She took the small hand and they walked slowly. Robin was at first too much awed to talk but as Donal was not awed at all and continued his prancing and the Mother lady said pretty things about the flowers and the grass and the birds and even about the pony at Braemarnie, she began now and then to break into a little hop herself and presently into sudden ripples of laughter like a bird's brief bubble of song. The tall lady's hand was not like Andrews, or the hand of Andrews' sister. It did not pull or jerk and it had a lovely feeling. The sensation she did not know was happiness again welled up within her. Just one walk round the Garden and then the tall lady sat down on a seat to watch them play. It was wonderful. She did not read or work. She sat and watched

them as if she wanted to do that more than anything else. Donal kept calling out to her and making her smile: he ran backwards and forwards to her to ask questions and tell her what they were "making up" to play. When they gathered leaves to prick stars and circles on, they did them on the seat on which she sat and she helped them with new designs. Several times, in the midst of her play, Robin stopped and stood still a moment with a sort of puzzled expression. It was because she did not feel like Robin. Two people--a big boy and a lady--letting her play and talk to them as if they liked her and had time!

The truth was that Mrs. Muir's eyes followed Robin more than they followed Donal. Their clear deeps yearned over her. Such a glowing vital little thing! No wonder! No wonder! And as she grew older she would be more vivid and compelling with every year. And Donal was of her kind. His strength, his beauty, his fearless happiness-claiming temperament. How could one--with dignity and delicacy--find out why she had this obvious air of belonging to nobody? Donal was an exact little lad. He had had foundation for his curious scraps of her story. No mother--no playthings or books--no one had ever kissed her! And she dressed and soignee like this! Who was the Lady Downstairs?

A victoria was driving past the Gardens. It was going slowly because the two people in it wished to look at the spring budding out of hyacinths and tulips. Suddenly one of the pair--a sweetly-hued

figure whose early season attire was hyacinth-like itself--spoke to the coachman.

"Stop here!" she said. "I want to get out."

As the victoria drew up near a gate she made a light gesture.

"What do you think, Starling," she laughed. "The very woman we are talking about is sitting in the Gardens there. I know her perfectly though I only saw her portrait at the Academy years ago. Yes, there she is. Mrs. Muir, you know." She clapped her hands and her laugh became a delighted giggle. "And my Robin is playing on the grass near her--with a boy! What a joke! It must be THE boy! And I wanted to see the pair together. Coombe said couldn't be done. And more than anything I want to speak to HER. Let's get out."

They got out and this was why Helen Muir, turning her eyes a moment from Robin whose hand she was holding, saw two women coming towards her with evident intention. At least one of them had evident intention. She was the one whose light attire produced the effect of being made of hyacinth petals.

Because Mrs. Muir's glance turned towards her, Robin's turned also. She started a little and leaned against Mrs. Muir's knee, her eyes growing very large and round indeed and filling with a

sudden worshipping light.

"It is--" she ecstatically sighed or rather gasped, "the Lady Downstairs!"

Feather floated near to the seat and paused smiling.

"Where is your nurse, Robin?" she said.

Robin being always dazzled by the sight of her did not of course shine.

"She is reading under the tree," she answered tremulously.

"She is only a few yards away," said Mrs. Muir. "She knows Robin is playing with my boy and that I am watching them. Robin is your little girl?" amiably.

"Yes. So kind of you to let her play with your boy. Don't let her bore you. I am Mrs. Gareth-Lawless."

There was a little silence--a delicate little silence.

"I recognized you as Mrs. Muir at once," said Feather. unperturbed and smiling brilliantly, "I saw your portrait at the Grosvenor."

"Yes," said Mrs. Muir gently. She had risen and was beautifully tall,--"the line" was perfect, and she looked with a gracious calm into Feather's eyes.

Donal, allured by the hyacinth petal colours, drew near. Robin made an unconscious little catch at his plaid and whispered something.

"Is this Donal?" Feather said.

"ARE you the Lady Downstairs, please?" Donal put in politely, because he wanted so to know.

Feather's pretty smile ended in the prettiest of outright laughs. Her maid had told her Andrews' story of the name.

"Yes, I believe that's what she calls me. It's a nice name for a mother, isn't it?"

Donal took a quick step forward.

"ARE you her mother?" he asked eagerly.

"Of course I am."

Donal quite flushed with excitement.

"She doesn't KNOW," he said.

He turned on Robin.

"She's your Mother! You thought you hadn't one! She's your Mother!"

"But I am the Lady Downstairs, too." Feather was immensely amused. She was not subtle enough to know why she felt a perverse kind of pleasure in seeing the Scotch woman standing so still, and that it led her into a touch of vulgarity. "I wanted very much to see your boy," she said.

"Yes," still gently from Mrs. Muir.

"Because of Coombe, you know. We are such old friends. How queer that the two little things have made friends, too. I didn't know. I am so glad I caught a glimpse of you and that I had seen the portrait. GOOD morning. Goodbye, children."

While she strayed airily away they all watched her. She picked up her friend, the Starling, who, not feeling concerned or needed, had paused to look at daffodils. The children watched her until her victoria drove away, the chiffon ruffles of her flowerlike parasol fluttering in the air.

Mrs. Muir had sat down again and Donal and Robin leaned against

her. They saw she was not laughing any more but they did not know that her eyes had something like grief in them.

"She's her Mother!" Donal cried. "She's lovely, too. But she's--her MOTHER!" and his voice and face were equally puzzled.

Robin's little hand delicately touched Mrs. Muir.

"IS--she?" she faltered.

Helen Muir took her in her arms and held her quite close. She kissed her.

"Yes, she is, my lamb," she said. "She's your mother."

She was clear as to what she must do for Donal's sake. It was the only safe and sane course. But--at this age--the child WAS a lamb and she could not help holding her close for a moment. Her little body was deliciously soft and warm and the big silk curls all in a heap were a fragrance against her breast.