Robin

By

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THE HEAD OF THE HOUSE OF COOMBE

In the years when Victorian standards and ideals began to dance an increasingly rapid jig before amazed lookers-on, who presently found themselves dancing as madly as the rest--in these years, there lived in Mayfair, in a slice of a house, Robert Gareth-Lawless and his lovely young wife. So light and airy was she to earthly vision and so diaphanous the texture of her mentality that she was known as "Feather."

The slice of a house between two comparatively stately mansions in the "right street" was a rash venture of the honeymoon.

Robert--well born, irresponsible, without resources--evolved a carefully detailed method of living upon nothing whatever, of keeping out of the way of duns, and telling lies with aptness and outward gaiety. But a year of giving smart little dinners and going to smart big dinners ended in a condition somewhat akin to the feat of balancing oneself on the edge of a sword.

Then Robin was born. She was an intruder and a calamity, of course. That a Feather should become a parent gave rise to much wit of light weight when Robin was exhibited in the form of a bundle of lace.

It was the Head of the House of Coombe who asked:

"What will you do with her?"

"Do?" Feather repeated. "What is it people 'do' with babies? I don't know. I wouldn't touch her for the world. She frightens me."

Coombe said:

"She is staring at me. There is antipathy in her gaze." He stared back unwaveringly also, but with a sort of cold interest.

"The Head of the House of Coombe" was not a title to be found in Burke or Debrett. It was a fine irony of the Head's own. The peerage recorded him as a marquis and added several lesser attendant titles.

To be born the Head of the House is a weighty and awe-inspiring thing--one is called upon to be an example.

"I am not sure what I am an example of--or to," he said, on one occasion, in his light, rather cold and detached way, "which is why I at times regard myself in that capacity with a slightly ribald lightness."

A reckless young woman once asked him:

"Are you as wicked as people say you are?"

"I really don't know. It is so difficult to decide," he answered.

"Perhaps I am as wicked as I know how to be. And I may have painful limitations or I may not."

He had reached the age when it was safe to apply to him that vague term "elderly," and marriage might have been regarded as imperative. But he had remained unmarried and seemed to consider his abstinence entirely his own affair.

Courts and capitals knew him, and his opportunities were such as gave him all ease as an onlooker. He saw closely those who sat with knit brows and cautiously hovering hand at the great chess-board which is formed by the map of Europe.

As a statesman or a diplomat he would have gone far, but he had been too much occupied with Life as an entertainment, too self-indulgent for work of any order. Having, however, been born with a certain type of brain, it observed and recorded in spite of him, thereby adding flavour and interest to existence. But that was all.

Texture and colour gave him almost abnormal pleasure. For this reason, perhaps, he was the most perfectly dressed man in London.

It was at a garden-party that he first saw Feather. When his eyes fell upon her, he was talking to a group of people and he stopped speaking. Some one standing quite near him said afterwards that he had, for a second or so, became pale--almost as if he saw something which

frightened him. He was still rather pale when Feather lifted her eyes to him. But he had not talked to her for fifteen minutes before he knew that there was no real reason why he should ever again lose his colour at the sight of her. He had thought, at first, there was.

This was the beginning of an acquaintance which gave rise to much argument over tea-cups regarding the degree of Coombe's interest in her. Remained, however, the fact that he managed to see a great deal of her. Feather was guilelessly doubtless concerning him. She was quite sure that he was in love with her, and very practically aware that the more men of the class of the Head of the House of Coombe who came in and out of the slice of a house, the more likely the dwellers in it were to get good invitations and continued credit.

The realisation of these benefits was cut short. Robert, amazingly and unnaturally, failed her by dying. He was sent away in a hearse and the tiny house ceased to represent hilarious little parties.

Bills were piled high everywhere. The rent was long overdue and must be paid. She had no money to pay it, none to pay the servants' wages.

"It's awful--it's awful--it's awful!" broke out between her sobs.

From her bedroom window--at evening--she watched "Cook," the smart footman, the nurse, the maids, climb into four-wheelers and be driven away.

"They're gone--all of them!" she gasped. "There's no one left in the house. It's empty!"

Then was Feather seized with a panic. She had something like hysterics, falling face downward upon the carpet and clutching her hair until it fell down. She was not a person to be judged--she was one of the unexplained incidents of existence.

The night drew in more closely. A prolonged wailing shriek tore through the utter soundlessness of the house. It came from the night-nursery. It was Robin who had wakened and was screaming.

"I--I won't!" Feather protested, with chattering teeth. "I won't! I won't!"

She had never done anything for the child since its birth. To reach her now, she would be obliged to go out into the dark--past Robert's bedroom--the room.

"I--I couldn't--even if I wanted to!" she quaked. "I daren't! I daren't! I wouldn't do it--for a million pounds!"

The screams took on a more determined note. She flung herself on her bed, burrowing her head under the coverings and pillows she dragged over her ears to shut out the sounds.

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Feather herself had not known, nor in fact had any other human being known why Lord Coombe drifted into seeming rather to follow her about. But there existed a reason, and this it was, and this alone, which caused him to appear--the apotheosis of exquisite fitness in form--at her door.

He listened while she poured it all forth, sobbing. Her pretty hair loosened itself and fell about her in wild but enchanting disorder.

"I would do anything--any one asked me, if they would take care of me."

A shuddering knowledge that it was quite true that she would do anything for any man who would take care of her produced an effect on him nothing else would have produced.

"Do I understand," he said, "that you are willing that I should arrange this for you?"

"Do you mean--really?" she faltered. "Will you--will you--?"

Her uplifted eyes were like a young angel's brimming with crystal drops which slipped--as a child's tears slip--down her cheeks.

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The florist came and refilled the window-boxes of the slice of a house with an admirable arrangement of fresh flowers. It became an established fact that the household had not fallen to pieces, and its frequenters gradually returned to it, wearing, indeed, the air of people who had never really remained away from it.

As a bird in captivity lives in its cage and, perhaps, believes it to be the world, Robin lived in her nursery. She was put to bed and taken up, she was fed and dressed in it, and once a day she was taken out of it downstairs and into the street. That was all.

It is a somewhat portentous thing to realise that a newborn human creature can only know what it is taught. To Robin the Lady Downstairs was merely a radiant and beautiful being of whom one might catch a glimpse through a door, or if one pressed one's face against the window pane at the right moment. On the very rare occasions when the Lady appeared on the threshold of the day-nursery, Robin stood and stared with immense startled eyes and answered in a whisper the banal little questions put to her.

So she remained unaware of mothers and unaware of affection. She never played with other children. Andrews, her nurse--as behooved one employed in a house about which there "was talk" bore herself with a lofty and

exclusive air.

"My rule is to keep myself to myself," she said in the kitchen, "and to look as if I was the one that would turn up noses, if noses was to be turned up. There's those that would snatch away their children if I let Robin begin to make up to them."

But one morning, when Robin was watching some quarrelsome sparrows, an old acquaintance surprised Andrews by appearing in the Gardens and engaged her in a conversation so delightful that Robin was forgotten to the extent of being allowed to follow her sparrows round a clump of shrubbery out of sight.

It was while she watched them that she heard footsteps that stopped near her. She looked up. A big boy in Highland kilts and bonnet and sporan was standing by her. He spread and curved his red mouth, then began to run and prance round in a circle, capering like a Shetland pony to exhibit at once his friendliness and his prowess. After a minute or two he stopped, breathing fast and glowing.

"My pony in Scotland does that. His name is Chieftain. I'm called Donal. What are you called?"

"Robin," she answered, her lips and voice trembling with joy. He was so beautiful.

They began to play together while Andrews' friend recounted intimate details of a country house scandal.

Donal picked leaves from a lilac bush. Robin learned that if you laid a leaf flat on the seat of a bench you could prick beautiful patterns on the leaf's greenness. Donal had--in his rolled down stocking--a little dirk. He did the decoration with the point of this while Robin looked on, enthralled.

Through what means children so quickly convey to each other the entire history of their lives is a sort of occult secret. Before Donal was taken home, Robin knew that he lived in Scotland and had been brought to London on a visit, that his other name was Muir, that the person he called "mother" was a woman who took care of him. He spoke of her quite often.

"I will bring one of my picture-books to-morrow," he said grandly. "Can you read at all?"

"No," answered Robin, adoring him. "What are picture books?"

"Haven't you any?" he blurted out.

She lifted her eyes to the glowing blueness of his and said quite simply, "I haven't anything."

His old nurse's voice came from the corner where she sat.

"I must go back to Nanny," he said, feeling, somehow, as if he had been running fast. "I'll come to-morrow and bring two picture books."

He put his strong little eight-year-old arms round her and kissed her full on the mouth. It was the first time, for Robin. Andrews did not kiss. There was no one else.

"Don't you like to be kissed?" said Donal, uncertain because she looked so startled and had not kissed him back.

"Kissed," she repeated, with a small caught breath. "Ye--es." She knew now what it was. It was being kissed. She drew nearer at once and lifted up her face as sweetly and gladly as a flower lifts itself to the sun. "Kiss me again," she said, quite eagerly. And this time, she kissed too. When he ran quickly away, she stood looking after him with smiling, trembling lips, uplifted, joyful--wondering and amazed.

The next morning Andrews had a cold and her younger sister Anne was called in to perform her duties. The doctor pronounced the cold serious, and Andrews was confined to her bed. Hours spent under the trees reading were entirely satisfactory to Anne. And so, for two weeks, the soot-sprinkled London square was as the Garden of Eden to Donal and Robin.

In her fine, aloof way, Helen Muir had learned much in her stays in London and during her married life--in the exploring of foreign cities with her husband. She was not proud of the fact that in the event of the death of Lord Coombe's shattered and dissipated nephew her son would become heir presumptive to Coombe Court. She had not asked questions about Coombe. It had not been necessary. Once or twice she had seen Feather by chance. She was to see her again--by Feather's intention.

With Donal prancing at her side, Mrs. Muir went to the Gardens to meet the child Nanny had described as "a bit of witch fire dancing--with her colour and her big silk curls in a heap, and Donal staring at her like a young man at a beauty."

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

"There she is!" cried Donal, as he ran to her. "My mother has come with me. This is Robin, mother! This is Robin."

Her exquisiteness and 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. She took the little hand and they walked round the garden, then sat on a bench and watched the children "make up" things to play.

A victoria was driving past. Suddenly a sweetly hued figure spoke to the

coachman. "Stop here," she said. "I want to get out."

Robin's eyes grew very round and large and filled with a worshipping light.

"It is," she gasped, "the Lady Downstairs!"

Feather floated near to the seat and paused, smiling. "Where is your nurse, Robin?" she asked.

"She is only a few yards away," said Mrs. Muir.

"So kind of you to let Robin 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," added Feather, unperturbed and smiling brilliantly. "I saw your portrait at the Grovenor."

"Yes," said Mrs. Muir, gently.

"I wanted very much to see your son; that was why I came."

"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."

She bade them good-bye and strayed airily away.

And that night Donal was awakened, was told that "something" had happened, that they were to go back to Scotland. He was accustomed to do as he was told. He got out of bed and began to dress, but he swallowed very hard.

"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." Then, in a way that was strangely grown up: "She has no one but me to remember."

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The next morning a small, rose-coloured figure stood still for so long in the gardens that it began to look rigid and some one said, "I wonder what that little girl is waiting for."

A child has no words out of which to build hopes and fears. Robin could only wait in the midst of a slow dark rising tide of something she had no name for. Suddenly she knew. He was gone! She crept under the shrubbery. She cried, she sobbed. If Andrews had seen her she would have said she was "in a tantrum." But she was not. Her world had been torn

away.

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Five weeks later Feather was giving a very little dinner in the slice of a house. There was Harrowby, a good looking young man with dark eyes, and the Starling who was "emancipated" and whose real name was Miss March. The third diner was a young actor with a low, veiled voice--Gerald Vesey--who adored and understood Feather's clothes.

Over coffee in the drawing-room Coombe joined them just at the moment that Feather was "going to tell them something to make them laugh."

"Robin is in love!" she cried. "She is five years old and she has been deserted and Andrews came to tell me she can neither eat nor sleep. The doctor says she has had a shock."

Coombe did not join in the ripple of laughter, but he looked interested.

"Robin is a stimulating name," said Harrowby. "Is it too late to let us see her?"

"They usually go to sleep at seven, I believe," remarked Coombe, "but of course I am not an authority."

Robin was not asleep, though she had long been in bed with her eyes

closed. She had heard Andrews say to her sister Anne:

"Lord Coombe's the reason. She does not want her boy to see or speak to him, so she whisked him back to Scotland."

"Is Lord Coombe as bad as they say?" put in Anne, with bated breath.

"As to his badness," Robin heard Andrews answer, "there's some that can't say enough against him. It's what he is in this house that does it. She won't have her boy playing with a child like Robin."

Then--even as there flashed upon Robin the revelation of her own unfitness--came a knock at the door.

She was taken up, dressed in her prettiest frock and led down the narrow stairway. She heard the Lady say:

"Shake hands with Lord Coombe."

Robin put her hand behind her back--she who had never disobeyed since she was born!

"Be pretty mannered, Miss Robin my dear," Andrews instructed, "and shake hands with his Lordship."

Each person in the little drawing-room saw the queer flame in the

child-face. She shrilled out her words:

"Andrews will pinch me--Andrews will pinch me! But--No--No!"

She kept her hands behind her back and hatred surged up in her soul.

In spite of her tender years, the doctor held to the theory that Robin had suffered a shock; she must be taken away to be helped by the bracing air of the Norfolk coast. Before she went, workmen were to be seen coming in and out of the house. When she returned to London, she was led into rooms she had never been in before--light and airy rooms with pretty walls and furniture.

It was "a whim of Coombe's," as Feather put it, that she should no longer occupy the little dog-kennels of nurseries, so these new apartments had been added in the rear. A whim of his also that Andrews, whose disciplinary methods included pinching, should be dismissed and replaced by Dowson, a motherly creature with a great deal of common sense. Robin's lonely little heart opened to her new nurse, who became in time her "Dowie."

It was Dowson who made it clear to Lord Coombe, at length, that Robin had reached the age when she needed a governess, and it was he who said to Feather a few days later:

"A governess will come here to-morrow at eleven o'clock. She is a

Mademoiselle Vallé. She is accustomed to the education of young children. She will present herself for your approval."

"What on earth can it matter?" Feather cried.

"It does not matter to you," he answered. "It chances for the time being to matter to me."

Mademoiselle Vallé was an intelligent, mature French woman, with a peculiar power to grasp an intricate situation. She learned to love the child she taught--a child so strangely alone. As time went on she came to know that Robin was to receive every educational advantage, every instruction. In his impersonal, aloof way Coombe was fixed in his intention to provide her with life's defences. As she grew, graceful as a willow wand, into a girlhood startlingly lovely, she learned modern languages, learned to dance divinely.

And all the while he was deeply conscious that her infant hatred had not lessened--that he could show her no reason why it should.

There were black hours when she was in deadly peril from a human beast, mad with her beauty. Coombe had almost miraculously saved her, but her detestation of him still held.

Her one thought--her one hope--was to learn--learn, so that she might make her own living. Mademoiselle Vallé supported her in this, and

Coombe understood.

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In one of the older London squares there was a house upon the broad doorsteps of which Lord Coombe stood oftener than upon any other. The old Dowager Duchess of Darte, having surrounded herself with almost royal dignity, occupied that house in an enforced seclusion. She was a confirmed rheumatic invalid, but her soul was as strong as it was many years before, when she had given its support to Coombe in his unbearable hours. She had poured out her strength in silence, and in silence he had received it. She saved him from slipping over the verge of madness.

But there came a day when he spoke to her of this--of the one woman he had loved, Princess Alixe of X----:

"There was never a human thing so transparently pure, and she was the possession of a brute incarnate. She shook with terror before him. He killed her."

"I believe he did," she said, unsteadily. "He was not received here at Court afterward."

"He killed her. But she would have died of horror if he had not struck her a blow. I saw that. I was in attendance on him at Windsor."

"When I first knew you," the Duchess said gravely.

"There was a night--I was young--young--when I found myself face to face with her in the stillness of the wood. I went quite mad for a time. I threw myself face downward on the earth and sobbed. She knelt and prayed for her own soul as well as mine. I kissed the hem of her dress and left her standing--alone."

After a silence he added:

"It was the next night that I heard her shrieks. Then she died."

The Duchess knew what else had died: the high adventure of youth and joy of life in him.

On a table beside her winged chair were photographs of two women, who, while obviously belonging to periods of some twenty years apart, were in face and form so singularly alike that they might have been the same person. One was the Princess Alixe of X---- and the other--Feather.

"The devil of chance," Coombe said, "sometimes chooses to play tricks. Such a trick was played on me."

It was the photograph of Feather he took up and set a strange questioning gaze upon.

"When I saw this," he said, "this--exquisitely smiling at me in a sunny garden--the tomb opened under my feet and I stood on the brink of it--twenty-five again."

He made clear to her certain facts which most persons would have ironically disbelieved. He ended with the story of Robin.

"I am determined," he explained, "to stand between the child and what would be inevitable. Her frenzy of desire to support herself arises from her loathing of the position of accepting support from me. I sympathise with her entirely."

"Mademoiselle Vallé is an intelligent woman," the Duchess said. "Send her to me; I shall talk to her. Then she can bring the child."

And so it was arranged that Robin should be taken into the house in the old fashioned square to do for the Duchess what a young relative might have done. And, a competent person being needed to take charge of the linen, "Dowie" would go to live under the same roof.

Feather's final thrust in parting with her daughter was:

"Donal Muir is a young man by this time. I wonder what his mother would do now if he turned up at your mistress' house and began to make love to you." She laughed outright. "You'll get into all sorts of messes but that would be the nicest one!"

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The Duchess came to understand that Robin held it deep in her mind that she was a sort of young outcast.

"If she consorted," she thought, "with other young things and shared their pleasures she would forget it."

She talked the matter over with her daughter, Lady Lothwell.

"I am not launching a girl in society," she said, "I only want to help her to know a few nice young people. I shall begin with your children. They are mine if I am only a grandmother. A small dinner and a small dance--and George and Kathryn may be the beginning of an interesting experiment."

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The Duchess was rarely mistaken. The experiment was interesting. For George--Lord Halwyn--it held a certain element of disaster. It was he who danced with Robin first. He had heard of the girl who was a sort of sublimated companion to his grandmother. He had encountered companions
before. 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.

He led her to the conservatory. He was extremely young and his fleeting emotions had never known a tight rein. An intoxicating hot-house perfume filled his nostrils. Suddenly he let himself go and was kissing the warm velvet of her slim little neck.

"You--you--you've spoiled everything in the world!" she cried. "Now"--with a desolate, horrible little sob--"now I can only go back--back." She spoke as if she were Cinderella and he had made the clock strike twelve. Her voice had absolute grief in it.

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

This last because his sister had suddenly appeared.

Kathryn bore Robin away. Boys like George didn't really matter, she pointed out, though of course it was bad manners. She had been kissed herself, it seemed. As they walked between banked flowers she added:

"By the way, somebody important has been assassinated in one of the Balkan countries. Lord Coombe has just come in and is talking it over with grandmamma."

As they neared the entrance to the ballroom she paused with a new kind

of impish smile.

"The very best looking boy in all England," she said, "is dancing with Sara Studleigh. He dropped in by chance to call and grandmamma made him stay. His name is Donal Muir. He is Lord Coombe's heir. Here he comes. Look!"

He was now scarcely two yards away. Almost as if he had been called he turned his eyes toward Robin and straight into hers they laughed--straight into hers.

The incident of their meeting was faultlessly correct; also, when Lady Lothwell appeared, she presented him to Robin as if the brief ceremony were one of the most ordinary in existence.

They danced for a time without a word. She wondered if he could not feel the beating of her heart.

"That--is a beautiful waltz," he said at last, as if it were a sort of emotional confidence.

"Yes," she answered. Only, "Yes."

Once round the great ballroom, twice, and 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. I hoped it was--after I first began to suspect. I hoped it was."

"It is--it is."

"Did we once play together in a garden?"

"Yes--yes."

Back swept the years, and the wonderful happiness began again.

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In the shining ballroom the music rose and fell and swelled again into ecstasy as he held 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.

ROBIN