

CHAPTER II

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 and having been accepted by his acquaintances was not infrequently used by them in their light moments in the same spirit. The peerage recorded him as a Marquis and added several lesser attendant titles.

"When English society was respectable, even to stodginess at times," was his point of view, "to be born 'the Head of the House' was a weighty and awe-inspiring thing. In fearful private denunciatory interviews with one's parents and governors it was brought up against one as a final argument against immoral conduct such as debt and not going to church. As the Head of the House one was called upon to be an Example. In the country one appeared in one's pew and announced oneself a 'miserable sinner' in loud tones, one had to invite the rector to dinner with regularity and 'the ladies' of one's family gave tea and flannel petticoats and baby clothes to cottagers. Men and women were known as 'ladies' and 'gentlemen' in those halcyon days. One Represented things--Parties in Parliament--Benevolent Societies, and British Hospitality in the form of astounding long dinners at which one drank healths and made speeches. In roseate youth one danced the schottische and the polka and the round waltz which Lord Byron denounced as indecent. To recall the vigour of his poem gives rise to a smile--when one chances to sup at a cabaret."

He was considered very amusing when he analyzed his own mental attitude towards his world in general.

"I was born somewhat too late and somewhat too early," he explained in his light, rather cold and detached way. "I was born and educated at the closing of one era and have to adjust myself to living in another. I was as it were cradled among treasured relics of the ethics of the Georges and Queen Charlotte, and Queen Victoria in her bloom. I was in my bloom in the days when 'ladies' were reproved for wearing dresses cut too low at Drawing Rooms. Such training gives curious interest to fashions in which bodices are unconsidered trifles and Greek nymphs who dance with bare feet and beautiful bare legs may be one's own relations. I trust I do not seem even in the shadowiest way to comment unfavourably. I merely look on at the rapidities of change with unalloyed interest. As the Head of the House of Coombe I am not sure WHAT I am an Example of--or to. Which is why I at times regard myself in that capacity with a slightly ribald lightness."

The detachment of his question with regard to the newborn infant of the airily irresponsible Feather was in entire harmony with his attitude towards the singular incident of Life as illustrated by the World, the Flesh and the Devil by none of which he was--as far as could be observed--either impressed, disturbed or prejudiced. His own experience had been richly varied and practically unlimited

in its opportunities for pleasure, sinful or unsinful indulgence, mitigated or unmitigated wickedness, the gathering of strange knowledge, and the possible ignoring of all dull boundaries. This being the case a superhuman charity alone could have forborne to believe that his opportunities had been neglected in the heyday of his youth. Wealth and lady of limitations in themselves would have been quite enough to cause the Nonconformist Victorian mind to regard a young--or middle-aged--male as likely to represent a fearsome moral example, but these three temptations combined with good looks and a certain mental brilliance were so inevitably the concomitants of elegant iniquity that the results might be taken for granted.

That the various worlds in which he lived in various lands accepted him joyfully as an interesting and desirable of more or less abominably sinful personage, the Head of the House of Coombe--even many years before he became its head--regarded with the detachment which he had, even much earlier, begun to learn. Why should it be in the least matter what people thought of one? Why should it in the least matter what one thought of oneself--and therefore--why should one think at all? He had begun at the outset a brilliantly happy young pagan with this simple theory. After the passing of some years he had not been quite so happy but had remained quite as pagan and retained the theory which had lost its first fine careless rapture and gained a secret bitterness. He had not married and innumerable stories were related to explain the reason why.

They were most of them quite false and none of them quite true. When he ceased to be a young man his delinquency was much discussed, more especially when his father died and he took his place as the head of his family. He was old enough, rich enough, important enough for marriage to be almost imperative. But he remained unmarried. In addition he seemed to consider his abstinence entirely an affair of his own.

"Are you as wicked as people say you are?" a reckless young woman once asked him. She belonged to the younger set which was that season trying recklessness, in a tentative way, as a new fashion.

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

"I could tell better if I knew exactly what wickedness is. When I find out I will let you know. So good of you to take an interest."

Thirty years earlier he knew that a young lady who had heard he was wicked would have perished in flames before immodestly mentioning the fact to him, but might have delicately attempted to offer "first aid" to reformation, by approaching with sweetness the subject of going to church.

The reckless young woman looked at him with an attention which he was far from being blind enough not to see was increased by his answer.

"I never know what you mean," she said almost wistfully.

"Neither do I," was his amiable response. "And I am sure it would not be worth while going into. Really, we neither of us know what we mean. Perhaps I am as wicked as I know how to be. And I may have painful limitations--or I may not."

After his father's death he spent rather more time in London and rather less in wandering over the face of the globe. But by the time he was forty he knew familiarly far countries and near and was intimate with most of the peoples thereof. He could have found his way about blind-folded in the most distinctive parts of most of the great cities. He had seen and learned many things. The most absorbing to his mind had been the ambitions and changes of nations, statesmen, rulers and those they ruled or were ruled by. Courts and capitals knew him, and his opportunities were such as gave him all ease as an onlooker. He was outwardly of the type which does not arouse caution in talkers and he heard much which was suggestive even to illumination, from those to whom he remained unsuspected of being a man who remembered things long and was astute in drawing conclusions. The fact remained however that he possessed a remarkable memory and one which was not a rag-bag filled with unassorted and parti-coloured remnants, but a large and orderly space whose contents were catalogued and filed and well enclosed from observation. He was also given to the mental argument which follows a point to its conclusion as a mere habit of mind.

He saw and knew well those who sat and pondered with knit brows and cautiously hovering hand at the great chess-board which is formed by the Map of Europe. He found an enormous interest in watching their play. It was his fortune as a result of his position to know persons who wore crowns and a natural incident in whose lives it was to receive the homage expressed by the uncovering of the head and the bending of the knee. At forty he looked back at the time when the incongruousness, the abnormality and the unsteadiness of the foundations on which such personages stood first struck him. The realization had been in its almost sacrilegious novelty and daring, a sort of thunderbolt passing through his mind. He had at the time spoken of it only to one person.

"I have no moral or ethical views to offer," he had said. "I only SEE. The thing--as it is--will disintegrate. I am so at sea as to what will take its place that I feel as if the prospect were rather horrible. One has had the old landmarks and been impressed by the old pomp and picturesqueness so many centuries, that one cannot see the earth without them. There have been kings even in the Cannibal Islands."

As a statesman or a diplomat he would have seen far but he had been too much occupied with Life as an entertainment, too self-indulgent for work of any order. He freely admitted to himself that he was a worthless person but the fact did not disturb him. Having been born with a certain order of brain it observed and worked in spite

of him, thereby adding flavour and interest to existence. But that was all.

It cannot be said that as the years passed he quite enjoyed the fact that he knew he was rarely spoken of to a stranger without its being mentioned that he was the most perfectly dressed man in London. He rather detested the idea though he was aware that the truth was unimpeachable. The perfection of his accompaniments had arisen in his youth from a secret feeling for fitness and harmony. Texture and colour gave him almost abnormal pleasure. His expression of this as a masculine creature had its limits which resulted in a concentration on perfection. Even at five-and-twenty however he had never been called a dandy and even at five-and-forty no one had as yet hinted at Beau Brummel though by that time men as well as women frequently described to each other the cut and colour of the garments he wore, and tailors besought him to honour them with crumbs of his patronage in the ambitious hope that they might mention him as a client. And the simple fact that he appeared in a certain colour or cut set it at once on its way to become a fashion to be seized upon, worn and exaggerated until it was dropped suddenly by its originator and lost in the oblivion of cheap imitations and cheap tailor shops. The first exaggeration of the harmony he had created and the original was seen no more.

Feather herself had a marvellous trick in the collecting of her garments. It was a trick which at times barely escaped assuming the

proportions of absolute creation. Her passion for self-adornment expressed itself in ingenious combination and quite startling uniqueness of line now and then. Her slim fairness and ash-gold gossamer hair carried airily strange tilts and curves of little or large hats or daring tints other women could not sustain but invariably strove to imitate however disastrous the results. Beneath soft drooping or oddly flopping brims hopelessly unbecoming to most faces hers looked out quaintly lovely as a pictured child's wearing its grandmother's bonnet. Everything draped itself about or clung to her in entrancing folds which however whimsical were never grotesque.

"Things are always becoming to me," she said quite simply. "But often I stick a few pins into a dress to tuck it up here and there, or if I give a hat a poke somewhere to make it crooked, they are much more becoming. People are always asking me how I do it but I don't know how. I bought a hat from Cerise last week and I gave it two little thumps with my fist--one in the crown and one in the brim and they made it wonderful. The maid of the most grand kind of person tried to find out from my maid where I bought it. I wouldn't let her tell of course."

She created fashions and was imitated as was the Head of the House of Coombe but she was enraptured by the fact and the entire power of such gray matter as was held by her small brain cells was concentrated upon her desire to evolve new fantasies and amazements

for her world.

Before he had been married for a year there began to creep into the mind of Bob Gareth-Lawless a fearsome doubt remotely hinting that she might end by becoming an awful bore in the course of time--particularly if she also ended by being less pretty. She chattered so incessantly about nothing and was such an empty-headed, extravagant little fool in her insistence on clothes--clothes--clothes--as if they were the breath of life. After watching her for about two hours one morning as she sat before her mirror directing her maid to arrange and re-arrange her hair in different styles--in delicate puffs and curls and straying rings--soft bands and loops--in braids and coils--he broke forth into an uneasy short laugh and expressed himself--though she did not know he was expressing himself and would not have understood him if she had.

"If you have a soul--and I'm not at all certain you have--" he said, "it's divided into a dressmaker's and a hairdresser's and a milliner's shop. It's full of tumbled piles of hats and frocks and diamond combs. It's an awful mess, Feather."

"I hope it's a shoe shop and a jeweller's as well," she laughed quite gaily. "And a lace-maker's. I need every one of them."

"It's a rag shop," he said. "It has nothing but CHIFFONS in it."

"If ever I DO think of souls I think of them as silly gauzy things floating about like little balloons," was her cheerful response.

"That's an idea," he answered with a rather louder laugh. "Yours might be made of pink and blue gauze spangled with those things you call paillettes."

The fancy attracted her.

"If I had one like that"--with a pleased creative air, "it would look rather ducky floating from my shoulder--or even my hat--or my hair in the evenings, just held by a tiny sparkling chain fastened with a diamond pin--and with lovely little pink and blue streamers." With the touch of genius she had at once relegated it to its place in the scheme of her universe. And Robert laughed even louder than before.

"You mustn't make me laugh," she said holding up her hand. "I am having my hair done to match that quakery thin pale mousey dress with the tiny poke bonnet--and I want to try my face too. I must look sweet and demure. You mustn't really laugh when you wear a dress and hat like that. You must only smile."

Some months earlier Bob would have found it difficult to believe that she said this entirely without any touch of humour but he realized now that it was so said. He had some sense of humour of

his own and one of his reasons for vaguely feeling that she might become a bore was that she had none whatever.

It was at the garden party where she wore the thin quakery mousey dress and tiny poke bonnet that the Head of the House of Coombe first saw her. It was at the place of a fashionable artist who lived at Hampstead and had a garden and a few fine old trees. It had been Feather's special intention to strike this note of delicate dim colour. Every other woman was blue or pink or yellow or white or flowered and she in her filmy coolness of unusual hue stood out exquisitely among them. Other heads wore hats broad or curved or flopping, hers looked like a little nun's or an imaginary portrait of a delicious young great-grandmother. She was more arresting than any other female creature on the emerald sward or under the spreading trees.

When Coombe's eyes first fell upon her he was talking to a group of people and he stopped speaking. Someone standing quite near him said afterwards that he had for a second or so become pale--almost as if he saw something which frightened him.

"Who is that under the copper beech--being talked to by Harlow?" he inquired.

Feather was in fact listening with a gentle air and with her eyelids down drooped to the exact line harmonious with the angelic little

poke bonnet.

"It is Mrs. Robert Gareth-Lawless--'Feather' we call her," he was answered. "Was there ever anything more artful than that startling little smoky dress? If it was flame colour one wouldn't see it as quickly."

"One wouldn't look at it as long," said Coombe. "One is in danger of staring. And the little hat--or bonnet--which pokes and is fastened under her pink ear by a satin bow held by a loose pale bud! Will someone rescue me from staring by leading me to her. It won't be staring if I am talking to her. Please."

The paleness appeared again as on being led across the grass he drew nearer to the copper beech. He was still rather pale when Feather lifted her eyes to him. Her eyes were so shaped by Nature that they looked like an angel's when they were lifted. There are eyes of that particular cut. But he had not talked to her 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. With the perception which invariably marked her sense of fitness of things she had begun in the course of the fifteen minutes--almost before the colour had quite returned to his face--the story of her husband's idea of her soul, as a balloon of pink and blue gauze spangled with paillettes. And of her own inspiration of wearing it floating from her shoulder or her hair

by the light sparkling chain--and with delicate ribbon streamers. She was much delighted with his laugh--though she thought it had a rather cracked, harsh sound. She knew he was an important person and she always felt she was being a success when people laughed.

"Exquisite!" he said. "I shall never see you in the future without it. But wouldn't it be necessary to vary the colour at times?"

"Oh! Yes--to match things," seriously. "I couldn't wear a pink and blue one with this--" glancing over the smoky mousey thing "--or paillettes."

"Oh, no--not paillettes," he agreed almost with gravity, the harsh laugh having ended.

"One couldn't imagine the exact colour in a moment. One would have to think," she reflected. "Perhaps a misty dim bluey thing--like the edge of a rain-cloud--scarcely a colour at all."

For an instant her eyes were softly shadowed as if looking into a dream. He watched her fixedly then. A woman who was a sort of angel might look like that when she was asking herself how much her pure soul might dare to pray for. Then he laughed again and Feather laughed also.

Many practical thoughts had already begun to follow each other

hastily through her mind. It would be the best possible thing for them if he really admired her. Bob was having all sorts of trouble with people they owed money to. Bills were sent in again and again and disagreeable letters were written. Her dressmaker and milliner had given her most rude hints which could indeed be scarcely considered hints at all. She scarcely dared speak to their smart young footman who she knew had only taken the place in the slice of a house because he had been told that it might be an opening to better things. She did not know the exact summing up at the agency had been as follows:

"They're a good looking pair and he's Lord Lawdor's nephew. They're bound to have their fling and smart people will come to their house because she's so pretty. They'll last two or three years perhaps and you'll open the door to the kind of people who remember a well set-up young fellow if he shows he knows his work above the usual."

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 owners of it were to get good invitations and continued credit, Feather was aware. Besides which, she thought ingenuously, if he was rich he would no doubt lend Bob money. She had already known that certain men who liked her had done it. She did not mind it at all. One was obliged to have money.

This was the beginning of an acquaintance which gave rise to much argument over tea-cups and at dinner parties and in boudoirs--even in corners of Feather's own gaudy little drawing-room. The argument regarded the degree of Coombe's interest in her. There was always curiosity as to the degree of his interest in any woman--especially and privately on the part of the woman herself. Casual and shallow observers said he was quite infatuated if such a thing were possible to a man of his temperament; the more concentrated of mind said it was not possible to a man of his temperament and that any attraction Feather might have for him was of a kind special to himself and that he alone could explain it--and he would not.

Remained however the fact that he managed to see a great deal of her. It might be said that he even rather followed her about and more than one among the specially concentrated of mind had seen him on occasion stand apart a little and look at her--watch her--with an expression suggesting equally profound thought and the profound intention to betray his private meditations in no degree. There was no shadow of profundity of thought in his treatment of her. He talked to her as she best liked to be talked to about herself, her successes and her clothes which were more successful than anything else. He went to the little but exceedingly lively dinners the Gareth-Lawlesses gave and though he was understood not to be fond of dancing now and then danced with her at balls.

Feather was guilelessly doubtless concerning him. She was quite sure

that he was in love with her. Her idea of that universal emotion was that it was a matter of clothes and propinquity and loveliness and that if one were at all clever one got things one wanted as a result of it. Her overwhelming affection for Bob and his for her had given her life in London and its entertaining accompaniments. Her frankness in the matter of this desirable capture when she talked to her husband was at once light and friendly.

"Of course you will be able to get credit at his tailor's as you know him so well," she said. "When I persuaded him to go with me to Madame Helene's last week she was quite amiable. He helped me to choose six dresses and I believe she would have let me choose six more."

"Does she think he is going to pay for them?" asked Bob.

"It doesn't matter what she thinks"; Feather laughed very prettily.

"Doesn't it?"

"Not a bit. I shall have the dresses. What's the matter, Rob? You look quite red and cross."

"I've had a headache for three days," he answered, "and I feel hot and cross. I don't care about a lot of things you say, Feather."

"Don't be silly," she retorted. "I don't care about a lot of things you say--and do, too, for the matter of that."

Robert Gareth-Lawless who was sitting on a chair in her dressing-room grunted slightly as he rubbed his red and flushed forehead.

"There's a--sort of limit," he commented. He hesitated a little before he added sulkily "--to the things one--SAYS."

"That sounds like Alice," was her undisturbed answer. "She used to squabble at me because I SAID things. But I believe one of the reasons people like me is because I make them laugh by SAYING things. Lord Coombe laughs. He is a very good person to know," she added practically. "Somehow he COUNTS. Don't you recollect how before we knew him--when he was abroad so long--people used to bring him into their talk as if they couldn't help remembering him and what he was like. I knew quite a lot about him--about his cleverness and his manners and his way of keeping women off without being rude--and the things he says about royalties and the aristocracy going out of fashion. And about his clothes. I adore his clothes. And I'm convinced he adores mine."

She had in fact at once observed his clothes as he had crossed the grass to her seat under the copper beech. She had seen that his fine thinness was inimitably fitted and presented itself to the eye as that final note of perfect line which ignores any possibility

of comment. He did not wear things--they were expressions of his mental subtleties. Feather on her part knew that she wore her clothes--carried them about with her--however beautifully.

"I like him," she went on. "I don't know anything about political parties and the state of Europe so I don't understand the things he says which people think are so brilliant, but I like him. He isn't really as old as I thought he was the first day I saw him. He had a haggard look about his mouth and eyes then. He looked as if a spangled pink and blue gauze soul with little floating streamers was a relief to him."

The child Robin was a year old by that time and staggered about uncertainly in the dingy little Day Nursery in which she passed her existence except on such occasions as her nurse--who had promptly fallen in love with the smart young footman--carried her down to the kitchen and Servants' Hall in the basement where there was an earthy smell and an abundance of cockroaches. The Servants' Hall had been given that name in the catalogue of the fashionable agents who let the home and it was as cramped and grimy as the two top-floor nurseries.

The next afternoon Robert Gareth-Lawless staggered into his wife's drawing-room and dropped on to a sofa staring at her and breathing hard.

"Feather!" he gasped. "Don't know what's up with me. I believe I'm--awfully ill! I can't see straight. Can't think."

He fell over sideways on to the cushions so helplessly that Feather sprang at him.

"Don't, Rob, don't!" she cried in actual anguish. "Lord Coombe is taking us to the opera and to supper afterwards. I'm going to wear--" She stopped speaking to shake him and try to lift his head. "Oh! do try to sit up," she begged pathetically. "Just try. DON'T give up till afterwards." But she could neither make him sit up nor make him hear. He lay back heavily with his mouth open, breathing stertorously and quite insensible.

It happened that the Head of the House of Coombe was announced at that very moment even as she stood wringing her hands over the sofa.

He went to her side and looked at Gareth-Lawless.

"Have you sent for a doctor?" he inquired.

"He's--only just done it!" she exclaimed. "It's more than I can bear. You said the Prince would be at the supper after the opera and--"

"Were you thinking of going?" he put it to her quietly.

"I shall have to send for a nurse of course--" she began. He went so far as to interrupt her.

"You had better not go--if you'll pardon my saying so," he suggested.

"Not go? Not go at all?" she wailed.

"Not go at all," was his answer. And there was such entire lack of encouragement in it that Feather sat down and burst into sobs.

In few than two weeks Robert was dead and she was left a lovely penniless widow with a child.