The Head of the House of Coombe

By

Frances Hodgson Burnett

CHAPTER I

The history of the circumstances about to be related began many years ago--or so it seems in these days. It began, at least, years before the world being rocked to and fro revealed in the pause between each of its heavings some startling suggestion of a new arrangement of its kaleidoscopic particles, and then immediately a re-arrangement, and another and another until all belief in a permanency of design seemed lost, and the inhabitants of the earth waited, helplessly gazing at changing stars and colours in a degree of mental chaos.

Its opening incidents may be dated from a period when people still had reason to believe in permanency and had indeed many of them--sometimes through ingenuousness, sometimes through stupidity of type--acquired a singular confidence in the importance and stability of their possessions, desires, ambitions and forms of conviction.

London at the time, in common with other great capitals, felt itself rather final though priding itself on being much more fluid and adaptable than it had been fifty years previously. In speaking of itself it at least dealt with fixed customs, and conditions and established facts connected with them--which gave rise to brilliant--or dull--witticisms.

One of these, heard not infrequently, was to the effect that--in London--one might live under an umbrella if one lived under it in the right neighbourhood and on the right side of the street, which axiom is the reason that a certain child through the first six years of her life sat on certain days staring out of a window in a small, dingy room on the top floor of a slice of a house on a narrow but highly fashionable London street and looked on at the passing of motors, carriages and people in the dull afternoon grayness.

The room was exalted above its station by being called The Day Nursery and another room equally dingy and uninviting was known as The Night Nursery. The slice of a house was inhabited by the very pretty Mrs. Gareth-Lawless, its inordinate rent being reluctantly paid by her--apparently with the assistance of those "ravens" who are expected to supply the truly deserving. The rent was inordinate only from the standpoint of one regarding it soberly in connection with the character of the house itself which was a gaudy little kennel crowded between two comparatively stately mansions. On one side lived an inordinately rich South African millionaire, and on the other an inordinately exalted person of title, which facts combined to form sufficient grounds for a certain inordinateness of rent.

Mrs. Gareth-Lawless was also, it may be stated, of the fibre which must live on the right side of the street or dissolve into

nothingness--since as nearly nothingness as an embodied entity can achieve had Nature seemingly created her at the outset. So light and airy was the fair, slim, physical presentation of her being to the earthly vision, and so almost impalpably diaphanous the texture and form of mind and character to be observed by human perception, that among such friends--and enemies--as so slight a thing could claim she was prettily known as "Feather". Her real name, "Amabel", was not half as charming and whimsical in its appropriateness. "Feather" she adored being called and as it was the fashion among the amazing if amusing circle in which she spent her life, to call its acquaintances fantastic pet names selected from among the world of birds, beasts and fishes or inanimate objects--"Feather" she floated through her curious existence. And it so happened that she was the mother of the child who so often stared out of the window of the dingy and comfortless Day Nursery, too much a child to be more than vaguely conscious in a chaotic way that a certain feeling which at times raged within her and made her little body hot and restless was founded on something like actual hate for a special man who had certainly taken no deliberate steps to cause her detestation.

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"Feather" had not been called by that delicious name when she married Robert Gareth-Lawless who was a beautiful and irresponsibly rather than deliberately bad young man. She was known as Amabel Darrel

and the loveliest girl in the lovely corner of the island of Jersey where her father, a country doctor, had begotten a large family of lovely creatures and brought them up on the appallingly inadequate proceeds of his totally inadequate practice. Pretty female things must be disposed of early lest their market value decline. Therefore a well-born young man even without obvious resources represents a sail in the offing which is naturally welcomed as possibly belonging to a bark which may at least bear away a burden which the back carrying it as part of its pack will willingly shuffle on to other shoulders. It is all very well for a man with six lovely daughters to regard them as capital if he has money or position or generous relations or if he has energy and an ingenious unfatigued mind. But a man who is tired and neither clever nor important in any degree and who has reared his brood in one of the Channel Islands with a faded, silly, unattractive wife as his only aid in any difficulty, is wise in leaving the whole hopeless situation to chance and luck. Sometimes luck comes without assistance but--almost invariably--it does not.

"Feather"--who was then "Amabel"--thought Robert Gareth-Lawless incredible good luck. He only drifted into her summer by merest chance because a friend's yacht in which he was wandering about "came in" for supplies. A girl Ariel in a thin white frock and with big larkspur blue eyes yearning at you under her flapping hat as she answers your questions about the best road to somewhere will not be too difficult about showing the way herself. And there you

are at a first-class beginning.

The night after she met Gareth-Lawless in a lane whose banks were thick with bluebells, Amabel and her sister Alice huddled close together in bed and talked almost pantingly in whispers over the possibilities which might reveal themselves--God willing--through a further acquaintance with Mr. Gareth-Lawless. They were eager and breathlessly anxious but they were young--YOUNG in their eagerness and Amabel was full of delight in his good looks.

"He is SO handsome, Alice," she whispered actually hugging her, not with affection but exultation. "And he can't be more than twenty-six or seven. And I'm SURE he liked me. You know that way a man has of looking at you--one sees it even in a place like this where there are only curates and things. He has brown eyes--like dark bright water in pools. Oh, Alice, if he SHOULD!"

Alice was not perhaps as enthusiastic as her sister. Amabel had seen him first and in the Darrel household there was a sort of unwritten, not always observed code flimsily founded on "First come first served." Just at the outset of an acquaintance one might say "Hands off" as it were. But not for long.

"It doesn't matter how pretty one is they seldom do," Alice grumbled. "And he mayn't have a farthing."

"Alice," whispered Amabel almost agonizingly, "I wouldn't CARE a farthing--if only he WOULD! Have I a farthing--have you a farthing--has anyone who ever comes here a farthing? He lives in London. He'd take me away. To live even in a back street IN LONDON would be Heaven! And one MUST--as soon as one possibly can.--One MUST! And Oh!" with another hug which this time was a shudder, "think of what Doris Harmer had to do! Think of his thick red old neck and his horrid fatness! And the way he breathed through his nose. Doris said that at first it used to make her ill to look at him."

"She's got over it," whispered Alice. "She's almost as fat as he is now. And she's loaded with pearls and things."

"I shouldn't have to 'get over' anything," said Amabel, "if this one WOULD. I could fall in love with him in a minute."

"Did you hear what Father said?" Alice brought out the words rather slowly and reluctantly. She was not eager on the whole to yield up a detail which after all added glow to possible prospects which from her point of view were already irritatingly glowing. Yet she could not resist the impulse of excitement. "No, you didn't hear. You were out of the room."

"What about? Something about HIM? I hope it wasn't horrid. How could it be?"

"He said," Alice drawled with a touch of girlishly spiteful indifference, "that if he was one of the poor Gareth-Lawlesses he hadn't much chance of succeeding to the title. His uncle--Lord Lawdor--is only forty-five and he has four splendid healthy boys--perfect little giants."

"Oh, I didn't know there was a title. How splendid," exclaimed Amabel rapturously. Then after a few moments' innocent maiden reflection she breathed with sweet hopefulness from under the sheet, "Children so often have scarlet fever or diphtheria, and you know they say those very strong ones are more likely to die than the other kind. The Vicar of Sheen lost FOUR all in a week. And the Vicar died too. The doctor said the diphtheria wouldn't have killed him if the shock hadn't helped."

Alice--who had a teaspoonful more brain than her sister--burst into a fit of giggling it was necessary to smother by stuffing the sheet in her mouth.

"Oh! Amabel!" she gurgled. "You ARE such a donkey! You would have been silly enough to say that even if people could have heard you. Suppose HE had!"

"Why should he care," said Amabel simply. "One can't help thinking things. If it happened he would be the Earl of Lawdor and--"

She fell again into sweet reflection while Alice giggled a little more. Then she herself stopped and thought also. After all perhaps--! One had to be practical. The tenor of her thoughts was such that she did not giggle again when Amabel broke the silence by whispering with tremulous, soft devoutness.

"Alice--do you think that praying REALLY helps?"

"I've prayed for things but I never got them," answered Alice. "But you know what the Vicar said on Sunday in sermon about 'Ask and ye shall receive'."

"Perhaps you haven't prayed in the right spirit," Amabel suggested with true piety. "Shall we--shall we try? Let us get out of bed and kneel down."

"Get out of bed and kneel down yourself," was Alice's sympathetic rejoinder. "You wouldn't take that much trouble for ME."

Amabel sat up on the edge of the bed. In the faint moonlight and her white night-gown she was almost angelic. She held the end of the long fair soft plait hanging over her shoulder and her eyes were full of reproach.

"I think you ought to take SOME interest," she said plaintively.

"You know there would be more chances for you and the others--if I were not here."

"I'll wait until you are not here," replied the unstirred Alice.

But Amabel felt there was no time for waiting in this particular case. A yacht which "came in" might so soon "put out". She knelt down, clasping her slim young hands and bending her forehead upon them. In effect she implored that Divine Wisdom might guide Mr. Robert Gareth-Lawless in the much desired path. She also made divers promises because nothing is so easy as to promise things. She ended with a gently fervent appeal that--if her prayer were granted--something "might happen" which would result in her becoming a Countess of Lawdor. One could not have put the request with greater tentative delicacy.

She felt quite uplifted and a trifle saintly when she rose from her knees. Alice had actually fallen asleep already and she sighed quite tenderly as she slipped into the place beside her. Almost as her lovely little head touched the pillow her own eyes closed. Then she was asleep herself--and in the faintly moonlit room with the long soft plait trailing over her shoulder looked even more like an angel than before.

Whether or not as a result of this touching appeal to the Throne of Grace, Robert Gareth-Lawless DID. In three months there was

a wedding at the very ancient village church, and the flowerlike bridesmaids followed a flower of a bride to the altar and later in the day to the station from where Mr. and Mrs. Robert Gareth-Lawless went on their way to London. Perhaps Alice and Olive also knelt by the side of their white beds the night after the wedding, for on that propitious day two friends of the bridegroom's--one of them the owner of the yacht--decided to return again to the place where there were to be found the most nymphlike of pretty creatures a man had ever by any chance beheld. Such delicate little fair crowned heads, such delicious little tip-tilted noses and slim white throats, such ripples of gay chatter and nonsense! When a man has fortune enough of his own why not take the prettiest thing he sees? So Alice and Olive were borne away also and poor Mr. and Mrs. Darrel breathed sighs of relief and there were not only more chances but causes for bright hopefulness in the once crowded house which now had rooms to spare.

A certain inattention on the part of the Deity was no doubt responsible for the fact that "something" did not "happen" to the family of Lord Lawdor. On the contrary his four little giants of sons throve astonishingly and a few months after the Gareth-Lawless wedding Lady Lawdor--a trifle effusively, as it were--presented her husband with twin male infants so robust that they were humorously known for years afterwards as the "Twin Herculeses."

By that time Amabel had become "Feather" and despite Robert's

ingenious and carefully detailed method of living upon nothing whatever, had many reasons for knowing that "life is a back street in London" is not a matter of beds of roses. Since the back street must be the "right street" and its accompaniments must wear an aspect of at least seeming to belong to the right order of detachment and fashionable ease, one was always in debt and forced to keep out of the way of duns, and obliged to pretend things and tell lies with aptness and outward gaiety. Sometimes one actually was so far driven to the wall that one could not keep most important engagements and the invention of plausible excuses demanded absolute genius. The slice of a house between the two big ones was a rash feature of the honeymoon but a year of giving smart little dinners in it and going to smart big dinners from it in a smart if small brougham 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. Nobody had contemplated her for a moment. Feather cried for a week when she first announced the probability of her advent. Afterwards however she managed to forget the approaching annoyance and went to parties and danced to the last hour continuing to be a great success because her prettiness was delicious and her diaphanous mentality was no train upon the minds of her admirers male and female.

That a Feather should become a parent gave rise to much wit of light

weight when Robin in the form of a bundle of lace was carried down by her nurse to be exhibited in the gaudy crowded little drawing-room in the slice of a house in the Mayfair street.

It was the Head of the House of Coombe who asked the first question about her.

"What will you DO with her?" he inquired detachedly.

The frequently referred to "babe unborn" could not have presented a gaze of purer innocence than did the lovely Feather. Her eyes of larkspur blueness were clear of any thought or intention as spring water is clear at its unclouded best.

Her ripple of a laugh was clear also--enchantingly clear.

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

She floated a trifle nearer and bent to look at her.

"I shall call her Robin," she said. "Her name is really Roberta as she couldn't be called Robert. People will turn round to look at a girl when they hear her called Robin. Besides she has eyes like a robin. I wish she'd open them and let you see."

By chance she did open them at the moment--quite slowly. They were dark liquid brown and seemed to be all lustrous iris which gazed unmovingly at the object in of focus. That object was the Head of the House of Coombe.

"She is staring at me. There is antipathy in her gaze," he said, and stared back unmovingly also, but with a sort of cold interest.