

## CHAPTER XXXII

Through all aeons since all the worlds were made it is at least not unthinkable that in all the worlds of which our own atom is one, there has ruled a Force illimitable, unconquerable and inexplicable and whichsoever its world and whatsoever the sign denoting or the name given it, the Force--the Thing has been the same. Upon our own atom of the universe it is given the generic name of Love and its existence is that which the boldest need not defy, the most profound need not attempt to explain with clarity, the most brilliantly sophistical to argue away. Its forms of beauty, triviality, magnificence, imbecility, loveliness, stupidity, holiness, purity and bestiality neither detract from nor add to its unalterable power. As the earth revolves upon its axis and reveals night and day, Spring, Summer and Winter, so it reveals this ceaselessly working Force. Men who were as gods have been uplifted or broken by it, fools have trifled with it, brutes have sullied it, saints have worshipped, poets sung and wits derided it. As electricity is a force death dealing, or illuminating and power bestowing, so is this Great Impeller, and it is fatuous--howsoever worldly wise or moderately sardonic one would choose to be--to hint ironically that its proportions are less than the ages have proved them. Whether a world formed without a necessity for the presence and assistance of this psychological factor would have been a better or a worse one, it is--by good fortune--not here imperative that one should attempt to decide. What is--exists. None of us created

it. Each one will deal with the Impeller as he himself either sanely or madly elects. He will also bear the consequences--and so also may others.

Of this force the Head of the House of Coombe and his old friend knew much and had often spoken to each other. They had both been accustomed to recognizing its signs subtle or crude, and watching their development. They had seen it in the eyes of creatures young enough to be called boys and girls, they had heard it in musical laughter and in silly giggles, they had seen it express itself in tragedy and comedy and watched it end in union or in a nothingness which melted away like a wisp of fog. But they knew it was a thing omnipresent and that no one passed through life untouched by it in some degree.

Years before this evening two children playing in a garden had not know that the Power--the Thing--drew them with its greatest strength because among myriads of atoms they two were created for oneness. Enraptured and unaware they played together, their souls and bodies drawn nearer each other every hour.

So it was that--without being portentous--one may say that when an unusually beautiful and unusually well dressed and perfectly fitted young man turned involuntarily in the particular London ball room in which Mrs. Gareth-Lawless' daughter watched the dancers, and looked unintentionally into the eyes of a girl standing

for a moment near the wide entrance doors, the inexplicable and unconquerable Force reconnected its currents again.

Donal Muir's eyes only widened a little for a second's time. He had not known why he had suddenly looked around and he did not know why he was conscious of something which startled him a little. You could not actually stare at a girl because your eyes chanced to get entangled in hers for a second as you danced past her. It was true she was of a startling prettiness and there was something--. Yes, there was SOMETHING which drew the eye and--. He did not know what it was. It had actually given him a sort of electric shock. He laughed at himself a little and then his open brow looked puzzled for a moment.

"You saw Miss Lawless," said Sara Studleigh who was at the moment dancing prettily with him. She was guilty of something which might have been called a slight giggle, but it was good-natured. "I know, you saw Miss Lawless--the pretty one near the door."

"There are so many pretty ones near everything. You can't lift your eyes without seeing one," Donal answered. "What a lot of them!" (The sense of having received a slight electric shock made you feel that you must look again and find out what had caused it, he was thinking.)

"She is the one with the eyelashes."

"I have eyelashes--so have you," looking down at hers with a very taking expression. Hers were in fact nice ones.

"But ours are not two inches long and they don't make a big soft circle round our eyes when we look at anyone."

"Please look up and let me see," said Donal. "When I asked you to dance with me I thought--"

What a "way" he had, Sara Studleigh was thinking. But "perhaps it WAS the eyelashes" was passing through Donal's mind. Very noticeable eyelashes were rather arresting.

"I knew you saw her," said Sara Studleigh, "because I have happened to be near two or three people this evening when they caught their first sight of her."

"What happens to them?" asked Donal Muir.

"They forget where they are," she laughed, "and don't say anything for a few seconds."

"I should not want to forget where I am. It wouldn't be possible either," answered Donal. ("But that was it," he thought. "For a minute I forgot.")

One should not dance with one girl and talk to her about another. Wisely he led her to other subjects. The music was swinging through the air performing its everlasting miracle of swinging young souls and pulses with it, the warmed flowers breathed more perceptible scent, sweet chatter and laughter, swaying colour and glowing eyes concentrated in making magic. This beautiful young man's pulses only beat with the rest--as one with the pulse of the Universe. Lady Lothwell acting for the Duchess was very kind to him finding him another partner as soon as a new dance began--this time her own daughter, Lady Kathryn.

Even while he had been tangoing with Sara Studleigh he had seen the girl with the eyelashes, whirling about with someone, and when he began his dance with Kathryn, he caught a glimpse of her at the other end of the room. And almost immediately Kathryn spoke of her.

"I don't know when you will get a dance with Miss Lawless," she said. "She is obliged to work out mathematical problems on her programme."

"I have a setter who fixes his eyes on you and waits without moving until you look at him and then he makes a dart and you're obliged to pat him," he said. "Perhaps if I go and stand near her and do that she will take notice of me."

"Take notice of him, the enslaving thing!" thought Kathryn. "She'd jump--for all her talk about lepers--any girl would. He's TOO nice! There's something about HIM too."

Robin did not jump. She had no time to do it because one dance followed another so quickly and some of them were even divided in two or three pieces. But the thrill of the singing sound of the violins behind the greenery, the perfume and stately spaces and thousand candlelights had suddenly been lifted on to another plane though she had thought they could reach no higher one. Her whole being was a keen fine awareness. Every moment she was AWARE. After all the years--from the far away days--he had come back. No one had dreamed of the queer half abnormal secret she had always kept to herself as a child--as a little girl--as a bigger one when she would have died rather than divulge that in her loneliness there had been something she had remembered--something she had held on to--a memory which she had actually made a companion of, making pictures, telling herself stories in the dark, even inventing conversations which not for one moment had she thought would or could ever take place. But they had been living things to her and her one near warm comfort--closer, oh, so weirdly closer than kind, kind Dowie and dearly beloved Mademoiselle. She had wondered if the two would have disapproved if they had known--if Mademoiselle would have been shocked if she had realized that sometimes when they walked together there walked with them a growing, laughing

boy in a swinging kilt and plaid and that he had a voice and eyes that drew the heart out of your breast for joy. At first he had only been a child like herself, but as she had grown he had grown with her--but always taller, grander, marvellously masculine and beyond compare. Yet never once had she dared to believe or hope that he could take form before her eyes--a living thing. He had only been the shadow she had loved and which could not be taken away from her because he was her secret and no one could ever know.

The music went swinging and singing with notes which were almost a pain. And he was in the very room with her! Donal! Donal! He had not known and did not know. He had laughed into her eyes without knowing--but he had come back. A young man now like all the rest, but more beautiful. What a laugh, what wonderful shoulders, what wonderful dancing, how long and strongly smooth and supple he was in the line fabric of his clothes! Though her mind did not form these things in words for her, it was only that her eyes saw all the charm of him from head to foot, and told her that he was only more than ever what he had been in the miraculous first days.

"Perhaps he will not find out at all," she thought, dancing all the while and trying to talk as well as think. "I was too little for him to remember. I only remembered because I had nothing else. Oh, if he should not find out!" She could not go and tell him. Even if a girl could do such a thing, perhaps he could not recall a childish incident of so long ago--such a small, small thing. It

had only been immense to her and so much water had flowed under his bridge bearing so many flotillas. She had only stood and looked down at a thin trickling stream which carried no ships at all. It was very difficult to keep her eyes from stealing--even darting--about in search of him. His high fair head with the clipped wave in its hair could be followed if one dared be alert. He danced with an auburn haired girl, he spun down the room with a brown one, he paused for a moment to show the trick of a new step to a tall one with black coils. He was at the end of the room, he was tangoing towards her and she felt her heart beat and beat. He passed close by and his eyes turned upon her and after he had passed a queer little inner trembling would not cease. Oh! if he had looked a little longer--if her partner would only carry her past him! And how dreadful she was to let herself feel so excited when he could not be EXPECTED to remember such a little thing--just a baby playing with him in a garden. Oh!--her heart giving a leap--if he would look--if he would LOOK!

When did she first awaken to a realization--after what seemed years and years of waiting and not being able to conquer the inwardly trembling feeling--that he was BEGINNING to look--that somehow he had become aware of her presence and that it drew his eyes though there was no special recognition in them? Down the full length of the room they met hers first, and again as he passed with yet another partner. Then when he was resting between danced and being very gay indeed--though somehow he always seemed gay. He had been



gay when they played in the Gardens. Yes, his eyes came and found her. She thought he spoke of her to someone near him. Of course Robin looked away and tried not to look again too soon. But when in spite of intention and even determination, something forced her glance and made it a creeping, following glance--there were his eyes again. She was frightened each time it happened, but he was not. She began to know with new beatings of the pulse that he no longer looked by chance, but because he wanted to see her--and wished her to see him, as if he had begun to call to her with a gay Donal challenge. It was like that, though his demeanour was faultlessly correct.

The incident of their meeting was faultlessly correct, also, when after one of those endless lapses of time Lady Lothwell appeared and presented him as if the brief ceremony were one of the most ordinary in existence. The conventional grace of his bow said no more than George's had said to those looking on, but when he put his arm round her and they began to sway together in the dance, Robin wondered in terror if he could not feel the beating of her heart under his hand. If he could it would be horrible--but it would not stop. To be so near--to try to believe it--to try to make herself remember that she could mean nothing to him and that it was only she who was shaking--for nothing! But she could not help it. This was the disjointed kind of thing that flew past her mental vision. She was not a shy girl, but she could not speak. Curiously enough he also was quite silent for several moments.

They danced for a space without a word and they did not notice that people began to watch them because they were an attracting pair to watch. And the truth was that neither of the two knew in the least what the other thought.

"That--is a beautiful waltz," he said at last. He said it in a low meaning voice as if it were a sort of emotional confidence. He had not actually meant to speak in such a tone, but when he realized what its sound had been he did not care in the least. What was the matter with him?

"Yes," Robin answered. (Only "Yes.")

He had not known when he glanced at her first, he was saying mentally. He could not, of course, swear to her now. But what an extraordinary thing that--! She was like a swallow--she was like any swift flying thing on a man's arm. One could go on to the end of time. Once round the great ball room, twice, and as the third round began he gave a little laugh and spoke again.

"I am going to ask you a question. May I?"

"Yes."

"Is your name Robin?"

"Yes," she could scarcely breathe it.

"I thought it was," in the voice in which he had spoken of the music. "I hoped it was--after I first began to suspect. I HOPED it was."

"It is--it is."

"Did we--" he had not indeed meant that his arm should hold her a shade closer, but--in spite of himself--it did because he was after all so little more than a boy, "--did we play together in a garden?"

"Yes--yes," breathed Robin. "We did." Surely she heard a sound as if he had caught a quick breath. But after it there were a few more steps and another brief space of silence.

"I knew," he said next, very low. "I KNEW that we played together in a garden."

"You did not know when you first looked at me tonight." Innocently revealing that even his first glance had been no casual thing to her.

But his answer revealed something too.

"You were near the door--just coming into the room. I didn't know why you startled me. I kept looking for you afterwards in the crowd."

"I didn't see you look," said Robin softly, revealing still more in her utter inexperience.

"No, because you wouldn't look at me--you were too much engaged. Do you like this step?"

"I like them all."

"Do you always dance like this? Do you always make your partner feel as if he had danced with you all his life?"

"It is--because we played together in the garden," said Robin and then was quite terrified at herself. Because after all--after all they were only two conventional young people meeting for the first time at a dance, not knowing each other in the least. It was really the first time. The meeting of two children could not count. But the beating and strange elated inward tremor would not stop.

As for him he felt abnormal also and he was usually a very normal creature. It was abnormal to be so excited that he found himself, as it were, upon another plane, because he had recognized and was

dancing with a girl he had not seen since she was five or six. It was not normal that he should be possessed by a desire to keep near to her, overwhelmed by an impelling wish to talk to her--to ask her questions. About what--about herself--themselves--the years between--about the garden.

"It began to come back bit by bit after I had two fair looks. You passed me several times though you didn't know." (Oh! had she not known!) "I had been promised some dances by other people. But I went to Lady Lothwell. She's very kind."

Back swept the years and it had all begun again, the wonderful happiness--just as the anguish had swept back on the night her mother had come to talk to her. As he had brought it into her dreary little world then, he brought it now. He had the power. She was so happy that she seemed to be only waiting to hear what he would say--as if that were enough. There are phases like this--rare ones--and it was her fate that through such a phase she was passing.

It was indeed true that much more water had passed under his bridge than under hers, but now--! Memory reproduced for him with an acuteness like actual pain, a childish torment he thought he had forgotten. And it was as if it had been endured only yesterday--and as if the urge to speak and explain was as intense as it had been on the first day.

"She's very little and she won't understand," he had said to his mother. "She's very little, really--perhaps she'll cry."

How monstrous it had seemed! Had she cried--poor little soul! He looked down at her eyelashes. Her cheek had been of the same colour and texture then. That came back to him too. The impulse to tighten his arms was infernally powerful--almost automatic.

"She has no one but me to remember!" he heard his own child voice saying fiercely. Good Lord, it WAS as if it had been yesterday. He actually gulped something down in his throat.

"You haven't rested much," he said aloud. "There's a conservatory with marble seats and corners and a fountain going. Will you let me take you there when we stop dancing? I want to apologize to you."

The eyelashes lifted themselves and made round her eyes the big soft shadow of which Sara Studleigh had spoken. A strong and healthy valvular organ in his breast lifted itself curiously at the same time.

"To apologize?"

Was he speaking to her almost as if she were still four or five?

It was to the helplessness of those years he was about to explain--and

yet he did not feel as though he were still eight.

"I want to tell you why I never came back to the garden. It was a broken promise, wasn't it?"

The music had not ceased, but they stopped dancing.

"Will you come?" he said and she went with him like a child--just as she had followed in her babyhood. It seemed only natural to do what he asked.

The conservatory was like an inner Paradise now. The tropically scented warmth--the tiers on tiers of bloom above bloom--the softened swing of music--the splash of the fountain on water and leaves. Their plane had lifted itself too. They could hear the splashing water and sometimes feel it in the corner seat of marble he took her to. A crystal drop fell on her hand when she sat down. The blue of his eyes was vaguely troubled and he spoke as if he were not certain of himself.

"I was wakened up in what seemed to me the middle of the night," he said, as if indeed the thing had happened only the day before.

"My mother was obliged to go back suddenly to Scotland. I was only a little chap, but it nearly finished me. Parents and guardians don't understand how gigantic such a thing can be. I had promised you--we had promised each other--hadn't we?"

"Yes," said Robin. Her eyes were fixed upon his face--open and unmoving. Such eyes! Such eyes! All the touchingness of the past was in their waiting on his words.

"Children--little boys especially--are taught that they must not cry out when they are hurt. As I sat in the train through the journey that day I thought my heart would burst in my small breast. I turned my back and stared out of the window for fear my mother would see my face. I'd always loved her. Do you know I think that just then I HATED her. I had never hated anything before. Good Lord! What a thing for a little chap to go through! My mother was an angel, but she didn't KNOW."

"No," said Robin in a small strange voice and without moving her gaze. "She didn't KNOW."

He had seated himself on a sort of low marble stool near her and he held a knee with clasped hands. They were hands which held each other for the moment with a sort of emotional clinch. His position made him look upward at her instead of down.

"It was YOU I was wild about," he said. "You see it was YOU. I could have stood it for myself. The trouble was that I felt I was such a big little chap. I thought I was years--ages older than you--and mountains bigger," his faint laugh was touched with pity



for the smallness of the big little chap. "You seemed so tiny and pretty--and lonely."

"I was as lonely as a new-born bird fallen out of its nest."

"You had told me you had 'nothing.' You said no one had ever kissed you. I'd been loved all my life. You had a wondering way of fixing your eyes on me as if I could give you everything--perhaps it was a coxy little chap's conceit that made me love you for it--but perhaps it wasn't."

"You WERE everything," Robin said--and the mere simpleness of the way in which she said it brought the garden so near that he smelt the warm hawthorn and heard the distant piano organ and it quickened his breath.

"It was because I kept seeing your eyes and hearing your laugh that I thought my heart was bursting. I knew you'd go and wait for me--and gradually your little face would begin to look different. I knew you'd believe I'd come. 'She's little'--that was what I kept saying to myself again and again. 'And she'll cry--awfully--and she'll think I did it. She'll never know.' There,"--he hesitated a moment--"there was a kind of mad shame in it. As if I'd BETRAYED your littleness and your belief, though I was too young to know what betraying was."

Just as she had looked at him before, "as if he could give her everything," she was looking at him now. In what other way could she look while he gave her this wonderful soothing, binding softly all the old wounds with unconscious, natural touch because he had really been all her child being had been irradiated and warmed by. There was no pose in his manner--no sentimental or flirtatious youth's affecting of a picturesque attitude. It was real and he told her this thing because he must for his own relief.

"Did you cry?" he said. "Did my little chap's conceit make too much of it? I suppose I ought to hope it did."

Robin put her hand softly against her heart.

"No," she answered. "I was only a baby, but I think it KILLED something--here."

He caught a big hard breath.

"Oh!" he said and for a few seconds simply sat and gazed at her.

"But it came to life again?" he said afterwards.

"I don't know. I don't know what it was. Perhaps it could only live in a very little creature. But it was killed."

"I say!" broke from him. "It was like wringing a canary's neck when it was singing in the sun!"

A sudden swelling of the music of a new dance swept in to them and he rose and stood up before her.

"Thank you for giving me my chance to tell you," he said. "This was the apology. You have been kind to listen."

"I wanted to listen," Robin said. "I am glad I didn't live a long time and grow old and die without your telling me. When I saw you tonight I almost said aloud, 'He's come back!'"

"I'm glad I came. It's queer how one can live a thing over again. There have been all the years between for us both. For me there's been all a lad's life--tutors and Eton and Oxford and people and lots of travel and amusement. But the minute I set eyes on you near the door something must have begun to drag me back. I'll own I've never liked to let myself dwell on that memory. It wasn't a good thing because it had a trick of taking me back in a fiendish way to the little chap with his heart bursting in the railway carriage--and the betrayal feeling. It's morbid to let yourself grieve over what can't be undone. So you faded away. But when I danced past you somehow I knew I'd come on SOMETHING. It made me restless. I couldn't keep my eyes away decently. Then all at once I KNEW! I couldn't tell you what the effect was. There you were

again--I was as much obliged to tell you as I should have been if I'd found you at Braemarnie when I got there that night. Conventions had nothing to do with it. It would not have mattered even if you'd obviously thought I was a fool. You might have thought so, you know."

"No, I mightn't," answered Robin. "There have been no Eton and Oxford and amusements for me. This is my first party."

She rose as he had done and they stood for a second or so with their eyes resting on each other's--each with a young smile quivering into life which neither was conscious of. It was she who first wakened and came back. He saw a tiny pulse flutter in her throat and she lifted her hand with a delicate gesture.

"This dance was Lord Halwyn's and we've sat it out. We must go back to the ball room."

"I--suppose--we must," he answered with slow reluctance--but he could scarcely drag his eyes away from hers--even though he obeyed, and they turned and went.

In the shining ball room the music rose and fell and swelled again into ecstasy as he took her white young lightness in his arm and they swayed and darted and swooped like things of the air--while the old Duchess and Lord Coombe looked on almost unseeing and

talked in murmurs of Sarajevo.

THE END