

CHAPTER XXXI

The whole day before the party was secretly exciting to Robin. She knew how much more important it seemed to her than it really was. If she had been six years old she might have felt the same kind of uncertain thrills and tremulous wonders. She hid herself behind the window curtains in her room that she might see the men putting up the crimson and white awning from the door to the carriage step. The roll of red carpet they took from their van had a magic air. The ringing of the door bell which meant that things were being delivered, the extra moving about of servants, the florists' men who went into the drawing-rooms and brought flowers and big tropical plants to re-arrange the conservatory and fill corners which were not always decorated--each and every one of them quickened the beating of her pulses. If she had belonged in her past to the ordinary cheerful world of children, she would have felt by this time no such elation. But she had only known of the existence of such festivities as children's parties because once a juvenile ball had been given in a house opposite her mother's and she had crouched in an almost delirious little heap by the nursery window watching carriages drive up and deposit fluffy pink and white and blue children upon the strip of red carpet, and had seen them led or running into the house. She had caught sounds of strains of music and had shivered with rapture--but Oh! what

worlds away from her the party had been.

She found her way into the drawing-rooms which were not usually thrown open. They were lofty and stately and seemed to her immense. There were splendid crystal-dropping chandeliers and side lights which she thought looked as if they would hold a thousand wax candles. There was a delightfully embowered corner for the musicians. It was all spacious and wonderful in its beautiful completeness--its preparedness for pleasure. She realized that all of it had always been waiting to be used for the happiness of people who knew each other and were young and ready for delight. When the young Lothwells had been children they had had dances and frolicking games with other children in the huge rooms and had kicked up their young heels on the polished floors at Christmas parties and on birthdays. How wonderful it must have been. But they had not known it was wonderful.

As Dowie dressed her the reflection she saw in the mirror gave back to her an intensified Robin whose curved lips almost quivered as they smiled. The soft silk of her hair looked like the night and the small rings on the back of her very slim white neck were things to ensnare the eye and hold it helpless.

"You look your best, my dear," Dowie said as she clasped her little necklace. "And it is a good best." Dowie was feeling tremulous herself though she could not have explained why. She thought that

perhaps it was because she wished that Mademoiselle could have been with her.

Robin kissed her when the last touch had been given.

"I'm going to run down the staircase," she said. "If I let myself walk slowly I shall have time to feel queer and shy and I might seem to CREEP into the drawing-room. I mustn't creep in. I must walk in as if I had been to parties all my life."

She ran down and as she did so she looked like a white bird flying, but she was obliged to stop upon the landing before the drawing-room door to quiet a moment of excited breathing. Still when she entered the room she moved as she should and held her head poised with a delicately fearless air. The Duchess--who herself looked her best in her fine old ivory profiled way--gave her a pleased smile of welcome which was almost affectionate.

"What a perfect little frock!" she said. "You are delightfully pretty in it."

"Is it quite right?" said Robin. "Mademoiselle chose it for me."

"It is quite right. 'Frightfully right,' George would say. George will sit near you at dinner. He is my grandson--Lord Halwyn you know, and you will no doubt frequently hear him say things are

'frightfully' something or other during the evening. Kathryn will say things are 'deevy' or 'exquig'. I mention it because you may not know that she means 'exquisite' and 'divine.' Don't let it frighten you if you don't quite understand their language. They are dear handsome things sweeping along in the rush of their bit of century. I don't let it frighten me that their world seems to me an entirely new planet."

Robin drew a little nearer her. She felt something as she had felt years ago when she had said to Dowie. "I want to kiss you, Dowie." Her eyes were pools of childish tenderness because she so well understood the infinitude of the friendly tact which drew her within its own circle with the light humour of its "I don't let them frighten ME."

"You are kind--kind to me," she said. "And I am grateful--GRATEFUL."

The extremely good-looking young people who began very soon to drift into the brilliant big room--singly or in pairs of brother and sister--filled her with innocent delight. They were so well built and gaily at ease with each other and their surroundings, so perfectly dressed and finished. The filmy narrowness of delicate frocks, the shortness of skirts accentuated the youth and girlhood and added to it a sort of child fairy-likeness. Kathryn in exquisite wisps of silver-embroidered gauze looked fourteen instead of nearly twenty--aided by a dimple in her cheek and a small tilted

nose. A girl in scarlet tulle was like a child out of a nursery ready to dance about a Christmas tree. Everyone seemed so young and so suggested supple dancing, perhaps because dancing was going on everywhere and all the world whether fashionable or unfashionable was driven by a passion for whirling, swooping and inventing new postures and fantastic steps. The young men had slim straight bodies and light movements. Their clothes fitted their suppleness to perfection. Robin thought they all looked as if they had had a great deal of delightful exercise and plenty of pleasure all their lives.

They were of that stream which had always seemed to be rushing past her in bright pursuit of alluring things which belonged to them as part of their existence, but which had had nothing to do with her own youth. Now the stream had paused as if she had for the moment some connection with it. The swift light she was used to seeing illuminate glancing eyes as she passed people in the street, she saw again and again as new arrivals appeared. Kathryn was quite excited by her eyes and eyelashes and George hovered about. There was a great deal of hovering. At the dinner table sleek young heads held themselves at an angle which allowed of their owners seeing through or around, or under floral decorations and alert young eyes showed an eager gleam. After dinner was over and dancing began the Duchess smiled shrewdly as she saw the gravitating masculine movement towards a certain point. It was the point where Robin stood with a small growing circle about her.

It was George who danced with her first. He was tall and slender and flexible and his good shoulders had a military squareness of build. He had also a nice square face, and a warmly blue eye and knew all the latest steps and curves and unexpected swirls. Robin was an ozier wand and there was no swoop or dart or sudden sway and change she was not alert at. The swing and lure of the music, the swift movement, the fluttering of airy draperies as slim sister nymphs flew past her, set her pulses beating with sweet young joy. A brief, uncontrollable ripple of laughter broke from her before she had circled the room twice.

"How heavenly it is!" she exclaimed and lifted her eyes to Halwyn's.

"How heavenly!"

They were not safe eyes to lift in such a way to those of a very young man. They gave George a sudden enjoyable shock. He had heard of the girl who was a sort of sublimated companion to his grandmother. The Duchess herself had talked to him a little about her and he had come to the party intending to behave very amiably and help the little thing enjoy herself. He had also encountered before in houses where there were no daughters the smart well-born, young companion who was allowed all sorts of privileges because she knew how to assume tiresome little responsibilities and how to be entertaining enough to add cheer and spice to the life of the elderly and lonely. Sometimes she was a subtly appealing sort

of girl and given to being sympathetic and to liking sympathy and quiet corners in conservatories or libraries, and sometimes she was capable of scientific flirtation and required scientific management. A man had to have his wits about him. This one as she flew like a blown leaf across the floor and laughed up into his face with wide eyes, produced a new effect and was a new kind.

"It's you who are heavenly," he answered with a boy's laugh. "You are like a feather--and a willow wand."

"You are light too," she laughed back, "and you are like steel as well."

Mrs. Alan Stacy, the lady with the magnificent henna hair, had recently given less time to him, being engaged in the preliminary instruction of a new member of the Infant Class. Such things will, of course, happen and though George had quite ingenuously raged in secret, the circumstances left him free to "hover" and hovering was a pastime he enjoyed.

"Let us go on like this forever and ever," he said sweeping half the length of the room with her and whirling her as if she were indeed a leaf in the wind, "Forever and ever."

"I wish we could. But the music will stop," she gave back.

"Music ought never to stop--never," he answered.

But the music did stop and when it began again almost immediately another tall, flexible young man made a lightning claim on her and carried her away only to hand her to another and he in his turn to another. She was not allowed more than a moment's rest and borne on the crest of the wave of young delight, she did not need more. Young eyes were always laughing into hers and elating her by a special look of pleasure in everything she did or said or inspired in themselves. How was she informed without phrases that for this exciting evening she was a creature without a flaw, that the loveliness of her eyes startled those who looked into them, that it was a thrilling experience to dance with her, that somehow she was new and apart and wonderful? No sleek-haired, slim and straight-backed youth said exactly any of these things to her, but somehow they were conveyed and filled her with a wondering realization of the fact that if they were true, they were no longer dreadful and maddening, since they only made people like and want to dance with one. To dance, to like people and be liked seemed so heavenly natural and right--to be only like air and sky and free, happy breathing. There was, it was true, a blissful little uplifted look about her which she herself was not aware of, but which was singularly stimulating to the masculine beholder. It only meant indeed that as she whirled and swayed and swooped laughing she was saying to herself at intervals,

"This is what other girls feel like. They are happy like this. I am laughing and talking to people just as other girls do. I am Robin Gareth-Lawless, but I am enjoying a party like this--a YOUNG party."

Lady Lothwell sitting near her mother watched the trend of affairs with an occasional queer interested smile.

"Well, mamma darling," she said at last as youth and beauty whirled by in a maelstrom of modern Terpsichorean liveliness, "she is a great success. I don't know whether it is quite what you intended or not."

The Duchess did not explain what she had intended. She was watching the trend also and thinking a good deal. On the whole Lady Lothwell had scarcely expected that she would explain. She rarely did. She seldom made mistakes, however.

Kathryn in her scant gauzy strips of white and silver having drifted towards them at the moment stood looking on with a funny little disturbed expression on her small, tip-tilted face.

"There's something ABOUT her, grandmamma," she said.

"All the girls see it and no one knows what it is. She's sitting out for a few minutes and just look at George--and Hal Brunton--and

Captain Willys. They are all laughing, of course, and pretending to joke, but they would like to eat each other up. Perhaps it's her eyelashes. She looks out from under them as if they were a curtain."

Lady Lothwell's queer little smile became a queer little laugh.

"Yes. It gives her a look of being ecstatically happy and yet almost shy and appealing at the same time. Men can't stand it of course."

"None of them are trying to stand it," answered little Lady Kathryn somewhat in the tone of a retort.

"I don't believe she knows she does it," Lady Lothwell said quite reflectively.

"She does not know at all. That is the worst of it," commented the Duchess.

"Then you see that there IS a worst," said her daughter.

The Duchess glanced towards Kathryn, but fortunately the puzzled fret of the girl's forehead was even at the moment melting into a smile as a young man of much attraction descended upon her with smiles of his own and carried her into the Tango or Fox Trot or

Antelope Galop, whichever it chanced to be.

"If she were really aware of it that would be 'the worst' for other people--for us probably. She could look out from under her lashes to sufficient purpose to call what she wanted and take and keep it. As she is not aware, it will make things less easy for herself--under the circumstances."

"The circumstance of being Mrs. Gareth-Lawless' daughter is not an agreeable one," said Lady Lothwell.

"It might give some adventurous boys ideas when they had time to realize all it means. Do you know I am rather sorry for her myself. I shouldn't be surprised if she were rather a dear little thing. She looks tender and cuddle-some. Perhaps she is like the heroine of a sentimental novel I read the other day. Her chief slave said of her 'She walks into a man's heart through his eyes and sits down there and makes a warm place which will never get cold again.' Rather nice, I thought."

The Duchess thought it rather nice also.

"Never get cold again," she repeated. "What a heavenly thing to happen to a pair of creatures--if--" she paused and regarded Robin, who at the other side of the room was trying to decide some parlous question of dances to which there was more than one

claimant. She was sweetly puckering her brow over her card and round her were youthful male faces looking eager and even a trifle tense with repressed anxiety for the victory of the moment.

"Oh!" Lady Lothwell laughed. "As Kitty says 'There's something about her' and it's not mere eyelashes. You have let loose a germ among us, mamma my sweet, and you can't do anything with a germ when you have let it loose. To quote Kitty again, 'Look at George!'"

The music which came from the bower behind which the musicians were hidden seemed to gain thrill and wildness as the hours went on. As the rooms grew warmer the flowers breathed out more reaching scent. Now and again Robin paused for a moment to listen to strange delightful chords and to inhale passing waves of something like mignonette and lilies, and apple blossoms in the sun. She thought there must be some flower which was like all three in one. The rushing stream was carrying her with it as it went--one of the happy petals on its surface. Could it ever cast her aside and leave her on the shore again? While the violins went singing on and the thousand wax candles shone on the faint or vivid colours which mingled into a sort of lovely haze, it did not seem possible that a thing so enchanting and so real could have an end at all. All the other things in her life seemed less real tonight.

In the conservatory there was a marble fountain which had long years ago been brought from a palace garden in Rome. It was not

as large as it was beautiful and it had been placed among palms and tropic ferns whose leaves and fronds it splashed merrily among and kept deliciously cool and wet-looking. There was a quite intoxicating hot-house perfume of warm damp moss and massed flowers and it was the kind of corner any young man would feel it necessary to gravitate towards with a partner.

George led Robin to it and she naturally sat upon the edge of the marble basin and as naturally drew off a glove and dipped her hand into the water, splashing it a little because it felt deliciously cool. George stood near at first and looked down at her bent head. It was impossible not also to take in her small fine ear and the warm velvet white of the lovely little nape of her slim neck. He took them in with elated appreciation. He was not subtle minded enough to be aware that her reply to a casual remark he had made to her at dinner had had a remote effect upon him.

"One of the loveliest creatures I ever saw was a Mrs. Gareth-Lawless," he had said. "Are you related to her?"

"I am her daughter," Robin had answered and with a slightly startled sensation he had managed to slip into amiably deft generalities while he had secretly wondered how much his grandmother knew or did not know.

An involuntary thought of Feather had crossed his mind once or

twice during the evening. This was the girl who, it was said, had actually been saved up for old Coombe. Ugly morbid sort of idea if it was true. How had the Duchess got hold of her and why and what was Coombe really up to? Could he have some elderly idea of wanting a youngster for a wife? Occasionally an old chap did. Serve him right if some young chap took the wind out of his sails. He was not a desperate character, but he had been very intimate with Mrs. Alan Stacy and her friends and it had made him careless. Also Robin had drawn him--drawn him more than he knew.

"Is it still heavenly?" he asked. (How pointed her fingers were and how soft and crushable her hand looked as it splashed like a child's.)

"More heavenly every minute," she answered. He laughed outright.

"The heavenly thing is the way you are enjoying it yourself. I never saw a girl light up a whole room before. You throw out stars as you dance."

"That's like a skyrocket," Robin laughed back. "And it's because in all my life I never went to a dance before."

"Never! You mean except to children's parties?"

"There were no children's parties. This is the first--first--first."

"Well, I don't see how that happened, but I am glad it did because it's been a great thing for me to see you at your first--first--first."

He sat down on the fountain's edge near her.

"I shall not forget it," he said.

"I shall remember it as long as I live," said Robin and she lifted her unsafe eyes again and smiled into his which made them still more unsafe.

Perhaps it was because he was extremely young, perhaps it was because he was immoral, perhaps because he had never held a tight rein on his fleeting emotions, even the next moment he felt that it was because he was an idiot--but suddenly he found he had let himself go and was kissing the warm velvet of the slim little nape--had kissed it twice.

He had not given himself time to think what would happen as a result, but what did happen was humiliating and ridiculous. One furious splash of the curled hand flung water into his face and eyes and mouth while Robin tore herself free from him and stood blazing with fury and woe--for it was not only fury he saw.

"You--You--!" she cried and actually would have swooped to the

fountain again if he had not caught her arm.

He was furious himself--at himself and at her.

"You--little fool!" he gasped. "What did you do that for even if I WAS a jackass? There was nothing in it. You're so pretty----"

"You've spoiled everything!" she flamed, "everything--everything!"

"I've spoiled nothing. I've only been a fool--and it's your own fault for being so pretty."

"You've spoiled everything in the world! Now--" with a desolate horrible little sob, "now I can only go back--BACK!"

He had a queer idea that she spoke as if she were Cinderella and he had made the clock strike twelve. Her voice had such absolute grief in it that he involuntarily drew near her.

"I say," he was really breathless, "don't speak like that. I beg pardon. I'll grovel! Don't--Oh! Kathryn--COME here."

This last because at this difficult moment from between the banks of hot-house bloom and round the big palms his sister Kathryn suddenly appeared. She immediately stopped short and stared at them both--looking from one to the other.

"What is the matter?" she asked in a low voice.

"Oh! COME and talk to her," George broke forth. "I feel as if she might scream in a minute and call everybody in. I've been a lunatic and she has apparently never been kissed before. Tell her--tell her you've been kissed yourself."

A queer little look revealed itself in Kathryn's face. A delicate vein of her grandmother's wisdom made part of her outlook upon a rapidly moving and exciting world. She had never been hide-bound or dull and for a slight gauzy white and silver thing she was astute.

"Don't be impudent," she said to George as she walked up to Robin and put a cool hand on her arm. "He's only been silly. You'd better let him off," she said. She turned a glance on George who was wiping his sleeve with a handkerchief and she broke into a small laugh, "Did she push you into the fountain?" she asked cheerfully.

"She threw the fountain at me," grumbled George. "I shall have to dash off home and change."

"I would," replied Kathryn still cheerful. "You can apologize better when you're dry."

He slid through the palms like a snake and the two girls stood and gazed at each other. Robin's flame had died down and her face had settled itself into a sort of hardness. Kathryn did not know that she herself looked at her as the Duchess might have looked at another girl in the quite different days of her youth.

"I'll tell you something now he's gone," she said. "I HAVE been kissed myself and so have other girls I know. Boys like George don't really matter, though of course it's bad manners. But who has got good manners? Things rush so that there's scarcely time for manners at all. When an older man makes a snatch at you it's sometimes detestable. But to push him into the fountain was a good idea," and she laughed again.

"I didn't push him in."

"I wish you had," with a gleeful mischief. The next moment, however, the hint of a worried frown showed itself on her forehead. "You see," she said protestingly, "you are so FRIGHTFULLY pretty."

"I'd rather be a leper," Robin shot forth.

But Kathryn did not of course understand.

"What nonsense!" she answered. "What utter rubbish! You know you wouldn't. Come back to the ball room. I came here because my mother

was asking for George."

She turned to lead the way through the banked flowers and as she did so added something.

"By the way, somebody important has been assassinated in one of the Balkan countries. They are always assassinating people. They like it. Lord Coombe has just come in and is talking it over with grandmamma. I can see they are quite excited in their quiet way."

As they neared the entrance to the ball room she paused a moment with a new kind of impish smile.

"Every girl in the room is absolutely shaky with thrills at this particular moment," she said. "And every man feels himself bristling a little. The very best looking boy in all England is dancing with Sara Studleigh. He dropped in by chance to call and the Duchess made him stay. He is a kind of miracle of good looks and takingness."

Robin said nothing. She had plainly not been interested in the Balkan tragedy and she as obviously did not care for the miracle.

"You don't ask who he is?" said Kathryn.

"I don't want to know."

"Oh! Come! You mustn't feel as sulky as that. You'll want to ask questions the moment you see him. I did. Everyone does. His name is Donal Muir. He's Lord Coombe's heir. He'll be the Head of the House of Coombe some day. Here he comes," quite excitedly, "Look!"

It was one of the tricks of Chance--or Fate--or whatever you will. The dance brought him within a few feet of them at that very moment and the slow walking steps he was taking held him--they were some of the queer stealthy almost stationary steps of the Argentine Tango. He was finely and smoothly fitted as the other youngsters were, his blond glossed head was set high on a heroic column of neck, he was broad of shoulder, but not too broad, slim of waist, but not too slim, long and strong of leg, but light and supple and firm. He had a fair open brow and a curved mouth laughing to show white teeth. Robin felt he ought to wear a kilt and plaid and that an eagle's feather ought to be standing up from a chieftain's bonnet on the fair hair which would have waved if it had been allowed length enough. He was scarcely two yards from her now and suddenly--almost as if he had been called--he turned his eyes away from Sara Studleigh who was the little thing in Christmas tree scarlet. They were blue like the clear water in a tarn when the sun shines on it and they were still laughing as his mouth was. Straight into hers they laughed--straight into hers.