## CHAPTER X

Donal talked a great deal as he pranced home. Feather had excited as well as allured him. Why hadn't she told Robin she was her mother? Why did she never show her pictures in the Nursery and hold her on her knee? She was little enough to be held on knees! Did some mothers never tell their children and did the children never find out? This was what he wanted to hear explained. He took the gloved hand near him and held it close and a trifle authoritatively.

"I am glad I know you are my mother," he said, "I always knew."

He was not sure that the matter was explained very clearly. Not as clearly as things usually were. But he was not really disturbed. He had remembered a book he could show Robin tomorrow and he thought of that. There was also a game in a little box which could be easily carried under his arm. His mother was "thinking" and he was used to that. It came on her sometimes and of his own volition he always, on such occasion, kept as quiet as was humanly possible.

After he was asleep, Helen sent for Nanny.

"You're tired, ma'am," the woman said when she saw her, "I'm afraid you've a headache."

"I have had a good deal of thinking to do since this afternoon,"

her mistress answered, "You were right about the nurse. The little girl might have been playing with any boy chance sent in her way--boys quite unlike Donal."

"Yes, ma'am." And because she loved her and knew her face and voice Nanny watched her closely.

"You will be as--startled--as I was. By some queer chance the child's mother was driving by and saw us and came in to speak to me. Nanny--she is Mrs. Gareth-Lawless."

Nanny did start; she also reddened and spoke sharply.

"And she came in and spoke to you, ma'am!"

"Things have altered and are altering every day," Mrs. Muir said. "Society is not at all inflexible. She has a smart set of her own--and she is very pretty and evidently well provided for. Easy-going people who choose to find explanations suggest that her husband was a relation of Lord Lawdor's."

"And him a canny Scotchman with a new child a year. Yes, my certie," offered Nanny, with an acrid grimness. Mrs. Muir's hands clasped strongly as they lay on the table before her.

"That doesn't come within my bailiewick," she said in her quiet

voice. "Her life is her own and not mine. Words are the wind that blows." She stopped just a moment and began again. "We must leave for Scotland by the earliest train."

"What'll he do?" the words escaped from the woman as if involuntarily. She even drew a quick breath. "He's a strong feeling bairn--strong!"

"He'll be stronger when he is a young man, Nanny!" desperately. "That is why I must act now. There is no half way. I don't want to be hard. Oh, am I hard--am I hard?" she cried out low as if she were pleading.

"No, ma'am. You are not. He's your own flesh and blood." Nanny had never before seen her mistress as she saw her in the next curious almost exaggerated moment.

Her hand flew to her side.

"He's my heart and my soul--" she said, "--he is the very entrails of me! And it will hurt him so and I cannot explain to him because he is too young to understand. He is only a little boy who must go where he is taken. And he cannot help himself. It's--unfair!"

Nanny was prone to become more Scotch as she became moved. But she still managed to look grim.

"He canna help himsel," she said, "an waur still, YOU canna."

There was a moment of stillness and then she said:

"I must go and pack up." And walked out of the room.

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Donal always slept like a young roe in the bracken, and in deep and rapturous ease he slept this night. Another perfectly joyful day had passed and his Mother had liked Robin and kissed her. All was well with the world. As long as he had remained awake--and it had not been long--he had thought of delightful things unfeverishly. Of Robin, somehow at Braemarnie, growing bigger very quickly--big enough for all sorts of games--learning to ride Chieftain, even to gallop. His mother would buy another pony and they could ride side by side. Robin would laugh and her hair would fly behind her if they went fast. She would see how fast he could go--she would see him make Chieftain jump. They would have picnics--catch sight of deer and fawns delicately lifting their feet as they stepped. She would always look at him with that nice look in her eyes and the little smile which came and went in a second. She was quite different from the minister's little girls at the Manse. He liked her--he liked her!

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He was wakened by a light in his room and by the sound of moving about. He sat up quickly and found his Mother standing by his bed and Nanny putting things into a travelling bag. He felt as if his Mother looked taller than she had looked yesterday--and almost thin--and her face was anxious and--shy.

"We let you sleep as late as we could, Donal," she said. "You must get up quickly now and have breakfast. Something has happened. We are obliged to go back to Scotland by very early train. There is not a minute to waste."

At first he only said:

"Back!"

"Yes, dear. Get up."

"To Braemarnie?"

"Yes, dear laddie!"

He felt himself grow hot and cold.

"Away! Away!" he said again vaguely.

"Yes. Get up, dear."

He was as she had said only a little boy and accustomed to do as he was told. He was also a fine, sturdy little Scot with a pride of his own. His breeding had been of the sort which did not include insubordinate scenes, so he got out of bed and began to dress. But his mother saw that his hands shook.

"I shall not see Robin," he said in a queer voice. "She won't find me when she goes behind the lilac bushes. She won't know why I don't come."

He swallowed very hard and was dead still for a few minutes, though he did not linger over his dressing. His mother felt that the whole thing was horrible. He was acting almost like a young man even now. She did not know how she could bear it. She spoke to him in a tone which was actually rather humble.

"If we knew where she lived you--you could write a little letter and tell her about it. But we do not where she lives."

He answered her very low.

"That's it. And she's little--and she won't understand. She's very little--really." There was a harrowingly protective note in his voice. "Perhaps--she'll cry."

Helen looking down at him with anguished eyes--he was buttoning his shoes--made an unearthly effort to find words, but, as she said them, she knew they were not the right ones.

"She will be disappointed, of course, but she is so little that she will not feel it as much as if she were bigger. She will get over it, darling. Very little girls do not remember things long." Oh, how coarse and crass and stupid it sounded--how course and crass and stupid to say it to this small defiant scrap of what seemed the inevitable suffering of the world!

The clear blue of the eyes Robin had dwelt in, lifted itself to her. There was something almost fierce in it--almost like impotent hatred of something.

"She won't," he said, and she actually heard him grind his little teeth after it.

He did not look like Donal when he was dressed and sat at the breakfast table. He did not eat much of his porridge, but she saw that he determinedly ate some. She felt several times as if he actually did not look like anybody she had ever seen. And at the same time his fair hair, his fair cheeks, and the fair sturdy knees beneath his swinging kilt made him seem as much a little boy as she had ever known him. It was his hot blue eyes which were

different.

He obeyed her every wish and followed where she led. When the train laboured out of the big station he had taken a seat in a corner and sat with his face turned to the window, so that his back was towards her. He stared and stared at the passing country and she could only see part of his cheek and the side of his neck. She could not help watching them and presently she saw a hot red glow under the skin as if a flood had risen. It subsided in a few moments, but presently she saw it rise again. This happened several times and he was holding his lip with, his teeth. Once she saw his shoulders more and he coughed obstinately two or three times. She knew that he would die before he would let himself cry, but she wished he would descend to it just this once, as the fields and hedges raced past and he was carried "Away! Away!" It might be that it was all his manhood she was saving for him.

He really made her heart stand still for a moment just as she was thinking this and saying it to herself almost fiercely. He suddenly turned on her; the blue of his eyes was flaming and the tide had risen again in his cheeks and neck. It was a thing like rage she saw before her--a child's rage and impotently fierce. He cried out as if he were ending a sentence he had not finished when he spoke as he sat on the floor buttoning his shoes.

"She has no one but me to remember!" he said. "No one but me had

ever even kissed her. She didn't know!"

To her amazement he clenched both his savage young fists and shook them before him.

"It'll kill me!" he raged.

She could not hold herself back. She caught at him with her arms and meant to drag him to her breast. "No! No! Donal!" she cried. "Darling! No--No!" But, as suddenly as the queer unchildish thing had broken out, did he remember himself and boy shame at his fantastic emotion overtook him. He had never spoken like that to anyone before! It was almost as bad as bursting out crying! The red tide ebbed away and he withdrew himself awkwardly from her embrace. He said not another word and sat down in his corner with his back turned toward the world.

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That the Lady Downstairs, who was so fond of laughing and who knew so many persons who seemed to laugh nearly all the time, might have been joking about being her mother presented itself to Robin as a vague solution of the problem. The Lady had laughed when she said it, as people so often laughed at children. Perhaps she had only been amusing herself as grown-up persons were apparently entitled to do. Even Donal had not seemed wholly convinced and

though his mother had said the Lady Downstairs WAS--somehow the subject had been changed at once. Mrs. Muir had so soon begun to tell them a story. Robin was not in the least aware that she had swiftly distracted their attention from a question, any discussion of which would have involved explanations she could not have produced. It would have been impossible to make it clear to any child. She herself was helpless before the situation and therefore her only refuge was to make the two think of other things. She had so well done this that Robin had gone home later only remembering the brightly transitory episode as she recalled others as brief and bright, when she had stared at a light and lovely figure standing on the nursery threshold and asking careless questions of Andrews, without coming in and risking the freshness of her draperies by contact with London top-floor grubbiness. The child was, in fact, too full of the reality of her happiness with Donal and Donal's mother to be more than faintly bewildered by a sort of visionary conundrum.

Robin, like Donal, slept perfectly through the night. Her sleep was perhaps made more perfect by fair dreams in which she played in the Gardens and she and Donal ran to and from the knees of the Mother lady to ask questions and explain their games. As the child had often, in the past, looked up at the sky, so she had looked up into the clear eyes of the Mother lady. There was something in them which she had never seen before but which she kept wanting to see again. Then there came a queer bit of a dream about the Lady

Downstairs. She came dancing towards them dressed in hyacinths and with her arms full of daffodils. She danced before Donal's Mother--danced and laughed as if she thought they were all funny. She threw a few daffodils at them and then danced away. The daffodils lay on the gravel walk and they all looked at them but no one picked them up. Afterwards--in the dream--Mrs. Muir suddenly caught her in her arms and kissed her and Robin was glad and felt warm all over--inside and out.

She wakened smiling at the dingy ceiling of the dingy room. There was but one tiny shadow in the world, which was the fear that Andrews would get well too quickly. She was no longer in bed but was well enough to sit up and sew a little before the tiny fire in the atom of a servant's room grate. The doctor would not let her go out yet; therefore, Anne still remained in charge. Founding one's hope on previous knowledge of Anne's habits, she might be trusted to sit and read and show no untoward curiosity.

From her bed Robin could see the sky was blue. That meant that she would be taken out. She lay as quiet as a mouse and thought of the joy before her, until Anne came to dress her and give her her breakfast.

"We'll put on your rose-coloured smock this morning," the girl said, when the dressing began. "I like the hat and socks that match."

Anne was not quite like Andrews who was not talkative. She made a conversational sort of remark after she had tied the white shoes.

"You've got pretty little aristocratic legs of your own," she said amiably. "I like my children to have nice legs."

Robin was uplifted in spirit by the commendation, but she hoped Anne would put on her own things quickly. Sometimes she was rather a long time. The one course, however, towards which discretion pointed as entirely safe was the continuance of being as quiet as a mouse--even quieter, if such thing might be--so that nothing might interfere with anything any one wanted to do. To interfere would have been to attract attention and might lead to delay. So she stood and watched the sparrows inoffensively until Anne called her.

When she found herself out on the street her step was so light on the pavement that she was rather like a rose petal blown fluttering along by soft vagrant puffs of spring air. Under her flopping hat her eyes and lips and cheeks were so happy that more than one passer-by turned head over shoulder to look after her.

"Your name ought to be Rose," Anne giggled involuntarily as she glanced down at her because someone had stared. She had not meant to speak but the words said themselves.

Because the time was young June even London sky and air were wonderful. Stray breaths of fragrance came and went. The green of the trees in the Gardens was light and fresh and in the bedded-out curves and stars and circles there were more flowers every hour, so that it seemed as if blooming things with scents grew thick about one's feet. It was no wonder one felt light and smiled back at nurses and governesses who looked up. Robin drew eyes became she was like a summer bloom suddenly appearing in the Spring Garden.

Nanny was not sitting on the bench near the gate and Donal was not to be seen amusing himself. But he was somewhere just out of sight, or, if he had chanced to be late, he would come very soon even if his Mother could not come with him--though Robin could not believe she would not. To a child thing both happiness and despair cannot be conceived of except as lasting forever.

Anne sat down and opened her book. She had reached an exciting part and looked forward to a thoroughly enjoyable morning.

Robin hopped about for a few minutes. Donal had taught her to hop and she felt it an accomplishment. Entangled in the meshes of the feathery, golden, if criminal, ringlets of Lady Audley, Anne did not know when she hopped round the curve of the walk behind the lilac and snowball bushes.

Once safe in her bit of enchanted land, the child stood still and

looked about her. There was no kilted figure to be seen, but it would come towards her soon with swinging plaid and eagle's feather standing up grandly in its Highland bonnet. He would come soon. Perhaps he would come running--and the Mother lady would walk behind more slowly and smile. Robin waited and looked--she waited and looked.

She was used to waiting but she had never watched for anyone before. There had never been any one or anything to watch for. The newness of the suspense gave it a sort of deep thrill at first. How long was "at first"? She did not know. She stood--and stood--and stood--and looked at every creature who entered the gate. She did not see any one who looked in the least like Donal or his Mother or Nanny. There were nurses and governesses and children and a loitering lady or two. There were never many people in the Gardens--only those who had keys. She knew nothing about time but at length she knew that on other mornings they had been playing together before this.

The small rose-coloured figure stood so still for so long that it began to look rigid and a nurse sitting at some distance said to another,

"What is that child waiting for?"

What length of time had passed before she found herself looking

slowly down at her feet because of something. The "something" which had drawn her eyes downward was that she had stood so long without moving that her tense feet had begun vaguely to hurt her and the ache attracted her attention. She changed her position slightly and turned her eyes upon the gate again. He was coming very soon. He would be sure to run fast now and he would be laughing. Donal! Donal! She even laughed a little low, quivering laugh herself.

"What is that child waiting for? I should really like to know," the distant nurse said again curiously.

If she had been eighteen years old she would have said to herself that she was waiting hours and hours. She would have looked at a little watch a thousand times; she would have walked up and down and round and round the garden never losing sight of the gate--or any other point for that matter--for more than a minute. Each sound of the church clock striking a few streets away would have brought her young heart thumping into her throat.

But a child has no watch, no words out of which to build hopes and fears and reasons, arguments battling against anguish which grows--palliations, excuses. Robin, could only wait in the midst of a slow dark, rising tide of something she had no name for. This slow rising of an engulfing flood she felt when pins and needles began to take possession of her feet, when her legs ached, and her

eyes felt as if they had grown big and tightly strained. Donal! Donal! Donal!

Who knows but that some echo of the terror against which she had fought and screamed on the night when she had lain alone in the dark in her cradle and Feather had hid her head under the pillow--came back and closed slowly around and over her, filling her inarticulate being with panic which at last reached its unbearable height?
She had not really stood waiting the entire morning, but she was young enough to think that she had and that at any moment Anne might come and take her away. He had not come running--he had not come laughing--he had not come with his plaid swinging and his feather standing high! There came a moment when her strained eyes no longer seemed to see clearly! Something like a big lump crawled up into her throat! Something of the same sort happened the day she had burst into a wail of loneliness and Andrews had pinched her. Panic seized her; she clutched the breast of her rose-coloured frock and panic-driven turned and fled into a thick clump of bushes where there was no path and where even Donal had never pierced.

"That child has run away at last," the distant nurse remarked, "I'd like to find out what she WAS waiting for."

The shrubs were part of the enclosing planting of the Gardens. The children who came to play on the grass and paths felt as if they formed a sort of forest. Because of this, Robin had made her

frantic dash to their shelter. No one would come--no one would see her--no one would hear her, beneath them it was almost dark. Bereft, broken and betrayed, a little mad thing, she pushed her way into their shadow and threw herself face downward, a small, writhing, rose-coloured heap, upon the damp mould. She could not have explained what she was doing or why she had given up all, as if some tidal wave had overwhelmed her. Suddenly she knew that all her new world had gone--forever and ever. As it had come so it had gone. As she had not doubted the permanence of its joy, so she KNEW that the end had come. Only the wisdom of the occult would dare to suggest that from her child mate, squaring his sturdy young shoulders against the world as the flying train sped on its way, some wave of desperate, inchoate thinking rushed backward. There was nothing more. He would not come back running. He was GONE!

There was no Andrews to hear. Hidden in the shadow under the shrubs, the rattle and roar of the street outside the railing drowned her mad little cries. All she had never done before, she did then. Her hands beat on the damp mould and tore at it--her small feet beat it and dug into it. She cried, she sobbed; the big lump in her throat almost strangled her--she writhed and did not know she was writhing. Her tears pouring forth wet her hair, her face, her dress. She did not cry out, "Donal! Donal!" because he was nowhere--nowhere. If Andrews had seen her she would have said she was "in a tantrum," But she was not. The world had been torn away.

A long time afterwards, as it seemed to her, she crawled out from under the shrubs, carrying her pretty flopping hat in her earth-stained hand. It was not pretty any more. She had been lying on it and it was crushed and flat. She crept slowly round the curve to Anne.

Seeing her, Anne sprang to her feet. The rose was a piteous thing beaten to earth by a storm. The child's face was swollen and stained, her hair was tangled and damp there were dark marks of mould on her dress, her hat, her hands, her white cheeks; her white shoes were earth-stained also, and the feet in the rose-coloured socks dragged themselves heavily--slowly.

"My gracious!" the young woman almost shrieked. "What's happened! Where have you been? Did you fall down? Ah, my good gracious! Mercy me!"

Robin caught her breath but did not say a word.

"You fell down on a flower bed where they'd been watering the plants!" almost wept Anne. "You must have. There isn't that much dirt anywhere else in the Gardens."

And when she took her charge home that was the story she told Andrews. Out of Robin she could get nothing, and it was necessary to have an explanation.

The truth, of which she knew nothing, was but the story of a child's awful dismay and a child's woe at one of Life's first betrayals. It would be left behind by the days which came and went--it would pass--as all things pass but the everlasting hills--but in this way it was that it came and wrote itself upon the tablets of a child's day.